

# BOOK OF PROCEEDINGS

## The Role of Academia in Promoting Child Rights

1st International Conference  
University of Patras, GREECE

**EDITORS**

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Laboratory of Pedagogical Research & Lifelong Education  
University of Patras  
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ΠΑΝΕΠΙΣΤΗΜΙΟ  
ΠΑΤΡΩΝ  
UNIVERSITY OF PATRAS

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**Child Rights Center**  
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## Preface

This volume brings together the intellectual energy, ethical dedication, and collaborative ethos that emerged during the 1st International Conference on “The Role of Academia in Promoting Child Rights” held on 6–7 June 2025 at the University of Patras. Organised through a strong partnership between UNICEF and the University of Patras, the Conference provided a significant platform to reflect on how universities can contribute –intellectually, institutionally, and socially– to the promotion of child rights at various levels, including local, regional, national, and international.

Today’s children are facing a multitude of serious and often interrelated challenges. Ongoing inequalities, exposure to violence and displacement, the rapid changes in digital landscapes, environmental instability, and limited avenues for meaningful engagement are all factors that are redefining childhood in complex ways. In this context, the importance of child rights becomes extremely tangible. The current challenge is not only to acknowledge these rights in theory but also to ensure their actual implementation in practice. This volume seeks to investigate how academia can effectively bridge the divide between commitments and implementation, and thereby influence policy, institutional cultures, and social attitudes that shape children’s everyday experiences.

### Academia and child rights: a responsibility beyond knowledge production

Universities as institutions have long been seen primarily as places of knowledge production and dissemination. However, their role and responsibilities go far beyond the classroom, the library, the laboratory, and the campus. Universities are critical for educating future professionals, contributing to public debate, informing policymaking with evidence, and providing a space for critical thinking and democratic dialogue. Therefore, promoting child rights within higher education systems is an investment for the future that can greatly benefit society as a whole.

Although progress has been made over the last decades, child rights cannot be solely upheld as the result of legislation and policy. Safeguarding child rights relies on professionals who recognise children as full rights holders; on institutions that uphold their dignity, participation, and act on the principle of the best interest of the child; on families that practice positive parenting; and on policies based on high-quality, ethical and well-reasoned research. Academia plays an essential role in all these respects by increasing awareness of the situation of children, integrating a child-rights lens in academic programmes, promoting research and community projects, empowering professionals in the fields of education, health, social services, law, public administration and economics to be child-rights oriented and influencing positive social mindsets, attitudes and behaviours towards children.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is considered the world’s main international instrument for setting benchmarks for the promotion of child rights. However, the translation of the principles and norms into daily life is a highly context-specific process that requires the development of a comprehensive strategy using an interdisciplinary approach, institutional commitment and coordination between universities, state services, civil society organisations and communities. This was one of the main focuses of the discussion that took place during the Patras Conference where academics, practitioners, and scholars came together to explore ways in which better interaction between scientific research, education and practices can contribute to the further promotion of child rights.

## From legal principles to lived experiences

For many years, discussions on child rights were largely framed in legal and policy discourses. While essential, such approaches often presented child rights as an abstract notion, far removed from the diverse daily experiences and realities of children and the professionals working with them. Increasingly, scholarship acknowledges that child rights have to be understood not only as entitlements but as practices that shape children’s development and are contingent upon cultural contexts, institutional arrangements and power relationships.

In this context, universities are well placed to contribute to more comprehensive understandings of child rights as social practices. By operating at the intersection of theory and practice, they offer not only the tools for critically questioning existing practices and policies but also a space to actively engage with schools, health services, child welfare agencies, the judiciary and the community. When institutions assume these responsibilities proactively, they play a crucial role in transposing the child rights paradigm from abstract concepts into tangible experiences of citizenship and childhood.

The establishment of twelve Child Rights Centres (CRCs) in Greek universities (as of December 2025) seems to confirm this development. These centres work as academic hubs for research, teaching, training and social action and form part of a national network committed to child rights. The Conference, and the present volume of proceedings, represents a significant and tangible manifestation of this shared aspiration, while also promoting exchanges and networking within a broader international context.

### Mapping the field: themes and contributions

The 21 papers published in this collection cover a wide spectrum of current approaches and thinking within the child rights academic community. A combination of disciplines, methodologies and perspectives, set within a variety of different national contexts, is used throughout this volume and reinforces the overall theme of the book. Child rights as a concept has developed into a truly paradigm-shifting tool of understanding and interpreting the position of children and the way in which their needs are met on a daily basis. Common to all papers in the collection is an underlying recognition of the position of children as rights-holders and active agents whose views, knowledge and circumstances must be acknowledged and taken into account when decisions are made concerning their (and their communities’) lives and when interventions are designed and implemented to address their needs.

This diverse collection encompasses a variety of research approaches: quantitative and qualitative research methods, ethnographic studies, conceptual analysis and programme evaluations. Some of these papers address issues related to the beliefs, knowledge, and professional training needs of educators, emphasising that a child-rights-based approach is central for the successful implementation of child rights in schools and other day-to-day settings.

Child-rights research is inherently multi-disciplinary. Across this volume, we can observe the intersection of legal and social policy with pedagogy, public health perspectives that inform educational programmes, and sociological approaches that help us understand inclusion and exclusion. New technologies, in turn, raise particular ethical issues for children’s lives. This book seeks to develop a richer and more contextually grounded understanding of children’s lived realities through these diverse perspectives.

A particularly important contribution to these proceedings lies in the fact that several authors discuss pilot programmes and interventions they were directly involved in. This volume, therefore, is grounded in applied research that offers insights into the challenges, opportunities and successful strategies in implementing child rights in schools, universities and communities,

through various programmes such as health-promotion initiatives, teacher training schemes, anti-bullying programmes and e-learning platforms. In this way, these authors examine not only the impact but also the process of such interventions, including how to work with stakeholders, to foster reflective practices, to coordinate different actors and how to tailor interventions to specific contexts.

Several articles explore how child rights research connects to major social and technological transformations and the impact that these contexts have on children's lives, such as migration, multilingualism, or the role of artificial intelligence. Child rights are presented not as a separate dimension but as an integral part of these global changes and contemporary children's lives.

For the purposes of this collection, and despite the alphabetical order in which the papers are published, we can divide the twenty-one chapters into five main themes, which are closely interrelated:

### **1. Health, nutrition, and community-based interventions**

Several contributions address the protection of children's right to health, with particular emphasis on the National Action Against Childhood Obesity in Greece, a Ministry of Health programme in collaboration with UNICEF. Through evidence-based interventions, reflective learning methodologies, and close collaboration with schools, families and communities, universities emerge as key partners in public health strategies. These papers demonstrate how a child-rights-based approach reframes obesity prevention and the promotion of healthy lifestyles and wellbeing as a matter of social justice, participation, and shared responsibility, rather than individual behaviour alone.

### **2. Institutionalising child rights in higher education**

This thematic cluster highlights how child rights are situated in higher education curricula, professional development programmes and academic discourse on education. Based on empirical research and a comparative perspective, the articles present both progress and continuing challenges. A core message is the need to integrate child rights in higher education and teacher education programmes with the explicit goal of preparing professionals who can apply rights-based approaches and practices. Faculty members' understanding of child rights should include not only legal principles, but also pedagogical and child development aspects, and be informed through research on inclusive, rights respectful and participative learning environments. A particular emphasis is placed on how professional development can support teaching staff at all levels of the education system in implementing rights-based education.

### **3. Inclusion, diversity, and intercultural pedagogies**

This thematic cluster centres on inclusion, multiculturalism, and the realisation of child rights for minorities and children in situations of vulnerability. Special focus is put on large-scale interventions designed to support teachers, school leaders, and schools, where migrant and refugee children are enrolled, such as the Teach4Integration programme. These papers also argue for the recognition of diversity (including multilingualism) as an asset, while universities can support schools, educators and communities in promoting a whole-school approach, creating an environment of belonging, respect, empowerment, and well-being for all children.

### **4. Violence prevention, digital citizenship, and emerging challenges**

Another major theme focuses on contemporary threats that children are facing such as bullying and social exclusion as well as ethical challenges associated with digital technologies. Articles in this cluster examine prevention and intervention approaches that make use of socio-emotional learning principles and rights-based practices, supported by emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence. A focus on the research's ability to guide practical interventions that place children at the centre responds to complex and evolving social challenges, while

remaining attentive to ethical safeguards.

### **5. Legal agency, STEAM education, and transformative research**

The final group of papers explores issues relating to the promotion of child rights within the legal system and access to child-friendly justice, the concept and practices of transformative research in child rights and the creative application of STEAM learning approaches to the child rights domain. The articles highlight how legal and theoretical child rights frameworks can be translated into action in children's lives through participative, age-appropriate, and empowerment-oriented practices which respond to children's specific voices and realities.

#### **Academia as a moral and civic actor**

The responsibility of higher education to promote and secure the implementation of child rights is a topic running through the volume. On the one hand, because graduates of higher education – as future policy makers, teachers, doctors, social workers and other professionals – have a responsibility to contribute to the promotion and protection of child rights. On the other hand, because higher education institutions are in a position to influence the social debate and advance scientific knowledge in a way that is conducive to positive changes related to the situation of children and the realisation of their rights.

Several articles explore universities as sites where child rights are put into practice. In all cases, the analysis is cautious in assuming an automatic implementation, highlighting a range of structural, ethical, methodological and epistemological tensions in the integration of child rights in higher education.

In these chapters a wide range of arguments are put forward as to why universities can and should be regarded as moral and civic actors that can shape public attitudes and practices towards children, influence inclusive, child-friendly policies, and act as a catalyst for change. At a time when uncertainties about the future are high, and space for critical reflection and democratic debate is shrinking, higher education institutions are essential in fostering these qualities. By integrating child rights in teaching, researching and working with communities, universities reaffirm their public responsibility to promote an equal, just and human rights-based society.

#### **A collaborative effort and a call to action**

These proceedings represent not only an account of an academic conference, but a collective call to action. They serve as an invitation to universities to deepen their work on child rights, to policymakers to utilise academic evidence, to researchers to collaborate with practitioners, and to students to see themselves as agents for child rights.

We express our sincere thanks to all those whose work is presented here, and especially to all the authors of the twenty-one contributions, whose rigorous research and reflective practice form the backbone of this book. We thank the Rector of the University of Patras, Prof. Christos Bouras, and the UNICEF Representative in Greece, Dr. Ghassan Khalil for their pioneering work under this collaboration, the members of the Scientific Committee for safeguarding the academic quality and integrity of the Conference, and for guiding it from vision to realisation. We would also like to acknowledge the work and dedication of twelve Greek universities that have recently established CRCs, similar to initiatives developed in Georgia and other countries. These centres collectively illustrate what institutional will and long-term commitment to child rights can achieve.

Most importantly, we want to emphasise and celebrate the strong partnership between UNICEF and the University of Patras. Their work on this project is a concrete example of the productive relationships that can be forged between an international organisation and a higher education institution committed to a shared agenda for child rights.

### An invitation to dialogue

The chapters that follow reflect and contribute to a lively debate on the role of higher education in realising child rights as a social justice imperative. Many papers, in different ways, explore the potential of child rights as a concept, methodology and framework for action. The intention is not to give a comprehensive overview of realising child rights in higher education settings. Rather, it is to illustrate the challenges and obstacles that need to be addressed. We hope that this volume will contribute to future academic research and discussions, encouraging reflection and practice in institutions and agencies that work for children.

This Preface is therefore offered not as a definitive interpretation of the volume, but as an invitation to dialogue. Rather than attempting to summarise the messages or implications of the papers in this volume, we encourage all potential readers, including researchers, educators, policymakers, practitioners, and students, to engage critically with the contributions that follow, to question assumptions, and to consider how the insights presented here might inform their own visions, plans and practices.

### The Editors

**Vassiliki Riga & Giorgos Simopoulos**

## Foreword of Dr. Khalil Ghassan UNICEF Representative in Greece

It is with great joy and deep appreciation that I introduce the Proceedings of the 1st International Conference on the Role of Academia in Promoting Child Rights. Reading through the pages that follow, one cannot help but feel inspired by the breadth of ideas, the passion of the contributors, and the shared commitment to creating a world where every child's rights are not only fully realized on paper, but lived, felt, and experienced in their everyday lives. This Conference — the first of its kind in Greece — marked an important milestone not only for UNICEF's work in the country, but for everyone who believes in the transformative power of education, research, and academic collaboration.

Over the past years, UNICEF has worked tirelessly to foster a culture of child rights in Greece. Our mission is simple yet ambitious: to ensure that the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child guide the way we think, and the way we act — from early childhood, to schools, to families, to communities, to the highest levels of policymaking. One of our most significant achievements in this journey has been the establishment of the Child Rights Centers (CRCs) in academic institutions across the country. These Centers represent a bold vision: that academia can and must be at the forefront of building societies that place children's well-being, dignity, inclusion, and participation at the centre.

The CRC initiative began with a firm conviction — that if we empower universities to integrate child-rights into teaching, research, and interaction with the communities, a new generation of professionals will emerge: educators who teach with empathy; social workers who advocate for every child; policymakers who rely on evidence and rights-based thinking; health professionals who value child-friendly systems; and scholars who push the global conversation on children's rights forward. Today, with a rapidly growing network of universities joining this vision, we see that hope becoming reality.

The University of Patras, where this Conference was hosted, holds a special place in this narrative. As the first institution to establish a Child Rights Center in Greece, it helped pave the way for the national network that followed. It is fitting, therefore, that this pioneering academic community also hosted the first international gathering dedicated to exploring how academia can shape a more child-centred world. The enthusiasm and dedication demonstrated by the rectoral authorities, faculty members, students, and administrators reflect a powerful truth: when universities embrace child rights, they become engines of meaningful social progress.

What made this Conference truly exceptional was not only its scale — with 125 contributors: speakers, panelists, and participants from 17 countries, with a diversity of backgrounds, and disciplines. Academics exchanged ideas and practices on the role of Academia on promoting child rights. Researchers shared innovative methodologies for studying children's lives, combating violence and bullying, enhancing participation and the sense of belonging. Educators described transformative approaches for embedding child-rights across curricula, strengthening inclusive education. Practitioners from public institutions and civil society organizations reflected on how academic insights can be translated into better policies for health, wellbeing, child-friendly justice and stronger child-protection systems. Students and young professionals brought fresh

perspectives, challenging us to think more creatively and act more urgently.

Across sessions, a common theme emerged: child rights must not remain abstract principles or aspirations. They must become lived experiences. And academia plays a central role in making this possible. Universities shape knowledge — but they also shape values, mindsets, and social action. When child-rights are present in university classrooms, research labs, fieldwork practices, and partnerships with local communities, they become embedded in the very fabric of society.

In this spirit, the global reflections of UNICEF also guide our work. As highlighted in UNICEF's recent child-rights advocacy strategy, the international landscape is marked by rising authoritarianism, shrinking civic space, policy regressions, digital threats, and misinformation — challenges that require stronger evidence, more inclusive coalitions, and a bold, unifying voice for children. This underscores even more powerfully the crucial role of universities as champions of knowledge, democratic dialogue, and rights-based thinking. Their contribution is not only academic; it is profoundly civic.

UNICEF is proud to have co-organized this Conference, and even prouder to work alongside the academic institutions that are embracing this agenda with such sincerity and vision. The partnership between UNICEF and Greek universities is more than a project; it is a long-term commitment to cultivating a rights-respecting culture that will benefit children for generations to come. Each new Child Rights Center strengthens this foundation. Each new research initiative generates evidence that can inform better decisions. Each new course prepares students to become advocates for justice, inclusion, and equality. Together, we are building a movement — one that is growing, evolving, and gaining momentum across Greece and beyond.

As you explore the pages of this volume, I encourage you to read not only with an academic lens but also with a sense of possibility. These proceedings demonstrate that the challenges children face can be addressed with thoughtful, evidence-based, and rights-driven solutions. They show that when academics partner with policymakers, practitioners, and communities, change is not only possible, it is inevitable.

Most of all, the papers collected here remind us of why we do this work. Behind every research question, every methodological choice, and every policy recommendation lies the face of a child — a child who deserves safety, learning, participation, and the full enjoyment of their rights. A child who deserves adults who care enough to reinvent systems, challenge old assumptions, and fight for fairness. A child whose dreams matter.

Let these Proceedings be a testament to what can be accomplished when we unite across disciplines, across institutions, and across countries for a common purpose. Let them also be a call to action: to expand our collaborations, deepen our understanding, and continue investing in the academic foundations of child-rights advocacy.

On behalf of UNICEF, I extend my heartfelt thanks to our partners in the University of Patras, as well as to all the contributors, and participants of this landmark Conference. Your work embodies the essence of our shared mission and fills us with hope for the future. May this volume inspire further innovation, renewed commitment, and a collective determination to ensure that every child's rights are upheld — not in words alone, but in everyday practice.

With warm regards and unwavering dedication.

## Foreword of Professor Christos I. Bouras Rector of the University of Patras

When, nearly two years ago, we established *the first Child Rights Center* at a Greek university—following a proposal by Dr. Ghassan Khalil on behalf of the UNICEF Greece Country Office—very few could have imagined that, in such a short period of time, we would have reached the point we are at today. The organization of the *1<sup>st</sup> International Conference on the Role of Academia in Promoting Child Rights* is undoubtedly the most fitting culmination of this collaboration and a clear sign of the potential that lies ahead in our continued partnership.

The University of Patras has a decades-long engagement in child-rights-related research, through the *Department of Educational Sciences and Early Childhood Education*, and places continuous efforts to promote a rights-respecting environment for all children. With the establishment of the Child Rights Center, we have been able to expand this commitment across the institution. In collaboration with UNICEF Greece Country Office, we initiated comprehensive training for a significant number of our teaching staff on issues related to child rights. These programs aim to integrate a child-rights perspective into all aspects of our mission—research, teaching, and societal engagement.

In addition, the School of Medicine, through the *Laboratory of Hygiene*, together with the Child Rights Center, is actively participating in the *National Action Against Childhood Obesity*, organized by the Ministry of Health and UNICEF. This initiative reflects our university's interdisciplinary approach and its commitment to safeguarding children's health and well-being.

Our collaborative efforts extend even further. Just one month before the conference, we had the honor of hosting in Patras the first meeting—organized by the UNICEF Greece Country Office—of the eleven Greek universities that have established Child Rights Centers. This meeting aimed to create a network for better and more effective coordination of our actions. These harmonized and collaborative efforts have the potential to spread the idea of promoting child rights to the new generation of our country and beyond.

Moreover, a *tripartite Memorandum of Understanding* has been signed between the University of Patras, UNICEF, and the Regional Directorate of Primary and Secondary Education of Western Greece. Through this agreement, we have begun working together—initially focusing on actions to combat school bullying.

Reading the *Proceedings of the First International Conference*, as well as the *Book of Abstracts*, I believe we are offered a unique opportunity to observe the richness of the research agenda in this field. It is also worth noting that a large number of speakers from seventeen different countries participated in the conference, a fact that clearly demonstrates the great need that existed for such an international forum.

At the University of Patras, we consider the promotion of the child rights agenda to be one of our key priorities in strengthening our connection with society and its needs. As a public university, our mission inherently includes maintaining a continuous, active relationship with the community. In my view, the most meaningful expression of this commitment lies in giving back to the most sensitive and vital part of society—its children. This contribution is also the most valuable investment in the future: our common future and our shared path forward.

## **I. Children Right to Health and the National Action Against Childhood Obesity: Connecting the University with Schools and the Community. The Case of the University of Thessaly**

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### **Abstract**

The protection of children's right to health needs to be one of the priorities of the state, while cooperation between the academic community, schools and the wider society is a necessary condition for positive results. The National Action against Childhood Obesity, implemented by the Ministry of Health with the support of UNICEF, provides the necessary framework for the promotion of prevention for children's health and in particular for the fight against childhood obesity, a disease which is highly prevalent in the case of Greece. The Department of Nutrition and Dietetics of the University of Thessaly, in collaboration with the Center for the Rights of the Child of the same University, proceeded to implement innovative training activities for school counselors, teachers and parents/guardians with the aim of adopting scientifically documented practices in everyday school and family life that ensure children's right to health. The central core of the training and other actions are the educational toolkits of the "Food for Action" program. Through experiential, collaborative and interactive activities, the above educational material raises awareness among students, teachers and parents/guardians on key dimensions of childhood obesity prevention, such as consumption of water and healthy breakfast/snacks, increase of physical activity and interruption/decrease of sedentary time. At the same time, the above educational material suggests guidelines for the organization of actions such as 'Health Festivals' and others where community participation is promoted in collaboration with members of the academic community. The implementation of the program so far has shown that cooperation between the University, school bodies and the community can be a decisive factor in protecting the right to health of children and especially in the issue of combating childhood obesity.

**KEYWORDS:** Right to Health; Nutrition; Childhood Obesity; Child Rights Centers

### 1. Childhood obesity: prevalence, etiology, implications

Obesity is a chronic disease which is characterized by excessive fat accumulation and it consists one of the most important challenges for public health (WHO, 2022). Its etiology is complex and attributed to a large number of genetic, sociodemographic, perinatal, lifestyle and clinical factors (NCD Risk Factor Collaboration [NCD-RisC], 2024). While some cases may involve genetic predispositions, the majority of obesity cases are preventable and primarily result from the long-term imbalance between energy intake—driven by dietary habits and nutrient consumption—and energy expenditure, which depends mainly on basal metabolic rate and physical activity levels (Farajian et al., 2014; WHO, 2022).

Globally, the prevalence of childhood overweight and obesity has increased dramatically in recent decades. According to the WHO (2022), more than 160 million children and adolescents aged 5–19 years were living with obesity in 2022. However, the distribution of obesity rates is uneven across regions. Within Europe, prevalence rates are consistently higher in Southern European countries, including Greece, compared with those in Central and Northern Europe (Manios et al., 2018; NCD-RisC, 2024). Recent studies estimate that 20.6% of Greek children aged 3.5–5.5 years are overweight or obese (Moschonis et al., 2010). The prevalence nearly doubles among children aged seven (37%) and exceeds 40% among those aged 10–12 years (Farajian et al., 2011; Farajian et al., 2014). This concerning trend coincides with increased rates of metabolic and psychological comorbidities, such as hypertension, insulin resistance, dyslipidemia, type 2 diabetes, depression, and social stigma. Moreover, obesity in childhood is often accompanied by micronutrient deficiencies, particularly in iron and vitamin D (NCD-RisC, 2024).

Socioeconomic inequalities play a significant role in shaping childhood obesity patterns. Evidence from Greek studies suggests that obesity prevalence is higher among children from lower socioeconomic status (SES) families compared to those from higher SES backgrounds (Moschonis et al., 2010). Gender disparities have also been identified, with obesity rates higher among boys (41%) than girls (33%) at age seven (Hassapidou et al., 2017; World Obesity Federation, 2022). Additionally, children living in rural areas tend to exhibit higher obesity rates than their peers in urban settings (Ramos Salas et al., 2021).

Research in Greece has sought to identify the lifestyle and behavioural factors contributing to these trends. Key determinants include dietary patterns, physical activity, and sedentary behaviours (Farajian et al., 2014; Georgiou et al., 2022). Behaviours such as frequent consumption of energy-dense, nutrient-poor foods; high intake of sugar-sweetened beverages; irregular meal patterns; and low adherence to the Mediterranean diet have all been linked to increased obesity risk (Farajian et al., 2011). Despite Greece's Mediterranean heritage, the GRECO study revealed poor adherence to traditional dietary habits among children aged 10–12 years (Farajian et al., 2011). Furthermore, studies focusing on overweight or obese Greek youth indicate low compliance with national dietary guidelines and generally poor diet quality (Georgiou et al., 2022; Androutsos et al., 2023).

Lifestyle behaviours are shaped early in life and strongly influenced by familial and environmental factors. Low parental SES, parental obesity, and unhealthy family food environments are consistently associated with childhood obesity (Moschonis et al., 2010; Farajian et al., 2014). Parental perceptions of their children's weight status also influence behaviours, as misperceptions often lead to inappropriate dietary restriction or neglect of weight issues (Ramos Salas et al., 2021). Parental modelling and feeding practices are particularly influential in early childhood. Controlling feeding styles have been associated with higher preferences for sugar-dense foods, whereas structured, balanced approaches foster healthier eating patterns (Hübner & Bartelmeß, 2024).

Parental involvement similarly affects children's physical activity and screen time behaviours. Systematic reviews highlight that parental encouragement and co-participation in physical activity increase children's engagement levels, while permissive behaviours, such as using screens as "babysitters," contribute to sedentary lifestyles (Vega-Díaz et al., 2023; Pyne et al., 2025). Collectively, these findings underscore the critical importance of family-centered strategies for obesity prevention and intervention.

Considering the significant, negative impact of obesity on human's health and its economic burden on health systems, it is essential to tackle the rising trends of obesity. Early life interventions seem to be the most effective for obesity prevention, since children's lifestyle behaviours may be more easily formed in the first years of life (WHO, 2022; NCD-RisC, 2024). In this light, UNICEF and the Ministry of Health (MoH) cosigned in late March 2023 a Programmatic Agreement to jointly implement the National Action to combat Child Obesity. This nationwide program aims to decrease the prevalence of overweight/obesity in 2-14-year-old children by 13% until 2030 (Greek Ministry of Health, 2025) and includes interventions at all levels of prevention (i.e., primary, secondary and tertiary prevention), across service delivery platforms and areas, among them school-based intervention programs. This intervention, which will take place within the school setting, will aim to create a supportive social and physical environment to promote behaviours related to healthy eating and active living. The main behaviours to be promoted among children are:

- (1) Water consumption (instead of sugary drinks).
- (2) Eating a healthy and balanced breakfast and/or mid-morning snack.
- (3) Physical activity throughout the day.
- (4) Reducing/breaking sedentary habits, with a special emphasis on screen time.

### 2. The role of Academia on advancing Public Health and the Child Rights Centers Initiative

In the framework of the National Action Plan, a Network of Associated Academic Bodies of the General Secretariat of Public Health has been established, to mobilize local communities and local governance to support actions to address childhood obesity. This network, coordinated by the Institute of Social and Preventive Medicine, includes different Faculties, Departments and Laboratories, mainly related to Medicine, Social Medicine, Physical Education and Dietetics, while a pivotal role has been assigned to the newly established Child Rights Centers, operational in 11 Universities. Each actor coordinates a Regional Task Force, where local authorities, education directorates, civil society organizations and other entities are represented. A series of teachers' and parents' trainings, awareness workshops related with the school toolboxes, health fairs, health and wellbeing summer camps and the development of schools-health hubs have been rolled out from 2024 to the present.

The Child Rights Centres (CRCs) represent a national network of academic hubs within 11 public universities across Greece that advance the realization of children's rights through promotion, research, and teaching of child rights. Beyond their individual academic functions, their value lies in their collective capacity as a nationwide network that connects local knowledge, academic expertise, and community partnerships under a unified child rights framework.

This structure makes the CRCs a unique platform for interdisciplinary collaboration in support of national public health goals - particularly in promoting healthy lifestyles and preventing childhood obesity, in line with Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the political priorities of the Ministry of Health. ). The collaboration between these two academic networks -the Child Rights Centres and the National Network led by ISPM- represents a model of synergy between child rights and public health policy, where shared values of prevention,

participation, and equity converge. Through their established functions the CRCs can enhance the ethical and normative dimension of the national programme, ensuring that health promotion is grounded in a child-rights-based approach, dignity, and evolving capacities of every child in line with the principles outlined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It is important to highlight that childhood obesity is not only a health condition but a reflection of social determinants that affect children's rights to health, development, and equality. Addressing it through a child-rights-based lens shifts the focus from individual responsibility to shared social accountability. The CRCs, through their scientific and societal role, can help reposition child health as a core element of the national human rights agenda, thereby reinforcing the State's obligations to create supportive environments for healthy growth.

### 3. Using reflective learning for school counselors, teachers and parents/guardians

Until September 2025 the University of Thessaly implemented workshops addressing school counsellors, educators, auxiliary education staff, community workers, parents and caregivers, while 2 school hubs are ready to become operational. More than 750 individuals have participated in such workshops, based on a reflective learning methodology. Reflective learning is one of the most important and widespread learning models for both children and adults. The development of reflection on previous knowledge and experience and the transformation of previous dysfunctional perceptions are particularly important parameters for achieving the goals of the learning process. The development of reflection can lead to a critical approach to previous perceptions and attitudes, as well as to the adoption of new ones, which come as a result of the new knowledge and experiences acquired.

The whole process has the characteristics of transformative learning (Mezirow, 2003), that is, learning that can transform the individual's previous mental habits. Although the advantages of reflective learning have been particularly emphasized in recent decades, the discussion about it, is much older.

Dewey was the first to systematically refer to the importance of experience and the concerns that each experience creates in the individual. According to his texts (Dewey, 1997), experience is the connecting link between the individual and his social environment and largely determines his needs, goals, abilities and desires. He emphasizes that every new learning process needs to start from existing experience, but also lead to a new experience, which in turn offers new knowledge. Therefore, according to Dewey, effective learning needs to evolve in a spiral. Existing experience mobilizes cognitive questions that produce new ideas, which in turn feed new experiences that produce new questions and so on.

Correspondingly to Dewey, several decades later, Kolb (1984) proposes a learning model that has the form of a circle and focuses on the process of reflection. The experiences of learners are the subject of reflection, which has the potential to lead to a cognitive theorization of the experience. Then the new theoretical cognitive constructions lead to new more complex empirical experiments that constitute the beginning of a new cycle of reflective process.

Kolb's theory, known as the theory of experiential learning, highlights that knowledge is the object of a continuous dynamic process. Therefore, it is not an autonomous 'load' that can be transferred from the teacher to the student, but a product that is in a process of transformation and interaction between the actors participating in the cognitive process. A characteristic of the above dynamic process is the conflict between old and new knowledge, as the latter is created as a result of new experiences. The conflict stage is characterized by the ambivalence of the student between the old and the new, while a successful development of the learning process leads to the resolution of the conflict and the integration of the new knowledge into the already

existing cognitive schemes. The process of unlearning previous knowledge and attitudes is one of the greatest obstacles for adult learners, as previous knowledge and behaviours have already created powerful constructs in the learner's cognitive and experiential world.

With the aim of investigating the process of developing participants' reflection within the context of the actions carried out, short-term qualitative research was organized, which utilized ethnographic observation as a basic research tool. In this context, a member of the research team observed all the actions and recorded the participants' perceptions, which highlighted the development of reflection. Hammersley & Atkinson (2007) underline the advantages of ethnographic observation, especially in the context of educational research. Respectively Patton (1990) argues that direct observation offers many possibilities and advantages. With direct observation, the observer can understand the context within which the functions and activities take place, an element that is very essential in the formation of a holistic perception of each current condition. The views collected through observation were then analysed using thematic content analysis (Anderson, 2007). The study presented here did not employ a formal sampling procedure. Instead, the sample consisted of the entire population of individuals (school counsellors, educators, other education staff, community workers, parents and caregivers), who participated in the training workshops. In total, approximately 750 people attended these workshops, and all were included as potential participants in the ethnographic observations. Because the research followed an ethnographic approach, the emphasis was placed on naturally occurring interactions and behaviours within the workshop settings rather than on drawing a statistically representative sample.

### 4. Findings and Discussion

As shown by the research findings, the function of reflection—and, consequently, of transformative learning—becomes evident in the following instances observed during the implementation of the program's activities.

During the seminar for parents and guardians, the facilitators (dietitians–nutritionists) presented participants with photographs of various food products (e.g., breakfast cereals, packaged fruit juices, toast, chocolate bars, etc.) and asked them, working in groups, to identify which of these they considered appropriate for their children's breakfast. Across all groups, participants included packaged fruit juices among the products they regarded as most suitable and healthy.

When the nutritionists presented data on the excessive sugar content of packaged fruit juices, parents and guardians expressed surprise and, upon reflecting on the quality of their children's breakfast, stated that they would discontinue the inclusion of such products in their family diet. They also declared their intention to replace the convenient option of packaged juices with freshly squeezed natural fruit juices.

A similar outcome was observed in the training seminar for teachers. Participants indicated that they would recommend the school canteen manager to cease offering packaged fruit juices and to promote their replacement with water or fresh, unsweetened juices.

A comparable process of reflective learning was also observed during the Health Festival, where a considerable number of students from all educational levels participated in awareness-raising activities aimed at fostering the development of daily habits that promote a healthy lifestyle. Students were asked to compare the time they spent engaging in physical activity or exercise with the time devoted to sedentary behaviors. For many students, sedentary time significantly exceeded active time. Following a discussion on the potential health implications of this finding, students were invited to suggest ways in which they could incorporate physical

activity into their daily routines.

The students' proposals were particularly noteworthy. Beyond the expected responses—such as “I’ll ask my dad, who is a bit overweight, to walk with me to my English tutoring lessons instead of driving”—they also proposed innovative ways of modifying everyday habits toward a healthier lifestyle. For instance, one group suggested: “On Sunday mornings, students and parents could organize joint activities, such as going for a run together and then having a picnic in the nearby park.” This suggestion not only promoted physical exercise but also underscored the importance of extending individual health-oriented behaviors into collective and community-based initiatives.

The reflective function of learning also became evident in the discussion held with students about the right of all children to health, and therefore to healthy nutrition. In collaboration with the Center for the Rights of the Child at the University of Thessaly, the students who participated in the Health Festival had the opportunity to discuss questions such as: “Do all children around the world have access to proper and healthy food?”, “Which factors determine the quality of nutrition?”, and “How could we support children’s right to proper nutrition?”

The students’ attempts to respond to these questions stimulated a series of reflections and critical reconsiderations on issues such as social inequalities, poverty, and social justice, among others. The discussion of these themes is directly related to critical and transformative learning (Mezirow, 2003), and at the same time constitutes one of the central aims of critical intercultural education (Magos, 2022).

At the current stage of the program, interactive activities incorporating reflective processes are being implemented in the “Health-Hub Schools” by the interdisciplinary research team of the University of Thessaly, comprising dietitians–nutritionists, physical educators, psychologists, pedagogues, and pediatricians. These activities take place twice a week in each participating school (1st Experimental Junior High School of Larissa, 7th Experimental Junior High School of Trikala, and 11th Primary School of Lamia). They have an intergenerational character and are open to all members of the local community.

The research team implements activities based on material developed by the Ministry of Health within the framework of the National Action Against Childhood Obesity. Among other elements, the facilitators pose reflective questions to participants—children (aged 2–18), parents/guardians, and grandparents—regarding the consumption of healthy foods and portion sizes in main and intermediate meals, the benefits of physical activity and quality sleep, the adverse effects of prolonged sedentary behaviour, as well as issues related to eating disorders, models of healthy body weight, and the importance of the child’s holistic physical and mental development.

## 5. Conclusions and way forward

The implementation of the National Action against Childhood Obesity demonstrates that safeguarding children’s right to health requires coordinated, multi-level efforts that bridge public health policy, educational settings, community participation, and academic expertise. Evidence presented in this paper confirms that childhood obesity in Greece is driven by a combination of structural, socioeconomic, and behavioral determinants, which necessitates preventive strategies that are both comprehensive and rights-based. The collaboration between the Ministry of Health, UNICEF, Universities and school communities provides a robust framework for advancing prevention, promoting healthy behaviors, and strengthening public awareness. Within this context, the educational toolkits of the “Food for Action” program and the reflective-learning methodology employed in teacher, parent, and student workshops have proven valuable in transforming perceptions and enabling more informed choices related to nutrition, physical

activity, and overall wellbeing. The Child Rights Centres further enhance this process by embedding the principles of children’s rights, participation, and equity into health-promotion initiatives.

Based on the findings, several recommendations emerge. First, reflective-learning methodologies should be systematically integrated into school-based health programs, as they foster critical thinking and sustainable behavior change. Second, ongoing capacity building for educators, school counselors, and parents is essential to ensure consistent and evidence-based health messages across home and school environments, overcoming a knowledge-based curriculum. Third, stronger mechanisms for community engagement—such as Health Festivals, school–community projects, and intergenerational activities—should be expanded to reinforce collective responsibility for child health. Finally, the implementation and Child Rights Centres should be further institutionalized within national public-health planning to maintain scientific rigor, ensure rights-based implementation, and support long-term monitoring and evaluation of childhood-obesity interventions.

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## II. Investigating the Presence of Children's Rights in the Curricula of Greek University Education Departments

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### Abstract

Although the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child was signed more than 30 years ago, research shows that there remains a significant gap in awareness – not only among the general public but also among individuals who can be considered stakeholders, such as teachers. Based on research suggesting that university education plays a crucial role in promoting children's rights, we examined the curricula of 19 university education departments in Greece to assess the presence of children's rights-related content. More specifically, we calculated the frequency of references to children's rights within course titles, course content, or other parts of the curriculum for the academic year 2024-2025. General references to human rights were not included in our analysis. Our findings reveal that a considerable number of departments (9 out of 19) do not include any reference to children's rights in their curricula. The highest number of references in a single curriculum was seven (references in five courses titles and/or content and two references in other parts of the curriculum), while several departments mentioned children's rights in the content of only one course. Our findings are discussed in light of the relevant literature.

**KEYWORDS:** Children's rights; Curriculum analysis; Universities; Education departments; Higher education

## 1. Introduction

The modern conception of childhood and the corresponding discourse on children's rights are relatively recent developments. For much of human history, children were not regarded as a distinct social group with particular needs or legal entitlements. Rather, they were seen as small adults expected to take on responsibilities, behaviours, and roles similar to those of grown-ups. In both legal and cultural terms, there was little differentiation between a child and an adult, and little, if any, protection was afforded specifically to children. Their existence was often framed through their utility to the family, the broader social order or the economy, rather than through any sense of individual worth or developmental need. Society has begun to recognize childhood as a unique phase of life and to acknowledge that children are individuals entitled to rights and protection only in the past few centuries (Kosher et al., 2016).

Scholars and historians have suggested various theories regarding the origins of the modern concept of childhood. Some argue that the earliest meaningful shift in thinking occurred among the Puritans in seventeenth-century England, who began to reject the long-held notion of children as inherently sinful beings. Others claim it was first recognized in late seventeenth-century Russia, where the appearance of educational texts specifically designed for young learners, focusing on grammar and religious teachings, suggested an emerging awareness of childhood as a separate and significant stage of human development (Sacotte et al., 2023). A particularly influential voice in this evolving discourse was the English philosopher John Locke. In his "Essay concerning human understanding" and "Some thoughts concerning education", Locke described the mind of a child as being a blank slate ready to be formed and shaped by experience and instruction, signalling a shift in how children were viewed: not as inherently corrupt beings to be punished, but as individuals capable of learning and growth (Benzaquén, 2011; Sacotte et al., 2023). He highlighted the critical role of education in the formation of moral character and personal virtue. He advocated for a thoughtful and balanced method that integrated reasoning, instruction, consistent discipline, and compassionate guidance. In his view, children possessed an innate curiosity and an early capacity for reason, and he maintained that a well-designed educational approach should actively support and cultivate these natural tendencies (Gianoutsos, 2006).

Building on these early ideas, enlightenment thinkers in the eighteenth century increasingly challenged the religious doctrine of original sin and began to redefine childhood as a time of innocence. A key figure in this development was the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau whose influential work *Émile* presented a new vision of childhood. Rousseau associated children with nature and innate goodness, suggesting that they possess an inherent purity that should be preserved and respected (Kosher et al., 2016). He suggested that children are entitled to a joyful and fulfilling childhood, marked by freedom, play, and a deep connection to the natural world. In contrast to John Locke's emphasis on reason and rationality from an early age, Rousseau argued that childhood is a distinct and valuable stage of life, with its own unique ways of perceiving, feeling, and understanding, and insisted that children should be allowed to remain children for as long as possible (Gianoutsos, 2006). In the decades that followed, Romantic thinkers went even further, portraying childhood as a sacred and idealized period of life. They advocated for environments that would nurture creativity and personal development, arguing that childhood should be a time not merely of preparation for adulthood, but of meaningful, self-contained experience (Scholz, 2010).

The enlightenment ideas about childhood did not gain much popularity for decades. As late as the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, children were still largely regarded as personal property of their parents, with virtually no independent legal rights or recognition. Parental

authority – particularly that of fathers – was nearly absolute, granting them the power to govern their children's lives with little to no external oversight. This control extended to all aspects of upbringing, including discipline, where physical punishment was not only common but widely accepted as normal and appropriate (Hopkins, 1994). Many historians suggest that the high rates of infant and child mortality contributed significantly to the emotional detachment parents often displayed toward their children. It is argued that, in order to cope with the constant threat of loss, parents learned to suppress emotional bonds and avoided forming deep attachments to infants, who had a low likelihood of survival. In this context, adults were not expected to have close or nurturing relationships with children. On the contrary, attitudes toward children could be marked by indifference, or even cruelty. Children were generally seen as having duties and obligations toward their families and communities, but they were granted few, if any, rights in return (Kosher et al., 2016).

In the pre-industrial era, child labor was a common practice, with children playing a vital role in the economic systems of societies across the globe. Throughout this period, and into the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, children – especially those older than six – were typically expected to contribute to the workforce in accordance with their physical abilities. Around the age of seven, many children began a gradual introduction into the world of labor, joining adults in a range of tasks across households, farms, workshops, or other labor settings (Alaimo, 2002). During the Industrial Revolution, as labor demands grew, societal views on child labor began to shift – from seeing it as a means of education and preparation for adulthood to recognizing it as a form of exploitation (Sacotte et al., 2023). Supported also by the views of childhood introduced by Enlightenment and Romantic thinkers which started gaining ground, the 19<sup>th</sup> century movement opposing child labour and promoting education marked a significant change in societal attitudes, and played a crucial role in redefining childhood and shaping the foundation of children's rights. This reform movement sparked widespread public debate about the role and meaning of childhood, introducing the groundbreaking idea that children might not be suited for work at all. Instead, it emphasized their right to a fundamentally different kind of childhood – one focused on physical, moral, intellectual, and social growth (Kosher et al., 2016).

The era between the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century has been named the "child-saving" era. During these years children's rights saw significant growth – particularly their rights to protection and access to services (Alaimo, 2002). The first legally binding agreement addressing child labor was established in 1919, when the International Labor Organization adopted conventions banning the employment of children in hazardous conditions. This was followed in 1924 by the League of Nations' adoption of the Declaration of Geneva, a nonbinding statement aimed at protecting children's rights. After World War II, the principles of human rights, outlined in the United Nations Charter, formed the basis for a comprehensive and legally binding definition of children's rights. Building on this foundation, the UN adopted the Declaration of the Rights of the Child in 1959 (Fass, 2011). The United Nations General Assembly declared 1979 as the International Year of the Child to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the 1959 Declaration of the Rights of the Child, and ten years later, in 1989, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Convention acknowledged children as active participants in social, economic, political, civil, and cultural life and minimum standards for the protection of children's rights across all areas were established and guaranteed. By 2015, the Convention was ratified by 196 states, making it the most widely ratified international instrument with 196 States; only the United States of America has not ratified to date (UNICEF, n.d.).

More than 30 years after the signing of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, research shows that there remains a significant gap in awareness – not only among

the general public but also among key stakeholders, including teachers (Covell et al., 2018). For instance, Deb & Mathews (2012) investigated the knowledge and attitudes towards children's rights expressed by 150 teachers in India and their results were alarming. Only 20,7% of them claimed that they were aware of provisions in the Indian Constitution protecting child rights and only 23% stated that they have heard of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Moreover, 22% of the teachers asked whether a child should have rights answered that they should not. In another study, the 44,7% of Zimbabwean trainee teachers and the 56,7% of teachers participated claimed that they were not introduced to the United Nations Convention and African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child during teacher training or professional experience (Shumba, 2003). Finally, a study with 397 caregivers and 168 teachers in Oman showed that, while they reported a positive attitude towards children's rights, their knowledge regarding child protection services in Oman was limited (Saadoon et al., 2025).

Considering the importance of key stakeholders, such as teachers and child care professionals, holding a high level of understanding of children's rights, research has been focused on practices to achieve it. Campbell & Covell (2001) developed the "children's rights knowledge scale" and they used it along with the "rights values survey" (Covell & Howe, 2001) in a pre-test/post-test design to trace the knowledge and attitudes of two groups of university students towards children's rights – the students of one group followed a children's rights class while the other group did not. The results of the study showed that the group who participated in the children's rights class demonstrated a notable improvement in both their understanding of children's rights and their support for those rights while they also exhibited a decline in the belief that children are the property of their parents. In contrast, the students who followed only their regular classes showed no significant changes in any of these areas between the pre-test and post-test. On the other hand, there are studies which conclude that students of university and other post-secondary institutions believe that they do not receive enough instruction on children's rights. For instance, Mitchell & McCusker (2008) interviewed individuals enrolled in Canadian post-secondary institutions intending to gain employment within public education for children and related professions. More specifically, analyzing the interviews of thirteen students and educators from fields such as education, child health, and child and youth studies, they reported that the majority of participants acknowledged a limited theoretical understanding of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and of concepts associated with childhood, leading to a noticeable gap in knowledge within post-secondary education.

Considering how important is that (a) key stakeholders, such as teachers, express good understanding of children's rights, and (b) post-secondary institutions offering programs in fields such as education include instruction on children's rights, we decided to examine the curricula of Greek education university departments to assess the presence of children's rights-related content.

**2. Methods**

For this study, we examined the curricula of Greek university departments of education for the academic year 2024-2025, as available on their respective websites (19 curricula). More specifically, we examined the curricula of the following departments (in alphabetical order):

- Department of Early Childhood Education, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki
- Department of Early Childhood Education, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens
- Department of Early Childhood Education, University of Ioannina
- Department of Early Childhood Education, University of Thessaly
- Department of Early Childhood Education, University of Western Macedonia
- Department of Education Sciences in Early Childhood, Democritus University of Thrace

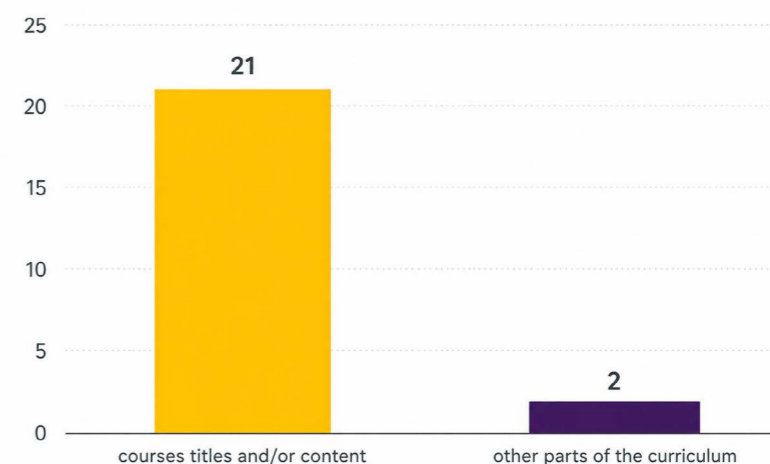
- Department of Educational Sciences and Early Childhood Education, University of Patras
- Department of Educational Sciences and Social Work, University of Patras
- Department of Preschool Education and Educational Design, University of the Aegean
- Department of Preschool Education, University of Crete
- Department of Primary Education, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki
- Department of Primary Education, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens
- Department of Primary Education, University of Ioannina
- Department of Primary Education, University of Crete
- Department of Primary Education, University of the Aegean
- Department of Primary Education, University of Thessaly
- Department of Primary Education, University of Western Macedonia
- Department of Primary Level Education, Democritus University of Thrace
- Department of Special Education, University of Thessaly

The first author identified the words 'dikaionoma/dikaionomata (in Greek: right/rights) in the textual corpus of the study, i.e. the whole text included in the curricula of interest, apart from biographies and bibliographies. We note that the Greek terms have been transliterated into Latin characters using the ELOT 743 standard, which corresponds to ISO 843. For the reader's convenience, we will refer to the English word in the rest of the text, i.e. right/rights. We then calculated the frequency of courses in which rights are mentioned in the context of children's rights in the title and/or the description. Moreover, we calculated the frequency of paragraphs in which rights are mentioned in the context of children's rights in other parts of the curricula. General references to human rights were not included in our analysis. The calculation of frequencies was performed individually by both authors and consensus was achieved.

**3. Results**

In total, 23 references of children's rights were identified in the curricula investigated. The large majority of these references concern the course titles and/or content (21 out of 23) while only two references concern other parts of the curriculum (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Frequencies of references regarding the part of the curricula they are found.

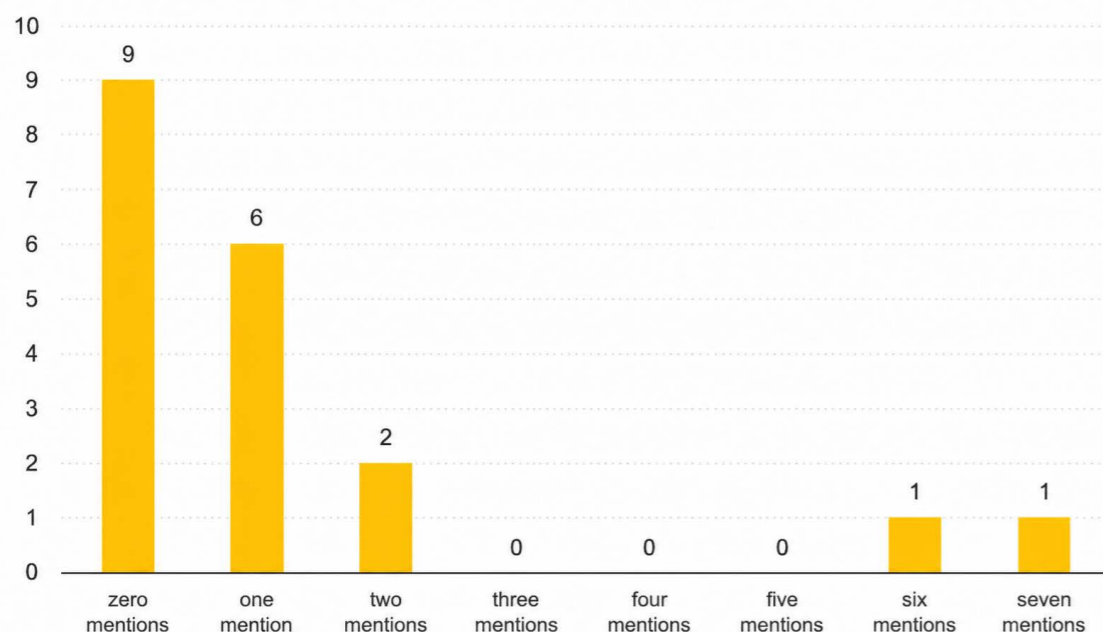


Moreover, as shown in Figure 2, a considerable number of departments (9 out of 19) do not include any reference to children's rights in their curricula. The highest number of references in a single curriculum was seven (references in five courses titles and/or content and two references in other parts of the curriculum), while several departments mentioned children's rights in the



content of only one course (6 out of 19).

Figure 1. Frequencies of the curricula per number of children's rights references



Below are examples of courses and other parts of the curricula that mention children's rights.

"Education for Peace and Human Rights – Children's Rights. Human rights can be promoted and realized through education and schooling. Educators can play a significant role in the implementation of human rights. Educators must actively participate in the struggle for human rights and cultivate a comprehensive human rights awareness. This course is introductory and theoretical in nature. It addresses International Conventions on Human Rights, the Rights of the Child, what Education for Peace and Human Rights entails, its history, and its background. It also explores topics that constitute dimensions of Peace Education or contribute to its understanding, such as conflicts, their causes, and methods for resolving them. Children's rights are human rights, which have been internationally protected since 1989 through the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Human rights apply not only to adults but also to children. There is no doubt that, due to their claim to universality, human rights apply above all to children – individuals who require special protection. Children are the primary bearers of human rights and the first recipients of education in human rights. Only if children develop an understanding of human rights can they, as adults, fully understand and claim their rights" (Department of Early Childhood Education – University of Thessaly, 2025: 123).

"Social exclusion and management of vulnerable groups in the school environment. Upon completion of the course, students are expected to: (1) Distinguish fundamental concepts related to social exclusion, vulnerable groups, marginalization, racism, discrimination, disadvantage, aggression, victimization, human rights, literacy, and equal access to social and educational spaces. (2) Build essential knowledge regarding the emergence of social exclusion among vulnerable groups, its causes, forms, and effects on the school environment and the wider community. (3) Understand the objective elements, principles, and procedures for preventing and addressing social exclusion and marginalization of vulnerable groups in the school setting. (4) Acquire theoretical knowledge in the broader field concerning the rights of children from

vulnerable groups in the educational process, along with practices that ensure their access to it. (5) Decode more specific knowledge related to the application of pedagogical and teaching strategies that prevent the occurrence of social exclusion and promote equal opportunities and access for students to the educational process. (6) Develop specialized skills and use them critically in selecting appropriate techniques for the prevention and management of social exclusion in various situations. (7) Be able to apply highly specialized knowledge in order to develop original thinking and research concerning the creation of new practices for managing social exclusion in schools". (Department of Primary Education – University of Ioannina, 2024: 432-433).

"Childhood and Children's Rights: Pedagogical Approaches. Upon successful completion of the course, students will be able to: (1) Describe the concept of "childhood", recognizing its diversity across time and space. (2) Develop the main theoretical approaches to childhood within the context of the evolution of pedagogical thought. (3) Identify divergent forms of childhood. (4) Distinguish childhood as a field of control, intervention, and regulation through education, the media, and technology. (5) Approach the early institutionalization of children's rights and their contemporary development. (6) Formulate critical questions regarding the understanding of rights and naturalized models of childhood. (7) Support with contemporary literature the evolution of social phenomena in which childhood plays a significant role. (8) Identify and critically analyze aspects of the international discourse concerning the universality of children's rights. (9) Explore the current state of children's rights in Europe and the rest of the world through the actions of relevant organizations. (10) Organize the content and design of educational programs and activities related to childhood and children's rights in both formal and non-formal learning settings, using multimodal materials and a range of pedagogical tools". (Department of Early Childhood Education – University of Western Macedonia, 2024: 83-84).

"Postgraduate Program 'Educational Sciences: Research and Practice in Changing Learning Environments'. The objectives of the postgraduate program are fulfilled through attending organized courses and seminars, completing group and individual assignments, and preparing a Thesis according to international academic standards. These objectives are: (1) To strengthen the professional identity of educators and other professionals who work or intend to work with children in formal and non-formal education settings, enabling them to use contemporary theory and research, reflect on their personal theories and practices, and be capable of revising and creatively responding to current and future educational challenges and changes. (2) To develop an investigative perspective towards the design of learning, teaching, and research in early and middle childhood, and the ability to produce innovative/alternative pedagogical proposals through applied research and ongoing critical reframing that leads to redesigns. (3) To understand the complexity of today's children's learning, which develops simultaneously within various formal, non-formal, and informal educational contexts, and to recognize the need for a transformative approach to learning and teaching. (4) To highlight the needs and rights of children in early and middle childhood for high-quality education, meaningful play, expression, and creativity with respect for the multiple dimensions of their diversity. (5) To train new researchers who aim to continue research (doctoral level) using qualitative and quantitative research methods and contemporary research tools within the framework of ethical conduct and with respect for children as equal members of the educational process. (6) To develop collaboration skills for participation in interdisciplinary teams designing and implementing research and educational programs with various scientific institutions, agencies, and groups involved in formal and non-formal education, both in Greece and abroad". (Department of Early Childhood Education – Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, 2024: 90-92).

"Laboratory of Child Psychology and Education. The Laboratory of Child Psychology and

Education is staffed by faculty members of the Department as well as from other domestic and international departments, along with members of the Laboratory Teaching Staff and doctoral candidates. It is organized around the following scientific and research axes: (1) Development of executive functions and sociocultural development in various contexts. (2) Working memory, executive functions, learning, and child development. (3) Experiential education and teacher learning. (4) Empathy and self-awareness in children with typical and atypical development and/or adults. (5) Rights and policies concerning the child. (6) Mental health in typical and atypical development (Department of Early Childhood Education – Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, 2024: 99).

#### 4. Discussion

The development of the concept of childhood and the recognition of children's rights is the result of a complex and ongoing interaction among cultural, philosophical, social, and political influences. From earlier periods, when children were largely absent or invisible in both legal terms and moral considerations, to the gradual acknowledgement of childhood as a unique and valuable phase of human life which deserves special attention and protection, this transformation led to important international agreements and conventions, that formally affirm children's status as independent rights holders, endowed with inherent dignity and entitlements (Ben-Arieh & Tarshish, 2016). Although significant progress has been done, the path towards fully realizing children's rights in everyday life remains challenging. Many barriers – legal, institutional, economic, and cultural – continue to impede the practical application of these rights across diverse global contexts (Stearns, 2016). The implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child remains uneven. In some countries, including the United States, ratification has been hindered by concerns over national sovereignty and parental rights. While legal frameworks have improved, children in many regions continue to face systemic injustices such as poverty, violence, and limited access to education (Sacotte et al., 2023).

Moreover, research shows that there remains a significant gap in awareness concerning children's rights – not only among the general public but also among individuals who can be considered stakeholders, such as teachers and child care professionals (e.g. Deb & Mathews, 2012; Saadon et al., 2025). Students enrolled in post-secondary institutions aiming to follow careers in education, child health and child/youth studies claim that their studies do not lead to a strong theoretical understanding of children's rights and concepts associated with childhood (Mitchell & McCusker, 2008). Aiming to investigate the situation concerning the presence of children's rights in university level education in Greece, we examined the curricula of 19 education university departments and found that (a) in almost half of them children's rights are not mentioned, and (b) in about one third of them children's rights are mentioned in one course. Our results are in accordance with the ones of Pitsou & Balias (2014) study, which concerned a review of the course titles and descriptions of the undergraduate study guides of Greek pedagogical departments for the academic year 2010-2011 in order to identify content related to human rights. The researchers reported that in Greek universities – particularly in pedagogical departments – human rights education holds a limited and understated role within the undergraduate study guides.

We acknowledge the limitations of our study. The lack of explicit references to children's rights in course titles or descriptions should not necessarily be interpreted as an absence of relevant content within the course itself. It is possible that principles and themes related to children's rights may be integrated into the curriculum in implicit or interdisciplinary ways, even if they are not directly stated in the course documentation. Similarly, the inclusion of references to children's rights in course titles or descriptions does not automatically ensure that these

topics are meaningfully addressed during instruction. The extent to which children's rights are emphasized in teaching practices can vary significantly, depending on the instructor's approach, priorities, and the broader educational context. Taking these limitations into account, we argue that children's rights should appear in curricula of all university education departments, since courses relevant to children's rights equip future teachers with the knowledge and sensitivity needed to uphold and promote the rights of every child in educational settings.

Further research is necessary to address the limitations identified in the present study and to deepen our understanding of how children's rights are integrated into teacher education in Greece. While this study focused on the analysis of curricula, it did not capture the actual implementation of the curriculum in classroom settings. To gain a more comprehensive perspective, future research could include qualitative methods such as interviews or focus groups with students and university professors from the relevant education university departments. These methods would allow for an exploration of how the intended curriculum is perceived, interpreted, and employed in educational practice. Such data could shed light on the extent to which children's rights are meaningfully addressed in teaching and learning, as well as reveal potential gaps between official documentation and actual pedagogical approaches.

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### III. A Whole School Approach to the Prevention of Childhood Obesity Based on Children's Rights: Design, Pilot Implementation, and Policy Lessons

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#### Abstract

Childhood obesity undermines fundamental rights of the child (health, development, adequate standard of living, purpose of education) and requires interventions that go beyond the narrow framework of the school curriculum. This paper presents the design and pilot implementation of the Whole School Approach (WSA) focused on children's rights, using the "Food for Action" toolkits, the multipliers training, and the school-family-community collaboration pattern. The implementation took place at the 21st Kindergarten of Athens and the 3rd Primary School of Zografou and highlighted both benefits (empowerment of children's participation, message consistency, cultural change) and challenges (habit resistance, infrastructure gaps, timetable pressure). Policy recommendations are made for institutional safeguarding of the WSA and for embedding the rights-based approach into school life.

**KEYWORDS:** Childhood obesity; Children's rights; Whole School Approach; School health policy; Student participation; Community

## 1. Introduction

Childhood obesity is one of the most serious public health problems worldwide, with the World Health Organization (WHO, 2016) and the World Obesity Federation (n.d.) confirming the qualities of a major threat to the health of children and adolescents. Research shows that childhood obesity is associated with an increased risk of chronic diseases such as type 2 diabetes and heart disease, while also negatively affecting psychosocial development, a fact which often leads to stigma, low self-esteem, and social exclusion (Porri, 2024; Zhang, Li, & Chen, 2024)

In Greece, rates remain alarmingly high, making development of prevention and intervention strategies within the school community extremely necessary. Schools are core spaces for socialization and education but they also play a key role in shaping attitudes and behaviors related to diet and physical activity.

At the same time, childhood obesity is not only a medical or behavioral issue; it is also strongly connected to children's rights. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) safeguards the right to health (Article 24), life and development (Article 6), an adequate standard of living (Article 27), and emphasizes the purpose of education (Article 29) which includes the promotion of children's well-being. When a child lacks access to healthy food or opportunities for exercise, their rights are being violated.

In this context, the Whole School Approach (WSA) emerges as an appropriate and effective model. It is a strategy that goes beyond the curriculum, extending to the school physical and social environment, its relationships with families and communities, and the institutional governing policies. In this way, the school gradually transforms into a "health and rights ecosystem" capable of promoting healthy behaviors and supporting children's overall development.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Childhood obesity has been recognized by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2016) as one of the most pressing public health problems of the 21st century, since it is linked to serious chronic conditions such as type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease, while also negatively impacting children's psychosocial development. It is not only a medical or dietary issue but a complex phenomenon involving society, family, and school.

In Greece, the problem is even more urgent. According to official data from the *National Action Against Childhood Obesity*, 37.5% of children and adolescents aged 2–14 are overweight or obese, rising to 43% among children aged 5–7. Additionally, 13.6% of children under five face overweight or obesity issues (*paxisarkiakaipaidi.gov.gr*). Similarly, UNICEF reports that 37.5% of children aged 2–14 and 42% of children aged 7–9 are overweight or obese, while 17% of 7–9-year-olds are classified as obese (*unicef.org*). The latest WHO European Region Health Report confirms that over four in ten Greek children aged 7–9 live with overweight or obesity, placing Greece among the highest-ranking countries in Europe (*insider.gr*).

Childhood obesity must also be viewed through the lens of children's rights, as enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). The right to health (Article 24) is threatened by obesity impacting on physical and mental well-being. The right to life and development (Article 6) is constrained by a lack of healthy nutrition and exercise. Access to an adequate standard of living (Article 27) is compromised when social inequalities and financial difficulties limit access to healthy foods. Finally, the purpose of education (Article 29) is directly linked to promoting health, well-being, and children's sense of responsibility toward themselves and society. Thus, childhood obesity does not only constitute a health issue but also a violation of fundamental rights.

To address this phenomenon, the Whole School Approach (WSA) has been proposed internationally, promoted by WHO (1997) and the SHE Network (Schools for Health in Europe).

It is a model that views the school as an integrated ecosystem, where curriculum, physical and social environment, school governance, and collaboration with families and communities combine to promote health and well-being. The WSA emphasizes message consistency—what is taught is reinforced by the school environment—and participation, empowering all stakeholders, especially children themselves. Its long-term sustainability lies in targeting not only behavioral change but also cultural change (Covell & Howe, 2008; UNICEF, 2009; UNICEF UK, 2015).

Particular attention is given to Lundy's model (2007), which specifies children's right to active participation in school life (Article 12, UNCRC). This model highlights four interlinked dimensions: space, voice, audience, and influence. Referring to the school context, the model presupposes that children have the space to express their views, the means to articulate them, the adults who listen to their opinion, and the influence to have them incorporated into decisions affecting their daily lives. Thus, childhood obesity prevention becomes a collective process that recognizes the child as an active agent of change rather than a passive recipient of instructions.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Study Design

The study was part of the "Food for Action" program (Ministry of Health & UNICEF, 2025) and was based on the Whole School Approach (WSA). The design was pilot in nature, aiming to explore the feasibility of integrating WSA principles and children's rights into school policies and practices for childhood obesity prevention.

### 3.2 Sample and Implementation Field

The pilot implementation took place in two public schools in Attica: the 21st Kindergarten of Athens and the 3rd Primary School of Zografou. These schools were chosen because they had already participated in networks such as "Eco-Schools" and the "Schools for Climate Network," a fact which facilitated their familiarity with participatory and holistic methodologies. At the same time, trained multipliers—teachers previously trained within UNICEF's framework—participated in the program.

### 3.3 Intervention Tools and Resources

The implementation relied on three pillars:

- (1) "Food for Action" toolkits, providing educational material, evidence-based good practices, and guidelines for developing school policy on nutrition and physical activity.
- (2) Training of multipliers, i.e., teachers trained to function as coordinators and supporters of WSA implementation. Training included developing school health policies, participatory techniques, applying internationally validated practices, and fostering a shared vision.
- (3) Lundy's model (2007), applied to ensure meaningful student participation in decision-making, by structuring their voice around the four dimensions (space, voice, audience, influence).

### 3.4 Implementation Process

The process was organized into four stages:

- Step 1: Establishing a framework. School leadership commitment was secured and a working group was formed, including teachers, students, parents, support staff, school nurse, psychologist, social worker, nutritionist, and community representatives.
- Step 2: Situation analysis. Existing good practices (e.g., environmental education activities) were recorded, factors affecting diet and physical activity (organizational, environmental, individual qualities) were assessed, and each school needs and priorities were identified.
- Step 3: Development of school policy. Through participatory dialogue, a policy document was drafted, setting out goals, principles, action timelines, available resources, and responsibilities. Grounded in health promotion principles and children's rights, it was circulated for consultation with all community members.
- Step 4: Dissemination and implementation. The policy was formally presented, accompanied

by awareness-raising activities and partnerships with local organizations, and integrated into the school daily practice. The working group monitored and evaluated initial outcomes.

- Evaluation combined quantitative and qualitative tools: questionnaires for students and parents, focus groups, school life observations, and creative outputs (e.g., drawings, posters, videos).

### 3.5 Participation of Students and Families

Children's participation was a central goal of the pilot, in line with Article 12 of the UNCRC and Lundy's model. In both schools, student health teams and nutrition councils were formed, where children proposed ideas for meal organization, cafeteria operations, improving recess, and enhancing physical activity. Their views were captured via questionnaires, interviews, and creative outputs such as posters, drawings, and videos.

Their influence on decisions was tangible: at the 21st Kindergarten, their suggestions led to replacing packaged snacks with homemade cheese rolls and olive bread, while at the 3rd Primary School, students collaborated with the NGO "Boroume" to reduce food waste in the local market and actively contributed to designing the new school canteen and the offered snacks.

Families participated through workshops, information sessions, and joint activities. In many cases, they shared traditional recipes or joined cooking activities at school, strengthening school-home continuity. Topics such as time management and the importance of sleep, highlighted by students themselves, were also discussed.

### 3.6 Role of Scientific Institutions

Universities and institutional stakeholders actively supported the intervention. Universities functioned as scientific partners, providing guidance in design and contributing to the development of tools to map attitudes and behaviors. Faculty members assisted in adapting international tools to the Greek context and co-authored guides.

UNICEF Child Rights Centers provided training and empowerment for teachers and students, with a focus on Article 12 of the UNCRC and child-friendly pedagogical methods.

The collaboration extended beyond theory: university students from education and medical faculties took part in nutrition workshops, physical activity sessions, and recess games. Linking schools with universities enhanced the validity of activities, enabled the dissemination of good practices, and provided research evidence.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Implementation of the intervention and compliance with the model

In both schools, the four-stage cycle for the development and implementation of a school policy on nutrition and physical activity was consistently completed: establishment and commitment of leadership and the working group, analysis of the current situation and recorded good practices, drafting-consultation-finalization of the policy text, and finally, communication and integration of the policy into daily practice along with monitoring of implementation. The process was not limited to simple information-sharing but followed a clear timetable, distribution of roles, and the provision of feedback mechanisms. Communication was conducted publicly to the entire school community, ensuring institutional visibility and accountability (WHO, 1997; SHE Network, n.d.).

### 4.2 Changes in school culture and consistency of messages

The adoption of the Whole School Approach (WSA) led to greater coherence of health messages: what was worked on in the classroom became visible in the playground, in the canteen, in recess routines, and in the way the school communicated with families. The school functioned as a role model, not only as a place of knowledge dissemination, which strengthened the sustainability of the intervention, as change extended from individual behavior to organizational

culture. At the same time, the involvement of all stakeholders enhanced the sense of collective responsibility, an element that international WSA documentation recognizes as crucial for the long-term maintenance of results (Covell & Howe, 2008).

### 4.3 Participation of children based on the Lundy model: from "voice" to "influence"

Children's participation was deliberately organized around the four dimensions of the Lundy model—space, voice, audience, and influence—in order to shift their involvement from mere expression of opinion to timely shared decision-making (Lundy, 2007). At the "space" level, safe discussion environments were created (health groups, nutrition councils). At the "voice" level, children used multiple means (questionnaires, posters, drawings, videos, presentations) to express proposals. At the "audience" level, their proposals were presented to teachers, management, and parents. Finally, at the "influence" level, their ideas were incorporated into arrangements for the canteen, recess routines, and the choice of physical activities. The shift from passive listening to influence status was recorded as a qualitative breakthrough in the school's decision-making culture (UNICEF, 2009; UNICEF UK, 2015).

### 4.4 Examples and micro-results per school

*21st Kindergarten of Athens.* The intervention was linked to experiential activities that introduced children to the concept of "real food" and daily well-being. A visit to the neighborhood bakery and the preparation of cheese bread/olive bread without preservatives bridged healthy choices with the local food culture, transferring the message of quality from the lesson into practice. At the same time, the "sleep goal" sparked discussions about routines, feelings, and rest, with artistic representation ("dream blanket"). In this way, it was highlighted that health care is holistic and includes, beyond nutrition, rest as well (WHO, 2016). The two pillars (nutrition-sleep) worked complementarily, reinforcing the understanding of well-being as a web of daily habits.

*3rd Primary School of Zografou.* The establishment of a Nutrition School Club mobilized the school community horizontally and functioned as a hub for ideas and actions. Collaboration with the NGO Boroume linked nutritional education with social solidarity, as students participated in actions to reduce food waste at the local market. Thus, the discussion shifted from the individual "what I eat" to the collective "how we manage food as a common good." At the same time, outreach activities for parents and local residents, such as a series of evening meetings with guest experts titled "Wednesday Afternoons at School with Parents", served as an excellent bridge between school and family, giving a public character to the school policy, strengthening the school-community connection, and making learning a collective responsibility (SHE Network, n.d.).

### 4.5 Family and community as fields of continuity of intervention

Family involvement shifted from simple consent to active support: workshops with parents, open meetings, and joint activities extended the school messages into the home. Mapping local health and nutrition stakeholders activated support networks, providing practical solutions (e.g., access to healthy options in the community, collaborations for physical activity). This way, the gap between "what we learn" and "what is feasible" in everyday life was reduced. The public presentation of the policy and the search for local support functioned as mechanisms of commitment and social accountability. However, reduced participation was observed among some families due to professional obligations or limited time, highlighting the need for institutional support.

### 4.6 Involvement of universities and Children's Rights Centers

Universities played the role of scientific partners: they supported planning, contributed to the development of tools for capturing attitudes and behaviors, and coordinated experiential interventions with student participation (nutrition workshops, organized games, physical activities during breaks). This collaboration enhanced the validity of the intervention and accelerated the dissemination of good practices. At the same time, UNICEF's Children's Rights Centers provided

training frameworks for teachers, child-friendly awareness material, and support for the institutional application of children's participation in decision-making, as defined by Article 12 of the CRC.

#### 4.7 Capacity building through the training of “multipliers”

The training of multipliers, teachers who take on support roles in schools, functioned as a pillar of sustainability. The objectives of the training included the development of a comprehensive model of school health policy, the building of a school network, the integration of evidence-based good practices, and the cultivation of a shared vision of an “active school” as a center for health promotion. Exploration of their experience fed into field adaptations and provided “local wisdom” on what is feasible in Greek schools.

#### 4.8 Specific fields of change: canteen, meals, physical activity, and learning

In the canteen and meal routines, policy led to the search for healthier options and participatory menu design with student input present. Daily physical activity extended beyond PE class, with active breaks and creative use of the schoolyard. The curriculum incorporated knowledge about health, the body, and self-esteem, while children functioned as “health ambassadors,” transferring messages to younger classes and the community. The dissemination of the initiative's core principles was strengthened both by appropriate use of space (hydration stations were created in every classroom, and movement breaks were implemented during lessons) and by the availability of educational material delivered to students in the form of an interactive-content suitcase. This typology of fields aligns with the directions of the WSA and the European SHE network.

#### 4.9 Implementation challenges and risk indicators

Implementation revealed barriers related to the broader context and school routines. Socioeconomic constraints and inequalities were recorded, making access to healthy food and consistency of routines at home more difficult; heterogeneous support from teaching staff and the need for common standards were noticed; repeated complaints from parents about lack of time or irregular schedules leading to “easy choices” were reported; difficulties in aligning canteens with policy without organized training/guidance for professionals were spotted and discussed; infrastructure shortages limiting creative physical activity were mentioned; low family participation in certain activities was often the case; and tight timetables hindering evaluation and redesign were used as an excuse for non-systematic implementation. In addition, specific problems were identified, such as monotony of the all-day program menu (“pasta every day”) and frequent changes of teachers affecting continuity. These difficulties are consistent with challenges documented in the international experience of WSA implementation (WHO, 2016; SHE Network, n.d.).

#### 4.10 Factors of sustainability and multiplier effect

The institutionalization of school policy through a participatory process, connection with the *Food for Action* program and its toolkits, the presence of multipliers supporting on-site teams, as well as public communication with local partnerships, functioned as factors strengthening the intervention's resilience over time. The transformation of children into active agents—health ambassadors and co-creators of rules—generated an “internal consistency pressure” in daily school life, which endures beyond the duration of individual projects.

### 5. Discussion

The pilot implementation of the Whole School Approach (WSA) for the prevention of childhood obesity confirmed that the school can act as a hub of health and social change when interventions are designed in a participatory way and embedded in school policy. The results reinforce international findings that highlight the importance of coherent policy, student

participation, and community involvement (WHO, 2016; SHE Network, n.d.).

One of the most significant findings concerns the role of children: the use of the Lundy model (2007) made it possible to move from mere “voice expression” to meaningful influence in decision-making. This is an innovative element, since internationally many interventions are limited to symbolic participation of students (Hart, 1992). Their active involvement in the canteen renovation, their commitment to recess routines, and anti-food waste initiatives shows that the realization of children's rights can be connected to practical issues of daily life, creating a solid culture of accountability and empowerment.

At the same time, family involvement proved to be a critical factor of continuity (Boutte & Johnson Jr, 2013; Durišić & Bunijevac, 2017). As also shown in other countries, the family can function either as a facilitator or as a barrier to change (Langford et al., 2015). In the Greek case, participation through workshops and cooking activities promoted the school-home connection. However, reports of lack of time, conflicting schedules, and inequalities in access to healthy nutrition highlighted socioeconomic constraints that go beyond the scope of the school's responsibility. These challenges are also noted in international WSA applications (WHO, 2016), but gain particular significance in the Greek context, where time pressure and the absence of systematic family support services are more pronounced.

Collaboration with universities and UNICEF Children's Rights Centers enhanced the validity of the intervention and provided a framework for institutional support. Unlike classic WSA implementations that focus exclusively on healthy nutrition and physical activity, this intervention added an innovative dimension: the framing of health as a right. This differentiates the study from other international practices and links childhood obesity prevention with the broader children's rights agenda (UNICEF, 2009).

The difficulties recorded—such as monotony in school meals (“pasta every day”), low family participation in some activities, and frequent teacher changes—confirm that the sustainability of such interventions depends on institutional reinforcement and investment in human resources. Multipliers functioned as a critical support mechanism but require broader networking and recognition within the educational system to ensure long-term continuity.

Overall, the experience shows that WSA can be creatively adapted to the Greek context, provided it is based on: (a) meaningful participation of children, (b) collaboration with families and the community, (c) scientific evidence and institutional support, and (d) recognition of the social inequalities that affect nutritional and physical activity habits. The child rights-based approach adds value, as it connects obesity prevention with the cultivation of a democratic culture, participation, and respect.

### 6. Limitations of the study

The study was pilot in nature and, therefore, the results cannot be generalized to all Greek schools. The small sample (two schools in Attica) limits the possibility of drawing reliable conclusions for different socioeconomic or geographical contexts. In addition, the evaluation relied mainly on qualitative data (discussions, creative activities, observations) without systematic quantitative measurement (e.g., BMI data, recording of physical activity levels). For instance, the study managed to capture the teachers and pupils' high interest, active involvement and commitment to continue working toward the development of healthy habits at school and the dedication of both school communities to this cause. However, as the area of focus in this study is heavily dependent on socioeconomic factors which cannot be addressed directly and solely at school, the study limits the ability to document direct changes in students' health.

Furthermore, the fact that this study relied on two school communities with prior experience

in participatory networks and an established supportive culture, it could easily lead to the assumption of a potential selection bias. Yet, we believe that these qualities confirmed the high potential hidden in the great number of schools which have developed a collaborative culture and an active citizenship vision (Alsaeed, 2022). Therefore, they should not be considered as isolated and rare examples of school institutions but rather viewed as representatives of the many school communities which mean to address contemporary issues recruiting all available resources and systematising their efforts toward a good cause.

Another limitation concerns the dependence on the degree of commitment of school leadership and teachers; frequent staff changes in certain classes created discontinuities. Likewise, family participation was uneven, as socioeconomic pressures, limited time, and lack of access to healthy options restricted involvement in some activities. Finally, the context of Greek education—with its rigid timetable and limited infrastructure—did not favor the full integration of all innovations into everyday school life.

Despite these limitations, the study provided valuable insights into the potential for implementing WSA in Greek schools and highlighted both the opportunities and the challenges that must be addressed in subsequent stages.

## 7. Conclusions

The pilot implementation of the Whole School Approach for the prevention of childhood obesity demonstrated that the school could serve as a powerful field of social change when it combines health education with children's participation, collaboration with families and communities, and institutional support from scientific organizations. The experience of the 21st Kindergarten of Athens and the 3rd Primary School of Zografou showed that policy developed in a participatory way can acquire institutional depth and become embedded in daily practice.

The key conclusions that emerged concern three dimensions. First, the active participation of children, based on the Lundy's model (2007), led to substantive changes and highlighted the value of the child's voice in school governance and culture. Second, the connection of school–family–community created a continuity network that allowed the school's messages to be transferred to homes and neighbourhoods, reinforcing sustainability. Third, collaboration with universities and institutions such as UNICEF's Children's Rights Centers provided scientific validity and viewed the initiative through the children's rights filter, moving beyond the traditional rationale of health education programs.

However, implementation also revealed limitations. Reduced family participation in some activities, socioeconomic inequalities, difficulties in aligning canteens with policy principles, and the rigid conditions of the school timetable acted as inhibitory factors. These obstacles underline the need for systemic changes that go beyond the responsibility of the individual school unit.

The pilot experience leads to specific policy proposals:

- Institutionalization of school health policies at the national level, with explicit reference to children's rights.
- Strengthening of multipliers training and the creation of a network of WSA ambassador schools.
- Collaboration with local health, nutrition, and social care stakeholders to reduce the gap between knowledge and practice.
- Support for families through targeted policy measures, such as provision of healthy school meals and flexible work programs for parents.
- Systematic evaluation of initiatives using tools adapted to the Greek reality, in collaboration with universities and international networks (e.g., SHE).

Overall, the implementation demonstrated that WSA, when enriched with a child rights perspective, can offer a holistic strategy for tackling childhood obesity while simultaneously

fostering a culture of democracy, participation, and social justice in schools. The challenge now is scaling up: transforming the pilot experience into a national strategy that will support children nationwide to grow up healthy and active, and within a context which shows respect for their rights.

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#### IV. Empowering School Communities Against Violence and Bullying: Pilot Program

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##### Abstract

This paper presents the outcomes of a teachers' capacity building programme implemented within a pilot programme designed to prevent and address school violence and bullying, to promote positive behaviour in schools, and to enhance the sense of belonging among members of the school community. The effective prevention and management of school violence presupposes the active engagement of the entire school community—teachers, students, and parents—as well as the adoption of a shared pedagogical framework grounded in collaboration, acceptance, and respect for children's rights. Prior empirical research has demonstrated the importance of empowering students to develop effective coping strategies, leading to a reduction in bullying incidents and an increased sense of safety within the school environment. The present pilot programme was developed through a tripartite collaboration between the UNICEF Office in Greece, the Regional Directorate of Education of Central Macedonia, and the Child Rights Centres of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and the International Hellenic University. The professional development activity involved teachers from primary (75%) and secondary (25%) schools in the Regional Unit of Thessaloniki and was based on a blended learning model (face-to-face and online meetings) that combined theoretical reflection with experiential learning approaches. Teachers' feedback highlighted participants' positive reaction and strong engagement, all of whom stated that the training sessions served as a source of inspiration, empowerment, and commitment to continuing the initiatives, strengthening their networking and the creation of a community of practice. The need for the systematic implementation of these actions in everyday school practice was emphasised, so that they permeate the overall culture of the school unit and are disseminated to the wider educational community, with the involvement of students' families.

**KEYWORDS:** School bullying; Social-emotional learning; Teachers' professional development

## 1. School Violence and Bullying

School violence, including bullying, has been at the forefront of multiple academic, research, and policy conversations (Hall, 2018; UNESCO, 2017). School violence refers to a multidimensional concept and a spectrum of aggressive and delinquent behaviours occurring within school and educational contexts (Furlong & Morrison, 2000; Miller, 2003). Traditional or conventional bullying, on the other hand, is a subset of aggressive behaviour with certain special characteristics, such as intention to cause harm, an unbalanced power relationship between the bully and the victim, and some repetitiveness in behavioural patterns (Olweus, 2013). In the schools, bullying involves a number of individuals, beyond the bully and the victim; it also involves students who can be at the same time bullies and victims, and other students who act as bystanders, defenders, or reinforcers (Pöyhönen, et al., 2012; Pozzoli & Gini, 2013). Notably, bullying is not confined to the school context and can occur online, at the workplace or even between siblings (Gaffney et al., 2019).

The negative behavioural, psychological, learning outcomes, and overall poor well-being for students involved in bullying incidents have been well-documented (Cook et al., 2010; Kim et al., 2022; Tenant et al., 2019). Negative consequences may include an array of internalising symptoms, reduced self-esteem, and other symptoms and issues that accompany students into their adult life as well (Cook et al., 2010; Ttofi et al., 2011). Similarly to the international literature, in the Greek school context, associations between bullying experiences, well-being, and school-related outcomes (achievement, connectedness) have been reported (Didaskalou et al., 2017; Koufaki & Andreou, 2021; Magklara et al., 2012). For example, in a recent study conducted with 558 adolescent students, results demonstrated that student-victims had almost tripled the risk of experiencing poor well-being, while any involvement in active aggression or bullying behaviours progressively increased the risk of experiencing poor well-being (Roussi-Vergou et al., 2019).

Recognising the potential for severe immediate and life-long bullying consequences, numerous prevention efforts and intervention programs have been implemented worldwide (Gaffney et al., 2019; Stefanakou et al., 2014). Meta-analytic reviews have found that antibullying programs, such as KIVA and the Olweus Bullying Prevention program, can be effective in reducing school-bullying perpetration and victimisation rates (Farrington & Ttofi, 2009; Gaffney et al., 2019). When it comes to specific program components associated with higher effectiveness, programs that were more intensive were more effective, as were programs including parental/guardian involvement, clear disciplinary procedures, and better adult supervision (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). In a more recent meta-analytic review (Gaffney et al., 2021), examining further effective components of antibullying efforts, it was found that peer and parental involvement were key elements for program effectiveness. Further, programs implementing classroom rules and adopting a whole-school approach reported a significant decrease in bullying (Gaffney et al., 2021). These findings also align with Debarbieux's (2020) argument that bullying prevention is most effective when embedded in a system-level, whole-school strategy that integrates shared values, relational practices, and collective responsibility rather than isolated disciplinary reactions. Given the great variation in underlying theoretical frameworks and anti-bullying program components, tailoring interventions across intervention tiers may be necessary in order to better meet the needs and utilise the strengths of specific subgroups of children and youth (Hemsus et al., 2023).

Last, bullying's potentially harmful consequences also pose an ethical concern (Olweus, 2013; Sercombe & Donnelly, 2013). According to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, it is the schools' obligation of schools to provide a safe learning environment for every child. Thus, addressing and targeting bullying can promote safe learning environments and positive school climate, and, in turn, fulfil the rights of the child (Sercombe & Donnelly, 2013). Similarly, Blaya

and Debarbieux (2009) emphasise that ensuring children's safety requires schools to cultivate a coherent climate of trust, transparent norms, and collaborative governance structures that engage all members of the school community.

## 2. Supporting teachers to empower students, strengthening the sense of belonging

To strengthen and expand national efforts against bullying, UNICEF, in collaboration with the Child Rights Centres established in Greek Universities and the Regional Directorates of Education in Central Macedonia and Western Greece, designed and implemented a pilot programme following a comprehensive, preventive approach that equips educators with the tools to foster safe learning environments, engaging families, and building students' resilience. The programme seeks to confront the persistent and rising challenge of school bullying in Greece through a preventive, system-strengthening approach that mobilises educators and empowers students. This focus on sustained, reflective professional learning echoes Blaya's (2011) findings that teacher capacity-building is a key determinant of schools' ability to prevent aggression, support students' socio-emotional development, and build inclusive classroom environments. A dedicated toolkit was co-created to support educators in preventing bullying in classrooms, promoting positive behaviours in a holistic and cross-cutting manner across subjects and school activities (Karamperidou et al.2025).

Following the development of the toolkit, training took place in both regions, supporting 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>-grade teachers in 25 schools to apply the techniques needed for bullying prevention and resilience-building strategies. The training programme combined in-person and online sessions to maximise accessibility and engagement. Emphasis was placed on practical competencies, including stress management, self-compassion, and empathy, as well as methods for setting up and facilitating peer support groups that enable students to share experiences, resolve conflicts, identify bullying behaviours, and build resilience collectively. Trainees also took part in follow-up reflective meetings, sharing classroom experiences, exchanging best practices, and strengthening their understanding through peer learning. Training sessions used experiential learning approaches, including interactive presentations, role-play in small groups, scenario-based simulations, and plenary discussions.

The pedagogical design of the training activities was guided by principles that emphasise the creation of a positive school climate, the strengthening of teachers' professional identity, and the cultivation of supportive relationships within the school community. These principles aimed simultaneously to foster a sense of belonging and to facilitate networking and collaboration among participants.

Participants, invited through a pilot call sent by the Regional Directorate of Education of Central Macedonia, included primary (75%) and secondary (25%) school teachers from diverse schools in Central Macedonia, recruited voluntarily with an interest in anti-bullying initiatives. Teachers represented multiple disciplines and grade levels, ensuring heterogeneity and increasing the generalizability of findings. Students involved in classroom activities participated in structured experiential exercises, enabling both skill development and assessment of program outcomes within real school environments (Olweus et al., 2019; Hatzichristou, 2023).

The program implementation adopted a blended, quasi-experimental design combining in-person workshops, classroom-based application, and remote follow-up sessions. The approach integrated experiential learning, reflective practice, and collaborative problem-solving, allowing iterative cycles of practice, reflection, and adaptation in authentic school contexts (Kolb, 1984; Wenger, 1998). By embedding theoretical concepts in practical application, the design aimed to

strengthen teacher capacity and promote sustainable implementation of anti-bullying strategies.

The intervention consisted of three sequential phases. Initially, teachers participated in a face-to-face training workshop, introducing foundational concepts of school bullying, aggression, and violence. This workshop incorporated role-playing exercises, analysis of realistic case scenarios, and collaborative discussion to co-develop action plans tailored to each classroom and school context. Emphasis was placed on cultivating professional identity, confidence, and the ability to translate theoretical knowledge into effective intervention strategies (Daniilidou & Platsidou, 2023; Smith et al., 2021).

In the classroom implementation phase, teachers applied the Toolbox for Experiential Sessions on School Bullying, consisting of ten structured sessions designed to integrate interaction, critical reflection, simulation, and teamwork. Activities were adapted to the developmental stage, socio-cultural context, and learning environment of students, promoting empathy, perspective-taking, collaborative problem-solving, and personal responsibility in relation to school violence (Imoto et al., 2024; Olweus et al., 2019). The teachers generally implemented the proposed activity plans, which, in some cases, they enriched with other relevant material or experiential activities (dramatisation, role-playing games, simulations, debates, case studies, etc.), with a notable emphasis on developing action plans. The average duration of implementing the initiative was 9 hours, with a minimum of 3 hours and a maximum of 30 hours.

Finally, three remote follow-up sessions employed synchronous and asynchronous tools, including online discussions, collaborative redesign exercises, and reflection journals. Teachers presented classroom outcomes, shared good practices, and engaged in cycles of critical reflection, enabling refinement of strategies and reinforcement of professional communities of practice.

### 3. Assessing relevance and effectiveness

The program employed a mixed-method evaluation process to capture both quantitative and qualitative dimensions of its impact. Structured questionnaires administered before, during, and after sessions assessed teachers' knowledge, attitudes, and confidence regarding bullying prevention, while group reflection and collaborative redesign exercises provided qualitative insights into pedagogical processes, adaptation of activities, and classroom implementation (Johnson et al., 2022). Field observations and student feedback documented engagement, social-emotional skill development, and fidelity of implementation. Quantitative data were analysed statistically to identify changes in teacher confidence, knowledge, and attitudes, while thematic analysis of qualitative data highlighted patterns in classroom practices, professional development outcomes, and student engagement. The combination of methods enabled triangulation of findings, enhancing reliability and validity (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Smith et al., 2021).

Quantitative analysis revealed high levels of engagement, motivation, and professional growth among participating teachers. Reported outcomes included increased confidence in managing bullying incidents and classroom conflicts, enhanced collaboration, improved mediation skills, and a deeper understanding of bullying dynamics and effective interventions (Johnson et al., 2022). Similar to prior research (Roussi et al., 2018; Wenger, 1998), the programme also fostered professional communities of practice across schools, enabling peer learning and the exchange of effective strategies.

Students appear to have reported significant gains in social-emotional competencies, including empathy, emotional regulation, and perspective-taking, alongside active engagement in democratic dialogue, shared decision-making, and peer mediation (Olweus et al., 2019). Participation in experiential sessions strengthened their ability to resolve conflicts constructively and fostered a sense of responsibility and inclusion within the school community (Imoto et al.,

2024).

The evaluation highlighted four critical factors for sustainable implementation. Alignment with empirical research ensured that interventions supported both the development of students' personal and social skills and the professional resilience of teachers (Olweus et al., 2019; Daniilidou & Platsidou, 2023). A holistic, systemic approach emphasised shared values, active stakeholder engagement, and coordinated school-community efforts over fragmented or punitive measures (Council of Europe, 2018; Smith et al., 2021). Programme sustainability relied on co-developed frameworks, integration of student voices, peer-learning communities, and dissemination of best practices (Gaffney et al., 2019; Wenger, 1998). The integration of experiential, emotional, and reflective components corresponds to Galand and Philippot's (2005) argument that bullying constitutes a complex psychosocial phenomenon requiring interventions that weave together emotional regulation, perspective-taking, and collaborative problem-solving. Finally, attention to emerging needs, including psychosocial learning, life skills, resilience, autonomous learning, and inclusive environments, fostered belonging and recognition of each student's value (Imoto et al., 2024; Johnson et al., 2022).

Teachers' reflections indicated transformative outcomes, including shifts in classroom management strategies, attitudes, and pedagogical mindsets. Many reported higher student engagement, improved emotional intelligence, and active student participation in conflict mediation, underscoring the effectiveness of experiential learning approaches in both student development and teacher professional growth (Smith et al., 2021). Through the questionnaires, teachers described the goals that were achieved, primarily at the student and classroom levels, as follows:

- increased teamwork – awareness – empathy – acceptance of diversity;
- enhancement of effective communication, conflict resolution;
- among the students, it became clear that bullying does not solve any problem;
- students were able to distinguish conflict from bullying;
- students understood the forms of the phenomenon and its consequences;
- students strengthened their emotional intelligence and their sense of responsibility as bystanders;
- students became familiar with ways of intervening and providing support;
- positive thoughts and a positive classroom atmosphere were created;
- children played more collaboratively and appeared happier;
- improved relationships and calmness during school breaks; and
- fewer conflicts and fewer complaints among the students.

Consequently, the vast majority of teachers (almost 85%) reported that in the group of students to whom they had implemented the initiative, positive changes were evident. Similarly, regarding the training sessions, 85% describe them as "useful, experiential, and helpful," while 15% consider them generally useful but would have liked something more. On the other hand, although no teacher described their students' participation as "limited," and 46% declared that the participation exceeded the expected level, the other 54% characterised it as "typical-expected," a fact that perhaps highlights the need for greater emphasis on the active engagement of students.

Overall, teachers believed that after completing the initiative, they were more prepared to act preventively and to manage incidents of school bullying effectively. Teacher responses reflect a significant change in the level of self-efficacy compared to their answers in the questionnaire from the first meeting, in which 35% of the teachers stated that they did not feel adequate in handling such incidents.

Finally, 42% of the teachers consider that the initiative positively affected all stakeholders (students, parents/guardians, teachers and other school personnel), although to varying degrees, while another 42% do not recognise any significant impact beyond that concerning the students.

This observation highlights the need to strengthen the focus on a whole-school approach and on activating meaningful school-home relationships and collaborations.

#### 4. Discussion and the way forward

The current antibullying pilot program, its implementation and evaluation demonstrated that systemic, comprehensive approaches to bullying prevention are more effective than isolated interventions. Sustained professional development, collaborative leadership, and engagement of families and community organisations were essential for achieving meaningful outcomes. Adaptation of materials to local contexts, fostering of collaboration and critical thinking, and structured institutional support were consistently highlighted as prerequisites for long-term success. The integration of experiential exercises with reflective practice allowed teachers and students to develop practical strategies that could be applied effectively across diverse educational settings, contributing to sustainable improvements in school climate, safety, and student well-being (Olweus et al., 2019; Gaffney et al., 2019; Imoto et al., 2024).

Further, the 2024-2025 pilot program highlighted that a blended, experiential approach to bullying prevention can empower school communities, strengthen professional capacities of educators, and foster safe, inclusive, and collaborative educational environments. Continuous reflection, active participation, and iterative feedback have emerged as critical components for sustaining outcomes and disseminating effective practices. The program has offered a scalable model for integrating research-based, contextually adapted interventions into school policy and practice, engaging all stakeholders in promoting student well-being and inclusive school cultures (Council of Europe, 2018; Johnson et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2021).

As aforementioned, data collection was continuous with before, during, and after each training session, questionnaires were administered, along group-based reflective, evaluative, and collaborative redesign tools were employed. Data analysis revealed a highly positive response and strong engagement among participants, all of whom reported that the training sessions functioned as sources of inspiration, empowerment, and renewed commitment to continuing relevant initiatives. The process also enhanced networking and supported the formation of a sustainable community of practice. Participants' feedback underscored the need for the systematic integration of such actions into everyday school practice so that they permeate the broader school culture and extend to the wider educational community through the active involvement of students' families.

Analysis of the open-ended responses revealed four central axes of support that teachers consider essential for effectively implementing educational initiatives in their schools:

(1) Access to Co-Designed Educational Materials:

(2) Teachers emphasized the need for high-quality, context-specific materials that are developed collaboratively and linked closely to the experiential nature of their training.

(3) Strengthening the School as a Learning Community: A supportive environment—characterized by collaboration, shared reflection, and collective problem-solving—is seen as critical for sustaining and deepening the impact of new practices.

(4) Institutional Provision of Time:

(5) Successful implementation requires designated time within the school schedule for planning, applying, and evaluating these programs.

(6) Systematic Dissemination of Good Practices:

(7) Sharing effective approaches across schools enhances collective capacity and encourages continuity and innovation.

These findings are consistent with both international and national research evidence

highlighting the effectiveness of interventions that focus, on the one hand, on the development of students' personal and social skills (Olweus et al., 2019), and, on the other, on the psychological resilience and professional empowerment of teachers (Daniilidou & Platsidou, 2023).

Addressing school violence and bullying cannot be confined to isolated actions or disciplinary measures; rather, it requires integration within a holistic educational policy framework (Council of Europe, 2018) grounded in evidence-based practices, a coherent set of values, and the active participation of all stakeholders.

The interactive and reflective processes implemented during the pilot underscored the need for sustained support of teachers, including enhanced institutional frameworks, improved material and technical infrastructure, regular supervision, and systematic professional development. These processes also encouraged critical reflection on learning objectives related to psychosocial development, empowerment, life skills, resilience, school readiness, and autonomous learning—objectives that form an essential foundation for inclusive education (Imoto et al., 2024).

Finally, the establishment of stable frameworks and co-constructed rules that incorporate children's voices, together with the creation of strong communities of practice, is crucial to the long-term sustainability of such interventions (Gaffney et al., 2019; Wenger, 1998). The findings of this pilot illustrate the significant potential for universities, schools, and communities to collaborate in creating safer and more supportive educational environments for all children.

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## V. Children's Rights through the Lens of UOWM Academic Staff: Critical Reflections and Professional Identity Considerations

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### Abstract

This paper outlines the strategic framework developed for the establishment and operation of the Center for the Promotion of Children's Rights at the University of Western Macedonia. The Center has been created in collaboration with UNICEF and is now part of the national Network of Centers for Children's Rights in Greece. A central aim of this initiative is to ensure the Center's sustainability and long-term impact. In addition to outlining the strategic framework, the paper is focused on the findings of a reflective process undertaken by the Center's academic and coordinating team. This process followed a capacity-building workshop delivered by UNICEF's academic team and constitutes a small-scale qualitative study, examining key thematic areas such as participants' expectations, perceived personal and professional benefits, and future directions for learning and professional development. Specifically, the critical reflection was guided by the following research questions: What were participants' expectations regarding the content of the initial Workshop on Children's Rights? How did they perceive their experience as "trainees" in the workshop? In what ways did it benefit them personally and professionally? How have they integrated or how do they plan to integrate children's rights into their academic and research interests? In what ways can their engagement with the Center contribute to their ongoing professional learning and development? Thematic qualitative analysis was employed to analyze participants' responses. The findings revealed both a positive disposition toward academic and professional growth and a set of concerns related to the effective pedagogical implementation of children's rights through best practices.

**KEYWORDS:** Professional development; Trainers' reflection; Children's rights; Workshop evaluation

## 1. Introduction

Universities and the academic community play a vital role in helping society understand and promote children's rights. Through their research, they shed light on how children experience their rights in everyday situations and identify what needs to change to better protect them. This kind of evidence-based insight is essential for shaping effective policies and practices (Lundy, 2007). By bringing together perspectives from education, law, psychology, and social sciences, universities help strengthen both national and global discussions on children's rights (Quennerstedt, 2013).

Beyond research, universities also spread awareness of children's rights through the way they educate future professionals. When degree programs include children's rights as part of their curriculum, students—whether they are training to be teachers, social workers, policymakers, or lawyers—gain the knowledge and confidence to apply rights-based principles in their work (Jerome et al., 2015). This ensures that the ideas of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) are not only understood in theory but are also put into practice in classrooms, social services, and community settings.

Universities further contribute by engaging directly with communities and public institutions. They organize conferences, research networks, and outreach projects that raise awareness and encourage meaningful dialogue about children's rights issues (Hanson & Lundy, 2017). By collaborating with schools, and government bodies, the academic community helps turn research into action, supporting environments where children are not only protected but also listened to and respected as active participants in society.

In Greece, research on how universities and the academic community support the promotion of children's rights is still quite limited, with only a few studies exploring this important area. For that reason, this small-scale study offers a meaningful contribution by shedding light on what is currently happening within Greek universities—the progress being made, the challenges that remain, and the possibilities for doing more. In doing so, it helps enrich the national research landscape and supports ongoing efforts to embed children's rights more firmly in university teaching, research, and community outreach.

This small scaled research came as a result followed a Capacity-Building Workshop delivered by UNICEF's academic team to the UOWM Child Rights Center's academic and coordinating team and constitutes a small-scale study examining key thematic areas:

- participants' expectations
- perceived personal and professional benefits, and
- future directions for learning and professional development

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 The importance of Professional Development

Teacher professional development (PD) is widely recognized as a central mechanism for improving educational quality, strengthening teachers' knowledge and skills, and ultimately enhancing student learning outcomes (Desimone, 2009). Far from being a single event, PD encompasses a variety of formal and informal learning experiences that support teachers' pedagogical growth, refine instructional practices, and sustain professional identity across the career span. Large-scale reviews consistently show that PD which is sustained, collaborative, embedded in classroom practice and aligned with teachers' content needs yields the most significant gains; for instance, a meta-analysis of 125 empirical studies found that continuous PD, ongoing coaching and collaborative models were among the strongest predictors of student achievement (Ventista & Brown, 2023). Similarly, the Learning Policy Institute's review of 35 rigorous studies concluded that effective PD is not a one-off workshop but involves multiple sessions, follow-up activities and opportunities for feedback and reflection. Several theoretical

perspectives clarify how and why PD works under these conditions.

Adult learning theory views teachers as adult learners who benefit from learning experiences that are relevant, participatory and socially embedded (Njenga, 2023), while the theory of communities of practice highlights the role of collaboration, sharing of experience and collective reflection in professional learning (Talaftan et al., 2023). A sociocultural perspective further emphasizes that teacher learning does not occur in isolation but within institutional and social contexts, where interactions with colleagues, school leaders and policy frameworks shape how new knowledge is appropriated and enacted (Study, 2023). Drawing on a systematic literature review, Richit (2021) proposes a theoretical framework for PD that integrates professional knowledge, professional learning processes, professional culture, ethical commitments and changes in practice, underscoring the multidimensional nature of teacher growth.

Within this theoretical landscape, several features repeatedly emerge as critical to impactful PD. Programs are more effective when they focus explicitly on subject content and how students learn that content rather than on generic pedagogy, and when they allow teachers to engage actively through experimentation, peer observation and reflection on practice (Desimone, 2009; Mansour et al., 2014). Sufficient duration and intensity, coupled with long-term coaching and mentoring, increase the likelihood that new strategies are embedded in classroom routines. Opportunities for collaboration and peer interaction -teachers co-planning lessons, exchanging feedback, participating in learning communities- reinforce reflection and collective learning (Hiebert et al., 2002).

Leadership and institutional support are equally vital: When, for instance, school leaders allocate time, resources and create a supportive culture, teachers are better able to translate PD experiences into sustained change. Research on online and blended forms of PD indicates that they can achieve positive effects on teacher knowledge and classroom practices, and modest effects on student outcomes, particularly when they incorporate interactive components, frequent feedback and opportunities for peer collaboration (Abakah, 2023). At the same time, challenges persist. Teachers often face time constraints, competing demands and insufficient resources; PD that is overly generic or weakly aligned with curriculum and policy has limited impact; and differences in teacher career stage or school context can affect uptake and outcomes (Seidel & Shavelson, 2023). Recent research, therefore, highlights the importance of considering temporal, spatial and career-stage dimensions, acknowledging that early-career teachers, for example, may have different PD needs than mid- or late-career teachers, and that school culture and locality influence the effectiveness of PD programmes.

Taken together, these theoretical and empirical insights suggest that teacher PD should be conceptualized as a multifaceted process that combines knowledge growth, practice change and cultural or identity shifts. For PD to contribute meaningfully to professional growth it must be responsive to teachers' challenges, integrate reflection and practical application, and foster peer interaction so that theory can be adapted to individual classrooms.

In addition, the concept of professional identity relates to self-images, which determine the way teachers teach, the way they develop as educators, and the way they handle educational changes. Professional identity is not only about the influence of others' perceptions and expectations, which includes the image society has formed regarding what a teacher ought to know and do. It also concerns the teachers' own perceptions about what they consider important in their professional activity and life -perceptions that have been shaped under the influence of their experiences and personal histories (Beijaard et al., 2004; Bukor 2015). Moreover, within the same professional setting of the school, not only one teaching framework or one teaching culture is formed, but the teacher, although constrained by the institutional framework, develops

their own educational culture to some extent. Teachers who took part in studies (Zwirn, 2005) did not confine themselves to material proposed by the school's curriculum but, knowing how to relate meanings, forms, means and materials to create a work of art based on their experience as artists, they included creativity, versatility, uncertainty, students' personal stories and interests in their teaching, thus encouraging, attempting, risking and constructing meanings through their practice. Teachers discuss their identity and their work by defining it as a synthesis of renewal, life-long learning, professional development and self-valuation (Kipourpoulou, 2022).

Institutional buy-in and structural support -scheduled time, resources, mentorship- are essential for sustainability, and robust evaluation of both teacher learning and student outcomes is needed to ensure impact. In contexts that emphasize children's rights, empowerment and interdisciplinarity, PD models should explicitly incorporate these themes by embedding rights-based pedagogy, creating collaborative spaces for critical reflection on equity and inclusion, and encouraging interdisciplinarity in lesson design. In this way PD functions not merely as training but as an ongoing, dynamic process of professional learning that underpins sustainable changes in teaching practice and improved student outcomes.

Professional training in human rights education plays a powerful role in helping university students understand and advocate for children's rights. When higher education programs include meaningful, rights-based learning experiences, they prepare future teachers, social workers, and other professionals to see children not just as learners or service recipients, but as individuals with their own voices and rights (Howe & Covell, 2010). This type of training helps students connect the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child to real-world situations, making it easier for them to apply these ideas in everyday practice (Bjerke, 2011). In this way, human rights education becomes more than a theoretical topic—it becomes a practical tool for creating environments where children feel respected, included, and heard.

Collaboration between universities further strengthens this effort by bringing people, ideas, and resources together. When institutions work jointly—through shared courses, joint research, or collaborative events—they expand the reach of children's rights education and build stronger networks of advocacy (Lundy et al., 2015). These partnerships allow universities to learn from one another, exchange successful strategies, and support a common commitment to promoting children's rights across different academic settings. As a result, inter-university collaboration not only enhances the quality of training but also helps create a wider culture in higher education where children's rights are taken seriously and seen as part of the institution's responsibility to society.

## 2.2 The meaning of reflection for teachers and trainers

Through their profession, teachers and, generally, trainers not only cultivate cognitive, pedagogical, and organizational skills, but also, going one step further, reflective skills. Reflective skills are considered extremely important in the context of strengthening professional identity and enhancing professional learning among teachers (Buschor & Kamm, 2015). In this sense, reflection can be seen as a feeling that brings us closer to "reality" or "realities"; that is, the different ways in which teachers view their profession (Admiraal & Wubbels, 2005).

Reflective thinking and action, can help teachers to discuss and become aware of an issue, a problem, or a teaching practice that may seem chaotic (Rodgers, 2002). This dynamic, socially and culturally oriented action and practice contributes to teachers' self-efficacy, professionalism, and increased sense of autonomy (Black, 2015). This is because it brings to light teachers' unconscious beliefs or even subconsciously experienced emotions and motivations that determine their behavior, which are externalized and given meaning accordingly (Korthagen & Nuijten, 2017). At the same time, it can be a dynamic and metacognitive tool for mediation, dialogue, and learning.

Internationally, training programs seem to be oriented toward reflective approaches, a "reflective turn" according to Donald Schön (1987), with the aim of training teachers who will be able to integrate theoretical knowledge into their teaching practices and critically reflect on their experiences and actions. This cognitive process emphasizes meaning, awareness of the essence, that is, the core of the issue or problem under consideration (Korthagen, 2004). In order to find deeper meaning in their experiences and be led to transformative learning, teachers and trainers must carefully reflect on the elements that make up their self-identity.

In the current literature we can realize that there are many definitions of the concept of "reflection". Most refer to teachers' understanding of educational issues with the aim of strengthening them (Cornford, 2002). However, as Rodgers (2002) points out, a number of problems arise with the concept of reflection. For example: *What kind of thoughts are characterized as reflective? How can reflection be assessed? How can it be discussed? How can it be researched to determine its impact on the learning of prospective teachers?*

From the above references, reflection as a vital concept for teachers and trainers, can be understood as an effective tool for connecting experience and learning (van Manen, 1995), with the aim of achieving awareness, understanding of higher levels of theory (Liu, 2015), and appropriate actions, depending on the circumstances. This term is even more important if we consider that teachers' knowledge is often described as tacit, not expressed verbally by them, but also not perceived. These educational theories can emerge through appropriate practical training programs and critical inquiry (Tzifopoulos, 2021).

The relevant literature distinguishes between three approaches to reflection. The first level of reflection concerns Technical Reflection (Van Manen, 1977; Lee, 2008). Teachers highlight elements of their lived experience from observing teaching or from their own teaching, decontextualized, without social and political positioning. This type of reflection mainly concerns the description of an event, a problem that may have arisen in the educational process, without the teacher taking a position or stance on the specific event.

Personalistic Reflection takes us one step further and concerns the socially and culturally positioned or mediated thinking of teachers about educational reality, as they experience it. Teachers externalize their thoughts, feelings, experiences, and assumptions about teaching and seem to position themselves in relation to them and discuss them with themselves (Valli, 1997). They discuss their thoughts, fears, and concerns and often ask themselves questions about situations they have experienced in their classroom. At this point, the teacher may experience an "awakening" through the realization of a situation that they want to improve in the future. At this stage, the teacher can bring their personal theories to light, view them from a distance, and reconstruct themselves.

The ultimate goal is to reach a "higher" level of critical reflection (Habermas, 1974; Van Manen, 1977), on the basis of which teachers will critically discuss their epistemological assumptions and beliefs about the teaching profession and integrate their active thinking into the context of the social, cultural, political, and broader educational framework. At this stage, as a reflective professional, the teacher transforms and reconstructs practices, opinions, and beliefs related to their work.

## 3. Research

### 3.1 Purpose of research

This paper focuses on the research findings from a reflective process undertaken by the Center's academic and coordinating team. This process followed a capacity-building workshop delivered by UNICEF's academic team in Greece under the guidance of Dr. Ghassan Khalil, UNICEF

Representative in Greece, and constitutes a small-scale study exploring key thematic areas: (a) participants’ expectations, learning experiences, (b) integration of children’s rights into academic and research practices, and (c) the perceived contribution of the Child Rights Center to professional development. The purpose of this research is to explore coordinating team’s critical reflections about the above three thematic areas, so as to strengthen team’s professional learning and development. The critical reflection was guided by the following research questions:

- What were participants’ expectations, regarding the content of the initial Workshop on Children’s Rights?
- How did they perceive their experience as “trainees” in the workshop? In what ways did it benefit them personally and professionally?
- How have they integrated -or how do they plan to integrate- children’s rights into their academic and research interests?
- In what ways can their engagement with the Center contribute to their ongoing professional learning and development?

The discourse data were analyzed using open-ended questionnaires that were administered through a Google Form. Thematic qualitative analysis was employed to analyze 15 participants’ discourse (Tsiolis, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) was used in a supportive way, as it highlighted the active role of the researcher in the creation, identification, analysis, and interpretation of themes, through theoretical and reflective positioning. The method of reflexive thematic analysis was used as an interpretative process for the construction and interaction of qualitative data, emphasizing subjective factors (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The participants included nine (9) women and (6) men: one female Professor; two female Associate Professors; three female Assistant Professors; three male Assistant Professors; one female member of the Special Teaching Staff; two male PhD candidates; one female PhD candidate; and one male Postgraduate Student. All participants were members of the Child Rights Center of the University of Western Macedonia, Greece.

In line with qualitative research principles, the sample used in this study was purposive, selected specifically for the participants’ expertise and direct involvement in children’s rights within higher education. As qualitative inquiry prioritizes depth over breadth, the findings are not intended to be generalizable to the wider population but rather to offer rich, contextualized insights (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Regarding validity, attention was given to ensuring credibility and trustworthiness through transparent procedures and careful documentation of the research process (Nowel et al, 2017). Additionally, all personal data were fully protected, with confidentiality and anonymity maintained throughout the study in accordance with established ethical standards.

**3.2 Research Findings**

The analysis of the material highlighted four thematic axes that align with the research questions, from which the codes, as presented analytically in the three tables below, emerged.

1<sup>st</sup> Theme: Expectations from participating in the Workshop

Prior to the Workshop, participants primarily sought information on children’s rights (laws, international declarations, educational framework for action) as well as the presentation of focused examples to guide their work. There was particular interest in best practices from Centers, Organizations, and Bodies (transfer of know-how, examples, transformative interventions) and for ways to integrate these themes into curricula. They also sought information on educational policy issues -organized actions, creation of safe learning environments, addressing modern challenges, and policy formulation through interventions. A significant part of the expectations concerned awareness-raising through case studies, experiential approaches, playful activities, and flexible working groups. Finally, there was interest in information about existing Centers, their current and upcoming actions, effective operation, transfer of know-how, and sustainability strategies.

Table 1. 1<sup>st</sup> Theme: Expectations from participating in the Workshop

1st Theme	Codes
Expectations from participating in the Workshop	<b>1.1 Information on children’s rights</b>
	1.1.1 Laws and declarations
	1.1.2 Educational framework for action
	1.1.2.1 Focused examples
	<b>1.2 Best practices for children’s rights</b>
	1.2.1 Experiences from Centers, Organizations, and Bodies
	1.2.1.1 Know-how
	1.2.1.2 Examples
	1.2.1.3 Transformative interventions
	1.2.2 Practices for integration into Curricula
	<b>1.3 Issues of Educational Policy</b>
	1.3.1 Organised actions
	1.3.1.1 Creation of safe learning environments
	1.3.2 Modern challenges
	1.3.3 Policy formulation through interventions
	<b>1.4 Awareness-raising of Workshop participants</b>
	1.4.1 Case studies
	1.4.2 Experiential approaches
	1.4.3 Playful activities
	1.4.4 Flexible working groups
<b>1.5 Information on existing Centers</b>	
1.5.1 Current actions	
1.5.2 Upcoming actions	
1.5.3 Effective operation of Centers	
1.5.3.1 Transfer of know-how	
1.5.3.2 Ways of Centers’ sustainability	

**Indicative excerpts**

“My expectations regarding its content included delving into the significance of children’s rights and how they can be protected and promoted in society. We hoped to gain a clearer picture of the legal, social, and educational frameworks that support children’s rights, as well as the practices adopted to strengthen these rights. I expected to learn how the various bodies (such as organizations, educators, etc.) collaborate to create safe and supportive environments for children.”

“Also, I wanted to learn about the challenges children face in different countries and societies, as well as the strategies used to address them, with a particular emphasis on practices and tools that can be applied in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).”

“Before the workshop began, what I expected was to receive practical advice on how a Center for Children’s Rights can be organized, as well as guidance on how we can research the



subject, collect material, and support its operation in practice.”

“Information on Children’s Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), and the implementation of related programs in educational practice.’

“My hope was that we would not have a perfunctory briefing on children’s rights, but that we could be better and deeply informed about the rationale served by the Declarations and how we could contribute to strengthening and disseminating the message they convey.”

**2<sup>nd</sup> Theme: Benefits from participating in the Workshop**

The Workshop experience proved rich on both a professional and personal level. On a professional level, the academic staff reported the acquisition and enrichment of knowledge, understanding of the legal and educational framework with updated material, understanding of the historical dimension of rights, as well as modern social issues such as equality, inclusion, childhood, and democratic education. Pedagogical skills were enhanced—students’ critical thinking, cultivation of social responsibility, enrichment of pedagogical practices with best practices from other universities—and there was information on future actions.

On a personal level, the Workshop strengthened participants’ awareness for the support of children and families and the types of violation of their rights, prompted reflection on educational issues, practices, and established perceptions, and reinforced the intention to act in favor of social and educational change (undertaking voluntary action, highlighting educators’ responsibility for information). Simultaneously, empathy was cultivated. The overall experience was characterized by a positive atmosphere, active participation, exchange of views in an academic discussion framework, interdisciplinary perspectives, and the formation of an effective cooperation network and acquaintance with field specialists.

Table 2. 2<sup>nd</sup> Theme: Benefits from participating in the Workshop

2nd Theme	Codes
Benefits from participating in the Workshop	<b>2.1 Professional level</b>
	2.1.1 Acquisition and enrichment of knowledge
	2.1.2 Understanding of the legal and educational framework
	2.1.2.1 Updated material
	2.1.3 Understanding the historical dimension of rights
	2.1.4 Social issues
	2.1.4.1 Equality & Inclusion
	2.1.4.2 Childhood
	2.1.4.3 Democratic education
	2.1.5 Pedagogical issues
	2.1.5.1 Enhancement of students’ critical thinking
	2.1.5.2 Cultivation of social responsibility skills
	2.1.5.3 Enrichment of pedagogical practices
	2.1.5.3.1 Best practices from other Universities
	2.1.6 Information on future actions
	<b>2.2.1 Awareness-raising</b>
	2.2.1.1 Support for children and families
	2.2.1.2 Types of violation of children’s rights
	2.2.2 Reflection
	2.2.2.1 Educational issues
	2.2.2.2 Educational practices
	2.2.2.3 Established perceptions of children’s rights
	2.2.3 Action for social and educational change
	2.2.3.1 Educators’ responsibility for information
	2.2.3.2 Undertaking voluntary action
	2.2.4 Empathy
	<b>2.3 Positive experience</b>
	2.3.1 Exchange of views
	2.3.1.1 Academic discussion framework
	2.3.1.2 Interdisciplinary perspectives
2.3.2 Active participation	
2.3.3 Good atmosphere	
2.3.4 Formation of an effective cooperation network	
2.3.4.1 Acquaintance with field specialists	



**Indicative excerpts**

“My experience as a trainee in the Workshop was particularly positive and empowering. The environment was participatory and safe, with respect to the views of all participants. On a personal level, it helped me operate reflectively in relation to my practical involvement with children’s rights. On a professional level, it pushed me to think more creatively about ways to defend children’s rights, through educational and research programs.”

“Interaction, communication, and collaboration with distinguished colleagues.”

“Excellent atmosphere, high-level discussions, and the trainers’ ability to transfer their knowledge and experience in the field.”

“On a personal level, I shared ideas and concerns and collaborated creatively with colleagues, which means stimuli for personal development were given. Professionally, I joined a community of colleagues and a network where there is the possibility to utilise ideas and transform them into actions.”

**3<sup>rd</sup> Theme: Children’s Rights in the University**

The knowledge gained is already being transferred into the university context. Examples of existing actions are observed: themes for children with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, equal participation and inclusion of children with disabilities in education, acceptance of students’ diversity, counseling support for children, analysis of social inequalities and the digital divide, issues of violence and digital texts, utilization of social media to empower children’s voices, children’s and youth literature, practical training, and active citizenship. Future actions are also included in the planning: non-formal education programs, workshops for parent empowerment, seminars for professionals working with children, new undergraduate courses (curricula, language education, critical reflections on children’s rights), an interactive platform with digital stories, and voluntary actions of students and trainees.

Table 3. 3<sup>rd</sup> Theme: Children’s Rights in the University

3rd Theme	Codes
Children's Rights in the University	<b>3.1 Examples from existing actions</b>
	3.1.1 Themes in undergraduate and postgraduate courses
	3.1.1.1 Children with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds
	3.1.1.2 Equal participation and inclusion of children with disabilities and SEN in education
	3.1.1.3 Acceptance of students' diversity
	3.1.1.4 Counseling support for children
	3.1.1.5 Social inequalities and digital divide
	3.1.1.6 Violence and digital texts
	3.1.1.7 Social Media and Empowerment of children's voice
	3.1.1.8 Children's and youth literature
	3.1.1.9 Practical Training
	3.1.1.10 Active citizenship
	<b>3.2 Examples from future actions</b>
	3.2.1 Non-formal education programs
	3.2.1.1 Workshops for parent empowerment
	3.2.1.2 Seminars for professionals working with children
	3.2.2 Undergraduate courses
	3.2.2.1 Curricula and language education
	3.2.2.2 Critical reflections on children's rights
	3.2.3 Interactive platform with digital stories
3.2.4 Voluntary actions of students and trainees	

**Indicative excerpts**

“As a psychologist with research interest in disability, I integrate children’s rights into my teaching and research, focusing on the equal participation and inclusion of children with disabilities in preschool education. I promote practices that ensure all children’s accessibility to learning, cultivate the acceptance of diversity among my students, and study strategies for enhancing the psychosocial support of children with special educational needs in the school environment. Simultaneously, I engage in counseling support for children living in families with social or psychological risks, aiming to empower and protect their rights within a safe and supportive framework.”

“School-family connection, school psychological support.”

“The human rights of the child are a core axis of my research interests. Within the framework of my teaching activity, I seek to integrate themes related to the participation, equality, and protection of children, both through theoretical approach and with experiential activities. The utilisation of children’s and youth literature as a tool for awareness-raising and critical reflection around children’s rights is of particular interest to me, as literary texts can serve as an opportunity for discussion, empathy, and empowerment.”



4<sup>th</sup> Theme: Enhancement of Professional Learning through participation in the Center for Children’s Rights

Participation in the Center for Children’s Rights emerges as a key tool for continuous professional learning. It provides knowledge about children’s rights, the possibility to exchange best practices, research collaborations, and dissemination of results, as well as awareness-raising for socially vulnerable groups. It promotes professional networking, cooperation with other bodies and scientists, the school-university-society link, and involvement in training activities. Simultaneously, it enhances the development of communication and collaboration skills, critical for the effective promotion of children’s rights in education.

Table 4. 4<sup>th</sup> Theme: Enhancement of Professional Learning through participation in the Center for Children’s Rights

4th Theme	Codes
Enhancement of Professional Learning through participation in the Center for Children’s Rights	<b>4.1 Knowledge on children’s rights</b>
	4.1.1 Exchange of best practices
	4.1.2 Research and dissemination of results
	4.1.3 Awareness-raising for socially vulnerable groups
	<b>4.2 Professional networking</b>
	4.2.1 Cooperation with other bodies/scientists
	4.2.2 School-university-society link
	4.2.3 Involvement in training activities
	<b>4.3 Skill development</b>
	4.3.1 Communication
4.3.2 Collaboration	

**Indicative excerpts**

“My participation in the Center for Children’s Rights of the University of Western Macedonia (UOWM) can essentially contribute to my professional learning and development, offering me the opportunity to enhance my knowledge on securing and advocating for children’s rights, especially in vulnerable groups such as children with disabilities or those living in at-risk families. Through cooperation with other scientists and the exchange of best practices, I will have the opportunity to evolve my teaching and research approaches, participate in interdisciplinary programs, and enhance my skills in implementing policies and interventions for children.”

“Through the development of a research plan and its implementation.”

“My participation in the Center can essentially contribute to my professional learning and development, as it offers me the opportunity to cooperate with people from different scientific fields, exchange ideas, and enrich my teaching and research practice. Through the Center’s actions, I can enhance my knowledge on the human rights of the child, utilise best practices, and actively participate in initiatives that promote the voice and participation of children. Simultaneously, I am given the opportunity to develop skills, such as the design of participatory educational programs, the management of cultural diversity, and the implementation of research actions with social impact.”

**4. Discussion**

The findings of this small-scale study strongly validate the key principles of effective professional development (PD) outlined in the theoretical framework. Specifically, the participants’

positive evaluation of the Workshop and their resulting intentions to integrate children’s rights into their academic work directly reflect the importance of PD that is relevant, participatory, and socially embedded. Their expressed benefits—such as the acquisition of enriched knowledge, critical reflection on educational practices, and the development of empathy —align perfectly with the theoretical model of PD as a multifaceted process encompassing knowledge growth, practice change, and cultural/identity shifts. The desire for continued professional learning through networking, research collaboration, and the exchange of best practices through the Center reinforces the value of the community of practice and sustained, collaborative models of PD, which are theorized to yield the most significant gains and are essential for translating new strategies into routine practice.

Furthermore, the academic team’s swift action to integrate rights-based themes into existing and planned university courses and outreach programs demonstrates the successful translation of theoretical learning into practical, rights-based pedagogy, a core element emphasized for PD in contexts focusing on children’s rights. The expressed interest in developing new, interdisciplinary courses, promoting critical reflection, and fostering a school-university-society link highlights the successful realization of the sociocultural perspective on learning, where new knowledge is appropriated within institutional contexts to shape policy and practice. The Center, therefore, functions not only as a setting for training but as a locus for institutional support and the allocation of resources, essential for the sustainability and impactful change that the theoretical literature deems necessary for effective professional growth.

**5. Conclusions**

To conclude, the Workshop constitutes a multidimensional and transformative learning environment that successfully integrates theoretical training and awareness-raising with practical pedagogical applications and best practices. By functioning simultaneously as a framework for learning and critical reflection, a locus of empowerment and community building, and a site of professional and personal development, it illustrates how academic initiatives can have a sustained impact on both practice and scholarship. The thematic incorporation of children’s rights into academic and research discourse further positions the Center as a dynamic forum for dialogue and reflection, advancing interdisciplinarity and applied perspectives. These features highlight its potential not only as a model for similar educational initiatives but also as a catalyst for the ongoing evolution of pedagogical and research practices.

The participation of the academic staff in the Workshop on Children’s Rights highlighted the need for holistic information, professional development, and involvement in actions that promote democratic, inclusive education. The expectations before the workshop, the benefits gained by the participants, and the ways in which they are integrating children’s rights into their academic and professional practice form a coherent framework of professional learning and social awareness.

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## VI. Impact Assessment of a Teachers' Professional Development Programme on Inclusive Education

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### Abstract

TEACH4Integration is a flagship initiative of the UNICEF Greece Country Office, aiming to train trainers and educators working with refugee and migrant background populations. The programme has been implemented from 2018 to the present. It is a collaboration between the UNICEF Greece Country Office and the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, and the University of Thessaly, with the support of the Ministry of Education, Religious Affairs and Sports, under the supervision of the Institute of Educational Policy. Teach for Integration comprises 400 training hours, spread over a period of nine months, which are accredited according to current legislation. The programme is implemented through live meetings / workshops, online meetings, and asynchronous digital learning methods. A total of 5,335 educators and 661 school counselors participated in the program during the last 4 years, approximately 7,000 education staff in total from the beginning of the project. Throughout the four implementation cycles from 2021 onward, Teach for Integration has been implemented as part of the All Children in Education programme, a UNICEF led initiative, with the cooperation of the Ministry of Migration and Asylum and with co-funding from the European Union. To assess the impact and long-term sustainability of the program's results, an impact assessment was conducted using a targeted questionnaire distributed to participants from all phases of the program. From the current academic year onward, an additional, fully asynchronous version of the program, titled TEACH4Inclusion, has been developed in the form of a MOOC and was piloted accordingly. The evaluation of all program phases from 2021 to the present was conducted by a research team of the Laboratory of Pedagogical Research and Lifelong Education of the Department of Educational Science and Early Childhood Education at the University of Patras, in close collaboration with the UNICEF Greece Country Office. This presentation will showcase selected data from all phases of the TEACH4Integration program—primarily from the impact assessment, as well as the pilot implementation of the TEACH4Inclusion programme.

**KEYWORDS:** Inclusive Education; Teachers' Professional Development; Assessment

## 1. Background

Teach for Integration (T4I) is a free accredited professional development programme for teachers and education administrators involved in the education of children with refugee or migrant backgrounds. International research highlights that high-quality teacher professional development is a key driver for inclusive schooling and improved learning outcomes for vulnerable learners (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Banks, 2016). T4I follows this evidence base by investing in enhancing teachers' skills and cultivating a school culture of inclusion aligned with global educational priorities (UNESCO, 2020).

Teach for Integration (T4I) is a collaboration between the UNICEF Greece Country Office and the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, and the University of Thessaly, with the support of the Hellenic Ministry of Education, Religious Affairs and Sports, under the supervision of the Institute of Educational Policy.

Teach for Integration invests in enhancing the teachers' skills as well as the culture of inclusion at schools. It addresses all the teachers and education administrators in Greece, prioritising those who staff Reception Classes and those who teach classes with learners who have a refugee or migrant background. The programme comprises 400 training hours, spread over a period of nine months, which are accredited according to current legislation. Training is implemented through live meetings / workshops, online meetings, and asynchronous digital learning methods.

The main aim of the programme is to improve the teachers' skills and competences in domains such as Teaching Greek as a Second Language, psycho-social support and inclusion of refugee students (Gay, 2018; Lucas & Villegas, 2013; Dryden-Peterson, 2016), the institutional and legal framework, differentiated instruction, teaching subjects other than language, use of Accelerated Learning Programme (ALP) and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), developing collaborative – experiential learning activities, classroom management and group dynamics, e-learning and distance learning, community engagement, and the effective integration of students with disability or special education needs.

Upon completion of the programme, participants have increased competence in responding to the challenges that arise in the field; they also effectively implement educational practices that promote inclusion, empower students, reduce school dropout and lead to successful learning outcomes. The above is made possible as teachers have developed an overview of the field and the challenges involved in educating individuals with refugee and migrant backgrounds; they also have developed familiarity with inclusion and learning support instructional practices. They are also able to develop effective practices at the class and school levels, which are compatible with multilingual and multicultural educational environments as well as educational contexts characterized by different learning levels. They can cope with psychosocial challenges by investing in resilience, harnessing group dynamics, enhancing motivation, and developing high expectations among all students.

Educators completing the T4I programme have the required skills to effectively integrate students with refugee and migrant backgrounds into mixed-mainstream classes, in a variety of subjects, through the implementation of differentiated teaching practices and through investing in the students' knowledge, home languages, and experiences. Additionally, they have developed their intercultural competence, deep empathy regarding issues of identity and inclusion, and they enact values that recognise children as subjects of rights. Thus, they consciously strive to foster collaboration across the school community (students, teachers, parents) and to develop communities of practice where effective, inclusive educational environments are shaped. Through their participation in the training programme, educators endeavour, individually and collectively, to develop their professional identity and continuously improve their skills and expertise.

All the training materials were developed by the 5 public Universities: Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, and University of Thessaly (leading a consortium with the University of Ioannina and the University of Crete). Three syllabi were also created, including all relevant information on the Program purpose, structure, and modules. The content included mostly common modules (with slight variations in titles), such as:

- (a) Methodology of teaching Greek as a second language
- (b) Institutional framework and education policy for refugees in Greece
- (c) Identities and Migration
- (d) Differentiated teaching
- (e) Refugee education and intercultural communication issues
- (f) Plurilingualism and classroom management in multilingual and multicultural contexts
- (g) Rights of the child
- (h) Development and selection of educational material
- (i) Psycho-social issues in refugee education

Other non-common modules included: Content and Language Integrated Learning, Participatory and experiential techniques and the use of Arts and Drama, ICT and Distance Education, Bilingualism, and Special Needs Education.

Since the beginning of its implementation, the programme has supported more than 6,000 teachers and education staff (Education Counsellors, Refugee Education Coordinators, Interdisciplinary Evaluation and Support Centre staff, regional and local Education Directorates administrators), while from 2022 onwards, interpretation in Greek Sign Language has been integrated into the programme. In addition, the Learning Management System complies with all the accessibility specifications for people with disabilities.

The programme's design is firmly grounded in international child-rights obligations. In alignment with CRC Articles 28 and 29, T4I promotes not only the child's right to quality education but also education directed toward the development of the child's personality, cultural identity, talents, and respect for human rights. The programme also draws on General Comment No. 14, emphasizing teachers' responsibilities to uphold the child's best interests in all educational decisions. By acknowledging relevant Optional Protocols, particularly those safeguarding children affected by conflict and discrimination, T4I reinforces a normative rights-based foundation and clarifies how its pedagogical practices operationalise children's rights in everyday school settings.

## 2. Assessment

Teach for Integration was highlighted as a Good Practice in the European Commission's Education and Training 2022 Monitor Report: <https://op.europa.eu/webpub/eac/education-and-training-monitor-2022/el/country-reports/greece.html>. To date, the Laboratory of Pedagogical Research and Lifelong Education of the University of Patras has evaluated the Programme on six occasions (i.e., interim and final evaluations for each implementation phase). The evaluations consistently highlight:

- The high level of compatibility of the programme with the expectations of the trainees. It should be noted that each implementation phase is preceded by an educational needs analysis targeting the applicants.
- The overwhelming majority (9/10) of teachers describe the programme as extremely useful, knowledge-rich, focused on practical skills and emphasising experiential participatory methodologies, and -at the same time- demanding.
- Similar percentages consider that the Programme has helped them become better teachers, not only in terms of the skills necessary for the specific student group, but also in

terms of improving their overall ability to comprehensively support all students, diversifying their teaching, and having a more positive attitude towards the heterogeneity of the student population.

- Among the participants, 95% would recommend this programme to their colleagues, because they very positively appraise the quality of the training materials, the support they received from their trainers and educational advisers, the link with classroom reality, the encouragement of dialogue and cooperation.

- Finally, all participants consider that the difficulties they had previously encountered in the context of engaging with learners who have refugee or migrant backgrounds were substantially reduced following their participation in the programme.

In all phases of implementation an assessment report was submitted. On all those assessments quantitative and qualitative approaches were used in order to collect data that could lead to meaningful and useful conclusions. In all those phases of assessment a fairly large number of trainees participated (2021-2022: 697 - 44,2%, 2022-2023: 512 - 31,6% and 2023-2024: 647 - 49,5%). In total, 1.858, i.e. 37,5%, participated in the assessment processes of all phases.

To assess the progress of the programme, but also to capture the impact, two sub-investigations were conducted.

The first was to explore the impact of the programme on trainees of all phases and to capture their views. For this purpose a special questionnaire was constructed, taking into account the assessment tools used so far. This questionnaire is presented in Annex 1 (Greek) and Annex 2 (English). This questionnaire was sent to all the participants of all the program phases, in total 4.949. Sampling was carried out between April, 24 and May, 10 (2024) with three intermediate reminders. It should be underlined that a very large percentage of the population responded, specifically 1,436 responded, i.e. 29%. This data, presented in the next section, is the main basis for the picture of the programme and the final conclusions.

The second was about the evolution of the programme over time. As mentioned, the three Implementing Partners designed and implemented the programme with largely the same methodology and content. The programme itself constituted a large-scale intervention which in programme design theory could be categorized under the so-called recurrent programs. These programs fall into three broad categories:

- Serial, i.e. those that are repeated at a specific time interval based on the same initial design or at least the same targeting.
- Parallel, where initially one of the programs is started and very soon the second one is started, so that they are implemented essentially in parallel.
- Cascade, where a program is replicated in exactly the same way from an original kernel.

It is obvious that in all these cases we are interested in whether the programs maintain the original qualitative elements as the relevant literature shows that in most cases the continuous implementation of the same programs results in divergences from the initial design and the first phases of implementation. These divergences result with gradual roll-out in most cases in a weakening of the original characteristics, but in some cases (much less frequently) in stability or even improvement. To study divergences through time, we select specific indicators and monitor their evolution through the phases or select extreme values (first and last phase). These indicators are constructed by the evaluator based on critical elements of a programme and are the quotient of the final value to the initial value (usually these elements are percentages or averages). It is understandable that the closer the index value is to 1 the less the deterioration over time, and in the few cases where the index value is greater than 1 we have a programme that is improving rather than bogging down and deteriorating over time. For all of this to apply there are three necessary conditions:

- (1) In assessment procedures the questions that generate the indicators remain constant.

- (2) Not significantly differentiate the characteristics of the participants, and

- (3) The implementation context should be relatively stable.

Considering that these conditions are met, we selected the following Divergence Indicators

(DI).

- Enrichment of knowledge in the subject of training
- Organization of the program
- Educational material
- Adequacy of trainers
- Learning climate
- Participation, teamwork and dialogue
- Fulfillment of training needs
- Platform user-friendliness
- Platform technical support
- Recommendation to other colleagues

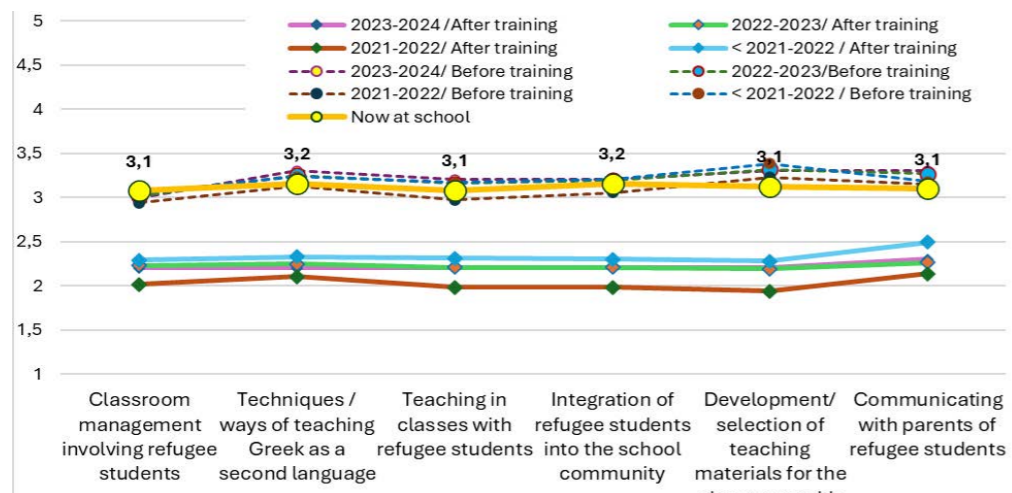
## 2.1 Sample

In the sample, the majority are women (84.5%), one in three participants are permanent teachers (72.4%), more than half of them have extensive work experience (54.9%) and hold a postgraduate degree (65.8%), one in three belong to the age group 36-45 years old and one in three to the age group 46-55 years old. The vast majority (88.3%) of participants have no work experience in intercultural education (47.6%) or little experience (19.5%) or little experience up to 5 years (21.2%). Almost half of the participants (46.8%) attended the training in the current program (2023-2024), one out of three people in the previous implementation in 2022-2023, 19.4% had attended the training two years earlier, while only 1.8% of the sample are trainees before 2021-2022. Participants come from a great variety of jobs related to education sector. Most participants (53%) are Teachers in Morning Mainstream Classes, and a large percentage are Principals - Vice Principals of a School Unit (these two categories are about one third of the sample). Regarding the specialty of the participants, more than one in three is a primary school teacher and one in five is a philologist, 16.9% of the sample is a kindergarten teacher, while 14.8 are various specialties. Pre-school and primary education teachers are more than half of the participants and the rest of them are working mainly in secondary education. Those working in Second Chance Schools, NGOs or other organizations are about 15%.

## 2.2 Findings

The following graph represents the mean difficulty scores reported at the time of the training by the four samples of the project implementations, i.e. 1st sample "before 2021-2022 (n=562)," 2nd sample "2021-2022 (n=691)," 3rd sample "2022-2023 (n=636)," 4th sample "2023-2024 (647)," before implementation and after implementation of the training and the difficulty they now report in their daily teaching practice accordingly in the total impact sample "2023-2024 now at school (n=1294)."

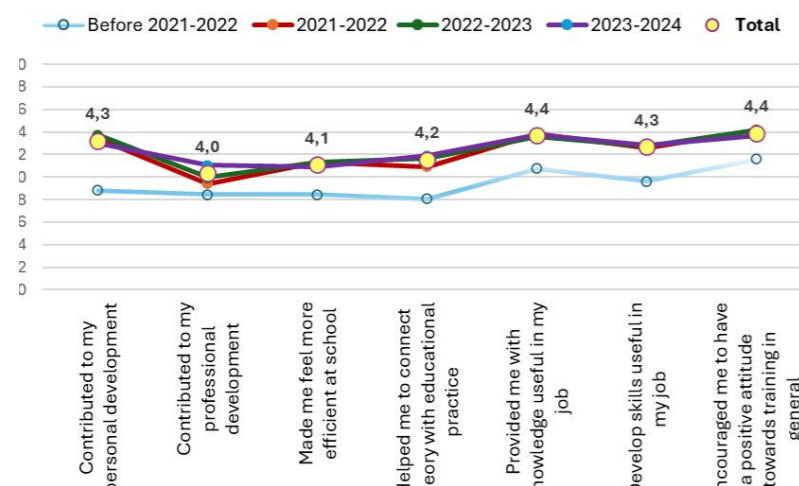
Table 1. Difficulty Scores



It is remarkable that in all groups, the mean difficulty scores decrease by almost one point (on the 1-5 scale) after the training, but when reporting today on educational practice these means return to the difficulty levels reported before the training. A possible hypothesis for that, is the so-called “wow effect” in evaluation, which means that when something exceeds expectations the grading and the comments are of higher level. So, maybe because the satisfaction of the participants was very high, they also gave greatest evaluations to their improvement in practice. Another possible explanation that should be seen not in contrary, but in parallel to the first one, is that participants gave higher evaluations during the period of the program attendance because they felt empowered in their everyday practice. In that case, periodic trainings or support by other means (for example asynchronous training) are necessary.

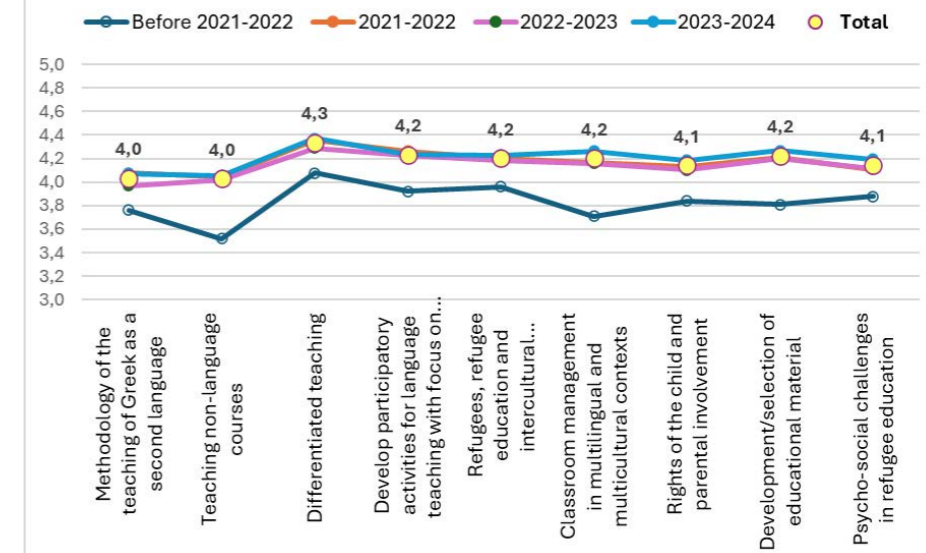
The vast majority of participants stated that the program contributed much or very much to their personal and professional development. Attending the programs made them to feel more efficient at school, able to connect theory with practice, while they were provided with knowledge and skills useful in job and encouraged them to have a positive attitude towards training in general. For all those parameters we must point out that positive answers vary between 75% and near 90%.

Table 2. Contribution to professional development



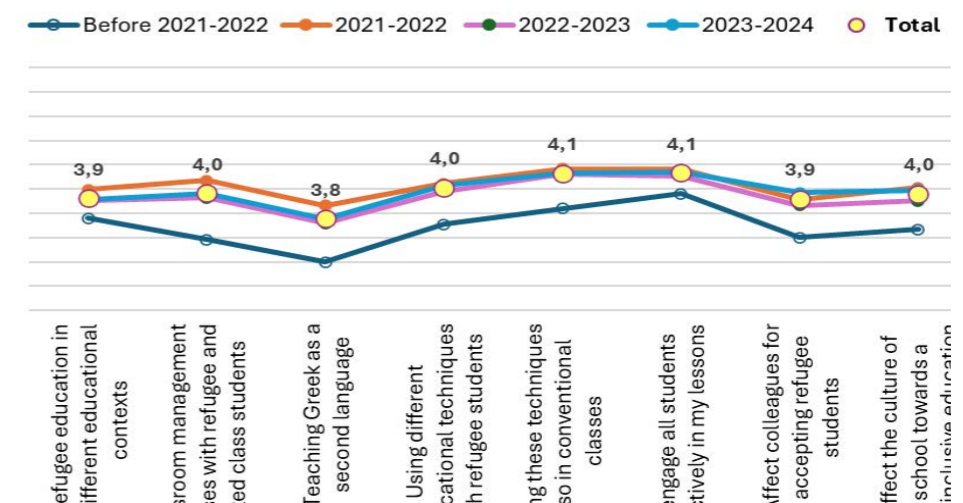
Additionally, most of the participants state, that in their educational practice all the axes of the program are much or very much useful, with means equal to or higher than 4 (very) in each of the nine training axes. It is worth referring that the same high grades were observed in the assessment of all the phases of the program. In the following graph, it is visible that the means of the axes’ utility increase as the training is more recent, but this increase is very slight (about 10% from the first to the last year of implementation).

Table 3. Modules’ usefulness



Regarding the self-competence of the participants for the role of teachers in refugee and migrant education, positive opinions (much-very much) vary between 70% and 80%, while negative opinions are extremely low (2,3% to 8,5%). The highest rates are observed in the items “Using these techniques also in conventional classes” (82,8%) and “To engage all students effectively in my lessons” (82,3%).

Table 4. Self-Competence

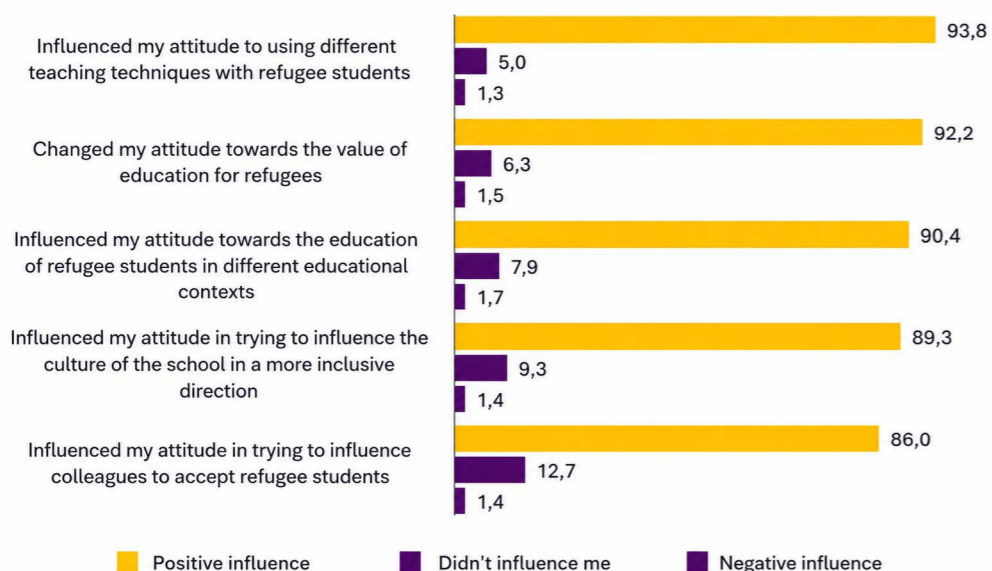


The vast majority of the participants stated that they already had a positive attitude towards “the value of education for refugees,” “the education of refugee students in different educational contexts,” “using different teaching techniques with refugee students,” “trying to influence colleagues to accept refugee students” and “trying to influence the culture of the school in a more inclusive direction” and this training boosted these positive attitudes. As we can on the following graph, the option “I had a positive attitude that was empowered” is about 80% or more. Also



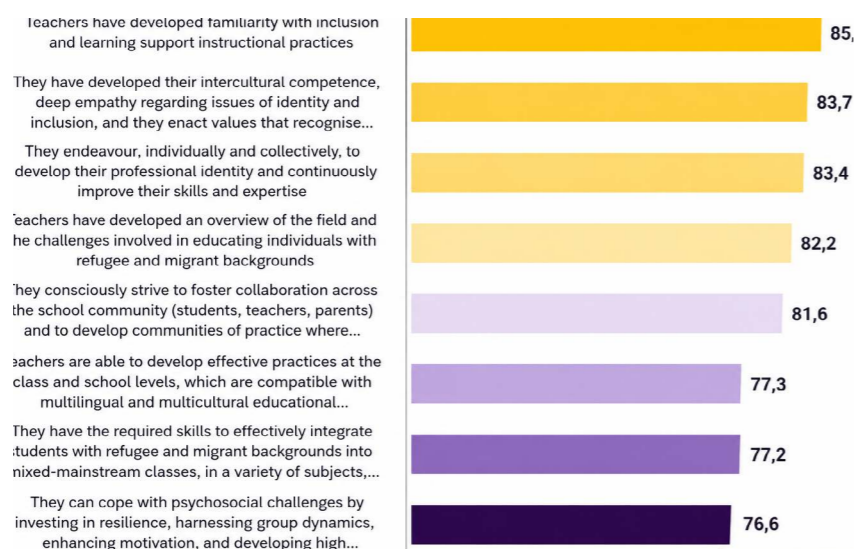
the “no influence option” vary between 5.9% and 10.2%, so 8 out of 10 participants were positively influenced by the program.

Table 5. Attitudes



The main objective of the programme is to improve the teachers’ skills and competences in domains such as Teaching Greek as a Second Language, psycho-social support and inclusion of refugee students, the institutional and legal framework, differentiated instruction, teaching subjects other than language, use of Accelerated Learning Programme (ALP) and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), developing collaborative - experiential learning activities, classroom management and group dynamics, e-learning and distance learning, community engagement, and the effective integration of students with disability or special education needs. Upon completion of the programme, participants have increased competence in responding to the challenges that arise in the field; they also effectively implement educational practices that promote inclusion, empower students, reduce school dropouts and lead to successful learning outcomes. The following figure shows that more than three out of four participants much or very much agree that the program achieved these goals.

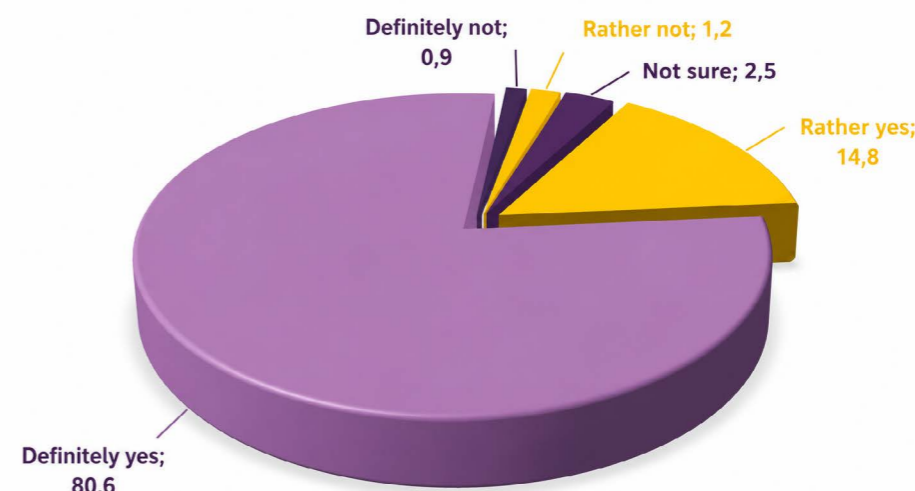
Table 6. Goals and Achievements



The degree of satisfaction of the participants from all phases of the training implementation

is also confirmed with their responses to the question whether they would recommend it to a teacher without previous experience and training in migrant and refugee education. Almost four out of five (80.6%) of people completed the questionnaire are absolutely sure (definitely yes) they will recommend the program to others, while the positive views are increased to 95.4% with the responses of those who feel that they will probably recommend the program (rather yes).

Table 7. Would you recommend this programme?



As previously mentioned, we have selected ten indicators in order to capture the evolution of the programme over the whole period of its implementation. The values of these indicators are presented in the fourth column of the following Table.

Table 8. Evolution

	2021-2022	2023-2024	DI
Enrichment of knowledge in the subject of training	94,8	91,7	0,97
Organization of the program	87,2	89,0	1,02
Educational material	93,4	91,2	0,98
Adequacy of trainers	94,3	95,2	1,01
Learning climate	90,1	90,9	1,01
Participation, teamwork and dialogue	94,1	94,4	1,00
Fulfillment of training needs	87,7	89,6	1,02
Platform user-friendliness	86,8	88,9	1,02
Platform technical support	82,4	83,5	1,01
Recommendation to other colleagues	95,0	94,0	0,99

The general picture of the program is that during the unfolding not only did it not show no deterioration compared to the original form but, on the contrary, all indicators are either very close to 1 or even slightly greater than 1, which means that the program was improving during its evolution. In all this it is necessary to take into account the relatively high starting values, for example that an index starting in the 90% range has very little room for improvement.



### 3. Conclusions

The impact assessment of the TEACH4Integration programme provides compelling evidence that a large-scale, long-term professional development initiative can strengthen teachers' capacities to create inclusive, equitable learning environments for refugee and migrant learners (OECD, 2019; UNESCO, 2020). Across all phases of implementation, the programme demonstrated strong alignment with educators' needs, a feature long recognised as central to effective teacher professional development (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Participants consistently reported substantial enrichment of their pedagogical toolkit—particularly in differentiated instruction, teaching Greek as a second language, psychosocial support, and intercultural communication—domains that are widely acknowledged as critical for inclusive and culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2018; Lucas & Villegas, 2013).

Beyond individual skill development, the programme contributed to shifts in attitudes and professional identity, strengthening teachers' confidence and commitment to inclusion (Banks, 2016). The findings indicate that educators felt increasingly capable of supporting diverse learners, fostering positive classroom climates, and advocating for inclusive school cultures—outcomes also highlighted in the literature on successful refugee education initiatives (Dryden-Peterson, 2016).

The temporary reduction in perceived difficulties immediately after training suggests the presence of a “wow effect,” a phenomenon noted in programme evaluation literature (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2016). However, the longer-term data affirm the need for continued professional support, including ongoing and asynchronous learning opportunities, to sustain and deepen impact (Avalos, 2011).

Importantly, the stability or slight improvement in the divergence indicators across the programme's life cycle signals that TEACH4Integration not only maintained but enhanced its quality over time—a notable achievement for a recurrent, large-scale intervention (OECD, 2019; Guskey, 2000).

Overall, TEACH4Integration, having demonstrated the significance of collaboration between Universities, UNICEF and state authorities, emerges as a robust, scalable, and sustainable model of teacher professional development for inclusive education. Its demonstrated effectiveness underscores the importance of investing in comprehensive, research-informed, and contextually responsive training programmes that strengthen teachers' capacity to ensure equitable learning opportunities for all children (UNICEF, 2021).

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## VII. Exploring Intercultural Sensitivity and Teacher Effectiveness in Multicultural Schools

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### Abstract

The increasing cultural diversity in Greek schools highlights the importance of teachers' intercultural sensitivity as a critical factor in promoting an educational environment that fosters and promotes the rights of all children. The primary aim of this research is to explore teachers' views on intercultural sensitivity and to examine how it affects their effectiveness within a multicultural classroom. In addition, it seeks to identify the challenges teachers face in multicultural educational settings and their readiness to address the needs of diverse student populations. Utilizing quantitative methodology, a questionnaire with Likert scale questions was distributed to 98 teachers working in intercultural schools. The findings reveal important aspects of teachers' attitudes, practices and challenges related to intercultural education. In addition, the analysis examines potential differences in Intercultural Sensitivity based on demographic factors such as teaching experience, gender, and age. This research contributes to a broader understanding of the role of Intercultural Sensitivity in the educational process, offering practical ideas and suggestions for improving multicultural education in Greece. By examining the perspectives and experiences of teachers, the study provides valuable data for policy makers, education professionals and researchers aiming to enhance the effectiveness of teaching in culturally diverse classrooms.

**KEYWORDS:** Intercultural sensitivity; Multicultural classes; Teachers; Effectiveness; Child rights

## 1. Introduction

Greece has been a major entry point for migrants and refugees in recent decades. In particular, and according to the official statistics of the Ministry of Immigration and Asylum, the inflow of migrants, starting from the year 2017, was a total of 33,787 persons for that year. Following this, in 2018, 45,828 migrants entered our country, while in 2019 the increase in inflows reached 59%. In 2020 and 2021 there is a decrease in inflows. However, since then, involuntary population movements have further increased primarily due to crises and wars in the surrounding area (Ministry of Immigration and Asylum, 2024).

The aforementioned demographic changes consequently affect the composition of the student population, while the education and integration of children with migrant and refugee backgrounds in schools raises various challenges, such as the need to enhance intercultural sensitivity, the provision of sufficient resources for the teaching of Greek as a second language and the management of social exclusion (Bachtsiavanou et al., 2022; Karanikola, 2025a; Nantsou et al., 2025). To this end, the Greek Ministry of Education has initiated and applied various measures aimed at supporting the educational and social inclusion of all students in both primary and secondary education. More specifically, the official version of Intercultural Education is expressed in Law 2413/96 (Greek Government, 1996), which concerns its purpose and content, Intercultural Education schools, teaching staff and school administration. In addition, Law 3879/2010 set up Educational Priority Zones (ZEP), which operate in areas with traits such as low overall academic standing, high dropout rate, low access to higher education and low socio-economic indicators. These classes are addressed to students with a migrant and/or refugee background, offered in morning general schools, with a parallel combination of intensive Greek language courses and regular class attendance. In addition, reception and education structures for refugees, which are separate classes exclusively for newly arrived refugees, hosted in school premises, have been erected (Karanikola, 2025a; Karanikola & Balias, 2015).

Intercultural sensitivity, defined as the ability to recognize and appreciate cultural differences, plays a key role in promoting effective communication and cooperation between people from different backgrounds (Chen & Hu, 2023), in the academic success of all children, in fostering social cohesion and mutual respect, in building an equitable education, and in protecting the rights of every child in today's pluralistic world (Beljanski & Bukvić, 2020; Ertürk, 2023). Furthermore, intercultural sensitivity is closely related to intercultural effectiveness, which includes the ability to communicate and behave appropriately in intercultural situations (Deardorff, 2006; Schelfhout et al., 2022; Karanikola, 2024). Effective intercultural interactions require a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes, which are often categorized under the broader umbrella of intercultural competence (Kovacevic et al., 2023). This competency includes elements such as cultural empathy, flexibility and intercultural relationship management, which contribute to successful communication across cultural boundaries (Karanikola & Panagiotopoulos, 2025; Khukhlaev et al., 2020).

In addition, research shows that who exhibit notable levels of intercultural sensitivity are more capable of promoting inclusive environments which foster positive intercultural interactions among students (Beljanski & Bukvić, 2020; Üzar-Özçetin et al., 2020; Ghajarieh, 2023). This sensitivity enhances teachers' confidence in dealing with culturally diverse student populations and encourages empathy and respect for differences, which are essential for effective teaching in multicultural settings (Üzar-Özçetin et al., 2020). Afterward, the relationship between intercultural sensitivity and psychological resilience has been highlighted in research involving teachers of refugee children, suggesting that those with greater intercultural sensitivity are more equipped to deal with the challenges of teaching in diverse classrooms (Nantsou et al., 2025;

Üzar-Özçetin et al., 2020). Furthermore, empirical studies show that factors such as previous intercultural experiences, travel and exposure to different environments significantly influence the development of intercultural sensitivity and effectiveness (Güngör et al., 2021; Kovacevic et al., 2023). This highlights the importance of hands-on engagement in cultivating intercultural skills.

Recent studies also analyze the role of educational interventions in enhancing intercultural sensitivity and effectiveness. Tuncel (2019) examines how curriculum regulations and integrated programs can significantly influence the development of these competencies. Similarly, Fantini (2020) highlights the need for a redefinition of intercultural communicative competence, supporting educational practices that prepare students for intercultural engagements in the real world. Tuncel and Paker's (2018) findings further support this notion, suggesting that structured intercultural communication lessons can lead to significant improvements in students' sensitivity and awareness. More specifically, Biasutti et al. (2019) report that the approaches adopted by an interculturally sensitive teacher increase their pedagogical knowledge and expand the level of learning resources provided to their students. In particular, expertise in the field of intercultural strategies increases teachers' understanding and makes them more effective in responding to the needs of all students (Alvarez Valdivia & Gonzalez Montoto, 2018; Karanikola & Balias, 2015).

In this vein, Bradshaw et al. (2018) support the view that cross-culturally sensitive teachers are more effective, as they report that teachers' cross-cultural sensitivity improves their skills and self-efficacy. They also report that interculturally sensitive teachers show better classroom management and greater responsiveness to classroom demands. Finally, they conclude that cross-culturally sensitive teachers display reduced disciplinary referrals of their students in their classrooms. This last conclusion is supported by Behizadeh et al. (2019) as well, as they state that students in a classroom taught by an interculturally sensitive teacher have a deeper understanding of the concept of diversity and this leads to a fuller understanding of the classroom rules and a greater awareness of their role within it.

In conclusion, the relevant literature shows that intercultural sensitivity and effectiveness are interrelated constructs that can be developed through targeted educational practices. By integrating intercultural communication into curricula, addressing barriers to effective communication, and promoting a positive climate of diversity, educational institutions can enhance students' abilities to navigate and thrive in multicultural environments.

## 2. Materials and methods

### 2.1 Research purpose and research questions

The primary aim of this research study is to seek teachers' perceptions on intercultural sensitivity and to examine how it affects their effectiveness within a multicultural classroom. Specifically, the participants were called to respond to the following research questions:

- What are teachers' perceptions of the five key dimensions of the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISI)
- How do demographics affect teachers' intercultural sensitivity?
- To what extent and in what ways is intercultural sensitivity linked to effectiveness?

### 2.2 Data collection and data analysis

This study relied on quantitative research approach for data collection and analysis. The research approach is inductive, i.e. it starts from the specific and ends with the general, linking the empirical data to the literature review. The choice of quantitative method is based on the purpose of the research, as it allows for objective measurement of variables and the processing of numerical data through statistical programs (Creswell, 2011). Therefore, in order to examine the views of teachers working in intercultural schools in the country, a quantitative research method

was applied, allowing for the collection of data from 98 participants (Babbie, 2021).

A questionnaire consisting of two parts was created for this research. The first part includes demographic and professional data aimed at profiling the teachers' profile (gender, age, marital status, years of experience, studies). The second part uses the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS-24), which contains 24 questions on a 5-point Likert scale, organized in five subscales: a) interaction engagement (seven sentences); b) respect for cultural differences (six sentences); c) interaction confidence (five sentences); d) interaction enjoyment (three sentences); e) interaction attentiveness (three sentences). The Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) was developed by Chen and Starosta (2000) and is a widely used instrument designed to measure individuals' intercultural sensitivity, which is the emotional aspect of intercultural communication competence. It assesses how confident and open participants are in interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds. It is part of the broader Intercultural Communication Competence Model (ICC Model), which includes emotional (sensitivity), cognitive (awareness) and behavioral (skills) components.

In the intent to examine the relation between intercultural sensitivity skills and teaching, an open-ended question was created in which participants were asked to describe whether and how intercultural sensitivity affects their ability to effectively teach students from different cultural backgrounds. The data were processed using descriptive and inferential statistics, utilizing IBM SPSS v29 software. Methods such as analysis of variance (ANOVA), Pearson or Spearman correlations, multiple regression or other statistical tests were applied for the inferential analysis, depending on the nature of the data and the type of research questions. However, the qualitative data collected from the open-ended question were analyzed using the thematic analysis tool (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Finally, the Cronbach's alpha internal consistency reliability test is greater than >0.700 which is considered the minimum acceptable, in the subscales concerning "interaction engagement" (0.831) and "respect for cultural differences" (0.931). The same is verified for the reliability indices concerning subscale 3 "interaction confidence" with 0.958, subscale 4 "interaction enjoyment" with an index of 0.762 and subscale 5 "interaction attentiveness" with an equally high index of 0.883.

**2.3 Research sample**

The sample consisted of 98 teachers working in intercultural schools in the city of Thessaloniki during the academic year 2024-2025. The participants came from different disciplines and covered a wide range of age groups, educational experience and professional backgrounds. The sample was selected through purposive sampling in order to cover the diversity of perceptions and experiences of participants working in intercultural schools. Intercultural schools in Thessaloniki were selected due to the increased number of students with a migrant background, which makes the research particularly relevant to the issue of intercultural sensitivity.

**2.4 Ethical considerations**

Ethical issues were considered as well. To begin with the researchers protected the participants' voluntary participation, confirming to them that they could opt out of the research if they preferred to. They were also briefed on the purpose of the study and assured of their data privacy and confidentiality. Their identity was kept safe and their personal experiences were not disclosed. In this way, freedom to express themselves and willingness to share their experiences of the multicultural classroom was sought. The foregoing practices empowered the trustworthiness between the researchers and the participating teachers. Trust is crucial so that respondents can honestly share their reality without self-censorship (Babbie, 2021).

**2.5 Research results**

Several findings emerged from the data analysis, organized according to the research

objectives and questions. The main research axes are four: (a) demographic and professional data; (b) teachers' perceptions of the five key dimensions of the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale; (c) correlation of cross-cultural sensitivity with the subscales; (d) to what extent and how intercultural sensitivity is linked to effectiveness.

*2.5.1 Demographic and professional data*

Focusing on the gender of the participants, 39.8% of the total survey sample were male and 60.2% were female. Regarding the age of the teachers, 17.3% are in the age of 22-30 years, as well as teachers in the age of 41-50 years, 37.8% who are the majority are 31-40 years old, and finally those over 50 years old make up 27.6% of the sample. In addition, most participants were married (62.2%). Most teachers had 16-20 years of experience and represented 24.5% of the sample, while the next most had 6-10 years of teaching experience (22.4%) and 0-5 years (21.4%). Next, most of the respondents held a master's degree in a subject other than intercultural education (58.2%), while only 18.4% had a master's degree in intercultural education. Finally, 59.2% of the teachers surveyed had attended undergraduate courses on intercultural education, 31.6% had taken part in training seminars on intercultural education, while only 9.2% had participated in a conference on intercultural education.

*2.5.2 Teachers' perceptions of the five key dimensions of the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale*

For interaction engagement the mean is 3.2493 which makes it a high mean value and suggests that participants rate engagement positively; for respect for cultural differences the mean is 2.9439, a relatively high value, but lower than interaction engagement; for interaction confidence the mean is 2.5755, a value lower than all, suggesting possibly limited confidence in participants during their interaction with students from different cultural backgrounds. The interaction enjoyment variable with a mean of 3.2449, similar to interaction engagement, indicates a high level of enjoyment, and finally interaction attentiveness with a mean of 3.5918 and a higher mean value, suggesting that participants rate interaction attentiveness very positively.

The Range of the variables is relatively similar (1.33-3.00), indicating that the responses cover a wide range of values, and the Std. Error of Mean is relatively small for all variables (0.04687 - 0.08764), indicating that the mean values are fairly accurate. Finally, the Median is close to the mean for all variables, indicating symmetry in their distributions. In conclusion, it appears that the interaction attentiveness and interaction engagement variables seem to have the highest mean values, indicating that participants evaluate these attributes more positively, while on the other hand, interaction confidence has the lowest mean value, while also showing a high variance, which may affect the overall predictability (Table 1).

Table 1. Descriptive analysis of research tool subscales

Statistical variable	Interaction engagement	Respect for cultural differences	Interaction confidence	Interaction enjoyment	Interaction attentiveness
N Valid	98	98	98	98	98
N Missing	0	0	0	0	0
Mean	3,2493	2,9439	2,5755	3,2449	3,5918
Std. Error of Mean	0,05349	0,04687	0,08129	0,06011	0,08764
Median	3,1429	2,8333	2,4000	3,3333	3,6667
Std. Deviation	0,52950	0,46402	0,80476	0,59504	0,86755
Variance	0,280	0,215	0,648	0,354	0,753
Range	1,86	1,33	3,00	2,67	3,00



2.5.3 Correlation of Intercultural Sensitivity with the subscales

Analyzing the overall Intercultural Sensitivity and the subscales separately, we observe that the overall Intercultural Sensitivity has a very strong positive correlation with the Interaction engagement subscale ( $r=0.912, p<0.001$ ). This indicates that the ability to engage with people from different cultures significantly influences overall sensitivity. In addition, with respect for cultural differences there is a moderate negative correlation ( $r=-0.616, p<0.001$ ), suggesting that perception of respect may move differently from overall cross-cultural sensitivity. Regarding Interaction confidence, the relationship is positive and strong ( $r=0.681, p<0.001$ ), indicating that interaction confidence contributes to intercultural sensitivity. Regarding Interaction enjoyment, there is a moderate negative correlation ( $r=-0.570, p<0.001$ ), suggesting that enjoyment of cross-cultural interactions may be inversely related to some aspects of sensitivity. In terms of Interaction Attentiveness, there is a very strong positive correlation ( $r=0.814, p<0.001$ ), suggesting that the more attentiveness there is during the interaction, the higher the cross-cultural sensitivity (Table 2).

Table 2. Correlation of Intercultural Sensitivity with the subscales

Subscale	Correlation (r)	Comment
Interaction engagement	0.912 ( $p<0.001$ )	Very strong positive correlation. The ability to interact significantly affects the overall sensitivity.
Respect for cultural differences	-0.616 ( $p<0.001$ )	Moderate negative correlation. Perception of respect moves differently from overall sensitivity.
Interaction confidence	0.681 ( $p<0.001$ )	Strong positive correlation. Trust contributes to cross-cultural sensitivity.
Interaction enjoyment	-0.570 ( $p<0.001$ )	Moderate negative correlation. Enjoyment may be inversely related to aspects of sensitivity
Interaction attentiveness	0.814 ( $p<0.001$ )	Very strong positive correlation. Attentiveness increases intercultural sensitivity.

Based on the Pearson correlation test, it can be seen that the correlations between the subscales of Intercultural Sensitivity have positive and negative relationships with each other. Specifically, Interaction engagement and Interaction Attentiveness have a very strong positive correlation ( $r=0.865, p<0.001$ ), which means that engagement in intercultural relationships is closely and positively related to the attention paid to them. Respect for cultural differences and Interaction engagement appear to have a strong negative correlation ( $r=-0.799, p<0.001$ ), which may suggest that as respect increases, attention decreases. Interaction confidence and Interaction enjoyment also have a very strong negative correlation ( $r=-0.804, p<0.001$ ), which may indicate that increased confidence may reduce the need for spontaneous enjoyment in cross-cultural interactions. Interaction Attentiveness and Respect for cultural differences show a very strong negative correlation ( $r=-0.887, p<0.001$ ), possibly indicating opposite trends between attention and respect as defined by the scale. Finally, Interaction Enjoyment has consistently negative correlations with all variables, indicating that it decreases when the others increase (Table 3).

Table 3. Correlations between the subscales of the research tool

Subscales	Correlation (r)	Comment
Engagement and attentiveness	0.865 ( $p<0.001$ )	Very strong positive correlation
Respect and engagement	-0.799 ( $p<0.001$ )	Strong negative correlation
Confidence and enjoyment	-0.804 ( $p<0.001$ )	Very strong negative correlation
Attentiveness and respect	-0.887 ( $p<0.001$ )	Very strong negative correlation

All correlations are statistically significant at the  $p<0.001$  level, indicating that the relationships between the variables are not random and that the results are strong enough to support the correlations.

2.5.4 Correlations of Intercultural Sensitivity with demographic/professional data

With a view to investigating the correlation between Cross-Cultural Sensitivity and Gender, a t-test for Equality of Means was conducted, observing that  $t = 1.145, df = 96, Sig. (Two-Tailed) = 0.255$ . The two-tailed p-value is greater than 0.05, which means that there is no statistically significant difference in Cross-Cultural Sensitivity between genders. Also, the One-Sided value (One-Sided  $p = 0.128$ ) is also  $> 0.05$ , so there is no difference here as well. Furthermore, the Mean Difference is 0.04527, meaning that males and females have similar values in Intercultural Sensitivity, with a difference of only 0.04527 points. The Confidence Intervals (95% Confidence Interval) range from Lower = -0.03323, Upper = 0.12377 and include 0, which confirms that the difference is not statistically significant. Therefore, males and females appear to be equally cross-culturally sensitive.

For the purpose of investigating the relationship between Intercultural Sensitivity and Age, a Paired Samples Correlation test was applied. The correlation is -0.518 meaning that there is a negative moderate correlation between Intercultural Sensitivity and Age, i.e. as Age increases, Intercultural Sensitivity tends to decrease, which may reflect differences in experiences or attitudes between different age groups. To compare the mean values of the two variables a Paired Samples t-test was applied, from this it was extracted that the mean difference between Intercultural Sensitivity and Age is -0.44473, indicating that, on average, Intercultural Sensitivity is lower as Age increases. The Std. Deviation is 1.18647, indicating that there is some variation in the differences, and in the 95% Confidence Intervals of the Difference, the values are defined by Lower = -0.68260, Upper = -0.20686 which does not include 0, indicating a statistically significant difference. Finally, the negative t-value of -3.711 reflects the decrease in Cross-Cultural Sensitivity with respect to Age and the Significance (Two-Sided  $p < 0.001$ ) indicating that the difference is statistically significant. So according to the above there is a statistically significant negative correlation and difference between Intercultural Sensitivity and Age.

Applying the same tests and with a correlation value of -0.018, there seems to be a very weak negative correlation between Intercultural Sensitivity and Years of Teaching Experience. In practice, the correlation is almost zero. The Significance (Two-Sided  $p = 0.864$ ), is much higher than 0.05, which means that the correlation is not statistically significant. Also, the mean difference has taken the value of -0.00595 between Cross-Cultural Sensitivity and Years of Teaching Experience so it is almost zero. So, in conclusion, no statistically significant correlation or difference was found between Intercultural Sensitivity and Years of Teaching Experience. Participants with different levels of teaching experience have similar levels of Intercultural Sensitivity.

As with the demographic data cited above, there does not appear to be a strong correlation



between Intercultural Sensitivity and Level of Studies. The Pearson value is -0.013, indicating a very weak negative correlation. This value is close to zero, indicating that there is no meaningful relationship between the two variables. Also, in Significance (2-tailed) the p value is 0.902, which is much higher than the 0.05 level of significance, indicating that the correlation is not statistically significant. That is, there is no strong relationship between cross-cultural sensitivity and level of study.

In terms of the correlation of Intercultural Sensitivity with Seminar Attendance the Pearson correlation coefficient value of 0.723 shows a strong positive correlation between the two variables, Seminar Attendance and Intercultural Sensitivity. Essentially, the more participants attend seminars, the higher their cross-cultural sensitivity seems to be. The Sig. value (2-tailed) is <.001 meaning that the correlation is statistically significant at the 0.01 level and is not due to chance, and there is less than a 1% chance that it occurred by chance. Therefore, we can trust the existence of this correlation and conclude that attending seminars has a measurable relationship with cross-cultural sensitivity (Table 4).

Table 4. Correlations of Intercultural Sensitivity with demographic/professional data

Demographics	Correlation/analysis test	Test values	Results
Gender	t-test for Equality of Means	t = 1,145, p = 0,255	No statistically significant correlation
Age	Paired Samples Correlation & t-test	Correlation = -0,518, t = -3,711, p < 0,001	There is a statistically significant negative correlation: as age increases, sensitivity decreases.
Years of teaching experience	Correlation & t-test	Correlation = -0,018, p = 0,864	No statistically significant correlation
Level of studies	Pearson Correlation	Correlation = -0,013, p = 0,902	No statistically significant correlation
Attendance of Seminars	Pearson Correlation	Correlation = <,001, p= 0,723	There is a strong positive correlation between the two variables

2.5.5 To what extent and how intercultural sensitivity is linked to effectiveness

The open-ended question was asked to explore participants' views on the link between intercultural sensitivity and effectiveness in the multicultural classroom and was included in the questionnaire distributed to the 98 teachers. The purpose was to understand thoroughly how teachers perceive the value of intercultural sensitivity in teaching. In the first part of the question on whether they believe that intercultural sensitivity is related to their effectiveness in a multicultural classroom, the results show that most teachers (N=86) have responded positively that "Sensitivity is related to Effectiveness". Then, in the second part of the question, teachers had to answer in what way they think Intercultural Sensitivity is related to Effectiveness. It was therefore deemed necessary to categorize the responses and examine the answers through thematic analysis. The following themes emerged: a) understanding cultural differences; b) promoting equality; c) developing teacher skills and d) improving communication/less conflict.

3. Discussion

The relationship between intercultural sensitivity and teaching effectiveness is a critical area of research as observed in the theoretical part of this paper, especially as educational

environments become increasingly diverse. Intercultural sensitivity is closely related to intercultural competence, which includes the skills and knowledge required for effective interaction between cultures (Karanikola & Balias, 2015). Research suggests that teachers who have high levels of intercultural sensitivity are more likely to create positive learning environments that promote intercultural communication among students. In this vein, Beljanski and Bukvić (2020) emphasize the importance of educating teachers in intercultural values, suggesting that competent teachers act as bridges for their students, guiding them through cultural complexities and encouraging their growth in intercultural interactions. Similarly, Moore-Jones (2018) showed that intercultural sensitivity is directly related to educational effectiveness, which is verified by the findings of this study as the teachers who participated in the study also overwhelmingly emphasized the relationship between the two concepts.

However, it is vital to note that high intercultural sensitivity, by itself, does not guarantee effective teaching practices. Hoa and Viën's research reveals that many teachers, despite having good intercultural understanding, often fail to implement intercultural activities in their classrooms (Hoa & Viën, 2019). This gap suggests that while intercultural sensitivity is essential, it must be complemented by appropriate pedagogical strategies and knowledge to translate sensitivity into effective teaching practices (Karanikola, 2025a; Karanikola, 2025b).

The results of the present study, showing a strong correlation between cross-cultural sensitivity and the engagement subscale (r = 0.912, p < 0.001), are in line with the research of Chen and Starosta (2000), which highlighted engagement as a key factor of cross-cultural sensitivity. However, on the subscale of confidence in interaction, the mean of the participants' mean was lower than the others, indicating that they have a reduced sense of confidence in their interpersonal relationships with students from different cultural backgrounds. Instructional development programs reported in the above research that incorporate elements of intercultural communication can help to enhance confidence between teachers and students by strengthening their ability to build relationships based on understanding and respect.

While the present study indicated a negative correlation between Intercultural Sensitivity and the Respect subscale (r = -0.616, p < 0.001), the study by Ruiz-Bernardo et al. (2024) showed a positive correlation. This difference may be due to the different cultural context of the participants. In some cultural contexts, respect is associated with equality and acceptance, while in others it may be seen as strict adherence to traditional or hierarchical rules and identified with obedience and authority. This perception may not be conducive to intercultural sensitivity, which implies flexibility and acceptance of diversity.

The relationship between intercultural sensitivity and demographics is a multifaceted area of research that highlights how various demographic factors, such as age, gender, ethnicity and educational background, affect people's ability to engage with and understand different cultures. Ghamarnia et al. (2016) investigated how ethnic background, age, and gender among Iranian teachers correlate with their levels of cross-cultural sensitivity, suggesting that these demographic factors play a critical role in shaping an individual's sensitivity to cultural differences. In the present study, there appears to be a negative moderate correlation between intercultural sensitivity and age, i.e., as age increases, intercultural sensitivity tends to decrease, which may reflect differences in experiences or attitudes between different age groups. Gender differences in intercultural sensitivity have been an issue of debate. However, according to Karanikola and Balias (2015) and Ertürk (2023), gender does not seem to affect the results of the scale.

Academic background also plays a key role in the development of intercultural sensitivity. For example, Karasu et al. (2021) found that nursing students who had greater exposure to diverse patient populations showed higher levels of cross-cultural sensitivity, suggesting that practical



experiences in multicultural settings enhance sensitivity. Similarly, Çiloğlan & Bardakçi (2019) noted that students with higher academic performance in English language studies showed greater intercultural sensitivity, supporting the idea that educational experiences contribute significantly to this competency. However, in this study there was no strong relationship between intercultural sensitivity and the level of study of the participating teachers. In conclusion, regarding demographics and their relationship with intercultural sensitivity which did not show strong correlations in this study, there are also other factors which in future research could provide important information, such as the impact of socioeconomic status and cultural background.

#### 4. Conclusion

In summary, the present research highlighted the close relationship between intercultural sensitivity and educational effectiveness, emphasizing the importance of developing skills and knowledge that promote intercultural communication. The findings suggest that, despite differences in cultural and demographic characteristics, intercultural sensitivity remains a critical factor in creating positive learning environments that promote understanding among students and support children's right to experience inclusion and equity in education. However, the need to combine this sensitivity with appropriate pedagogical practices becomes evident, and the integration of experiential learning and structured curriculum development programs can enhance teachers' capacity to respond to the challenges of multicultural classrooms.

The limitations of the research could not be omitted when interpreting the results. The limited number of participants and their geographical or cultural homogeneity may affect the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the use of questionnaires as the main data collection tool may have limited the accuracy of responses due to possible subjectivity or socially desirable responses. Finally, the lack of a longitudinal approach does not allow for the study of the evolution of intercultural sensitivity over time. Future research could focus on investigating intercultural sensitivity in larger and more heterogeneous samples, as well as on developing and evaluating educational programs that incorporate intercultural skills. At the same time, conducting longitudinal studies could shed light on the dynamic evolution of intercultural sensitivity in different cultural and educational contexts. Finally, an emphasis on the practical application of the findings may enhance the link between theory and practice, promoting effective interaction in multicultural settings.

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## VIII. Preparing Active Citizens in the AI Era

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### Abstract

According to the Council of Europe (2022), digital citizenship is the ability to participate actively, systematically and responsibly in online and physical communities, using digital technologies. In the modern era, where the daily use of technology has increased rapidly and AI is part of it, we have to talk about a digital world, where citizens and especially children have to find their place in it. The preparation of young people for their safe entry into the digital world through the internet should be the main objective of education, focusing on the cultivation and development of the appropriate *values, attitudes, skills and knowledge* necessary for their safe existence, protecting their rights and information as well as the rights and information of all those who coexist with them. The need for digital literacy is therefore emerging, including competences variously referred to as computer literacy, ICT literacy, information literacy, AI literacy and media literacy (UNESCO, 2018). This presentation aims to highlight the important role of the academic and research community in preparing both teachers/educators and parents and children themselves to meet the challenges of the new digital era by approaching their access to it in a critical way, so that they are able to defend their democratic rights and promote the values of human rights, democracy and the rule of law in cyberspace. At the same time, the use of AI technologies in educational contexts is something that will emerge due to its direct link to digital citizenship education, according to the Council of Europe (Committee of Ministers, 2019).

**KEYWORDS:** Digital Citizenship Education; Human Rights Education; AI Literacy; Digital Literacy

## 1. Introduction

This research assumes that the concept of Citizenship is an integral part of the individual's identity, which presupposes both the acquisition of appropriate knowledge and the adoption of values, attitudes, and behaviors (Council of Europe, 2018) that lead to an active and mature participation in the social and economic fabric of the country. Nowadays, we can talk about a rapid development of technology, where its use is an integral part of everyday life for the majority of citizens. Especially children, from an early age, become familiar with electronic devices and acquire a digital citizenship that adults or/and elder people often lack. However, even if children today are digital citizens, often more fluent in new technologies than adults, they often struggle to evaluate sources and understand online content in context. At the same time, the digital environment can shape children's lives in many ways, creating opportunities and risks to their well-being and enjoyment of human rights. Thus, the need to cultivate digital literacy among citizens, especially children and youth, therefore seems more necessary than ever, in order for them to feel safe and informed in the digital world in which they live.

Referring to a digital world, we are also talking about a digital citizen, who, according to the Council of Europe (2019), uses technology **safely, ethically, and responsibly**, protecting **their rights and information**, as well as the rights and information of all those who participate in the digital world. Reference is therefore made to preparing individuals from an early age to coexist with others with respect and responsibility in a world that is now digital, knowing their rights and, at the same time, their obligations. This preparation must begin at an early age through education, and more specifically through Digital Citizenship Education, which, as we will analyze below, refers to the cultivation and development of the appropriate *values, attitudes, skills and knowledge* necessary for their safe existence, protecting their rights and information as well as the rights and information of all those who coexist with them. Thus, part of the Digital Citizenship Education is the creation of digital literacy, including competences variously referred to as computer literacy, ICT literacy, information literacy, AI literacy and media literacy (UNESCO, 2018, 2021).

In this paper, we will focus on the design of AI literacy, as part of the Digital Citizenship Education due to the significant and rapid development in the field, which attracted the interest of the scientific community and being a topic of discussion. Artificial Intelligence (AI) offers many opportunities in various areas, including Education, however there are challenges and risks that have to be taken into consideration. Recently we had the publication of EU AI Act, the first legal framework on AI, which addresses the risks of AI and positions Europe to play a leading role globally. EU AI Act aims to establish a framework for the AI use in various fields, while highlighting the need for education and training in this area, as it is a new and constantly evolving field for all of us and especially children. The need for education and training of citizens from a young age therefore lies with the academic and scientific community, which must first investigate the needs and then prepare citizens, especially young people, for the contemporary social and technological challenges of the era. With a view to protecting citizens and their fundamental rights online, the Digital Service Act (DSA) was published, setting out rules, part of which concern the protection of children's rights online. DSA aims to ensure user safety, to protect fundamental rights, and to create a fair and open online platform environment. This happens through imposing greater accountability on the biggest platforms to remove illegal content such as hate speech and disinformation and tackle risks to children.

Recognizing the need of investigating citizens, especially young people, familiarization with AI as well as involving them in the discussion about AI, the European funded program YouthGovAI<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>YouthGovAI has been funded with the support of the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union. Project Number: 2023-2-DE04-KA220-YOU-000176952. (<https://youthgovai.eu/>).

focuses on young people's attitudes and experiences towards the use of Artificial Intelligence as part of their daily lives. To investigate this dimension, a questionnaire was designed and distributed to young people among four European countries. In this paper, the results of the greek survey will be presented highlighting the need for preparation of the young people for this change as well as to empower them to actively shape European AI Governance.

## 2. Digital Citizenship Education

The concept of Citizenship directly related to the set of rights and obligations that every citizen ought to have, as an active and equal member of both the country in which he or she lives and the world in general (Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz, Zalewska & Karakatsani, 2017). A brief interpretation that could be given to it is that *'Citizenship is the perception of belonging to a society'*. The first to speak about citizenship and its direct connection with human rights was T.H. Marshall. Through his work, T. H. Marshall (2001) defines citizenship as *"a social status conferred on all those who are full members of a community"*, characterized by equality in terms of their rights and obligations towards the state. John J. Cogan & Ray Derricott (1998) attribute the concept of Citizenship to five basic characteristics: *i. a sense of identity; ii. the enjoyment of certain rights; iii. the fulfillment of required obligations (rights ↔ obligations); iv. the cultivation of interest as well as a willingness to engage in public affairs; and finally, v. the acceptance of basic social values*. However, reflecting on the diversity of each era and the needs that it constantly generates, Kennedy (2020, p. 33) understands that the concept can be understood through different dimensions and forms, which he categorizes as follows: *i. participation in political activities; ii. participation in voluntary activities; iii. participation in activities that tend to change political and social dimensions; iv. participation in self-regulated activities*.

Thus, citizenship is a status and a set of rights and obligations and according to the Council of Europe (2005), being a citizen means full participation in society. The preparation of the individual for active participation and action is therefore particularly demanding and must be achieved, as already mentioned, in the context of the educational process and must take place mainly at an early age. Since the mid-1990s, an effort began to take place in the field of education to strengthen citizenship education, which set as its main priority the preparation and, above all, the familiarization of students with everything they should know and be able to do given their assumption of their civic role and their action in a national, European and international context. In an attempt to make the reference framework of citizenship education clearer, it is divided into three main categories of education (Kerr, 1999):

- education **about** citizenship
- education **through** citizenship, and
- education **for** citizenship

In the context of an increasingly interconnected and complex global society, citizenship education has taken on new dimensions and significance (Danju & Uzunboylu, 2016). Since 2019, the role and objectives of citizenship education have evolved to address contemporary challenges such as globalization, digital citizenship, environmental sustainability, and social justice movements. These developments reflect a growing need to prepare individuals to navigate and engage with the diverse and rapidly changing political, social, and technological landscapes (Kennedy, 2013). Nowadays, due to the rapid development of technology, the discussion about citizenship education includes also the field of Digital Citizenship Education which aims to empower learners of all ages through education or the acquisition of competences for learning and active participation in a digital society to exercise and defend their democratic rights and responsibilities online, and to promote and protect human rights, democracy and the rule of law in cyberspace (Council of Europe, 2022). Thus, the goal of Digital Citizenship Education (DCE) is

to provide young citizens with innovative opportunities to develop the values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge necessary for every citizen to participate fully and assume their responsibilities in society.

Part of the Digital Citizenship education is digital literacy, which is the ability to access, manage, understand, integrate, communicate, evaluate, and create information safely and appropriately through digital technologies for employment, decent work, and entrepreneurship. It encompasses skills that are variously referred to as computer literacy, ICT literacy, information literacy, AI literacy and media literacy (UNESCO, 2018, 2021). Talking about digital technology, we refer to the technology used in modern devices to transmit certain data in a specific way, like websites, smartphones, video streaming (e.g. Skype, Messenger, etc.), ebooks, etc. The Council of Europe (2022) recognizing the potential risks that children and young people presence in a digital world may face, it mentions certain digital citizenship competences. The competences comprise ten (10) different domains of activity under three umbrellas:

(1) **being online** (access & inclusion, learning & creativity, media & information literacy)

(2) **well-being online** (ethics & empathy, health & wellbeing, epresence & communications)

(3) **rights online** (active participation, Rights & Responsibilities, privacy & security, consumer awareness)

Part of the Secretary General's Strategic Framework of the Council of Europe for 2021-2025 in order to prevent discrimination and protect the vulnerable groups, including children, was the Strategy for the Rights of the Child 2022-2027 (Council of Europe, 2022). The Strategy aims at developing actions supporting relevant provisions of this Strategic Framework as well as Protecting human rights, democracy and the rule of law in the digital environment. As highlighted in the challenges, although our mission is to provide an equal and accessible education to all children, there is a lack of equal access to technologies as well as Digital citizenship and media education is still not sufficiently provided for children, carers, professionals and volunteers working with children. Children are aware of this gap and perceive a need to be engaged more proactively in the regulation, design and innovative use of the digital environment and technology. At the same time, children as early adopters of technology, increasingly interact with AI systems as part of their everyday life through various platforms and services they use for education, entertainment, social interactions and more. This makes the need of equal access of all children to AI and Data literacy important, and also prioritizes the need to safeguard children from any kind of vulnerabilities they face in the digital environment, including AI systems' use in education.

Specifically, in 2019, the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers adopted a recommendation on Digital Citizenship Education in which a key focus was the application of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in educational contexts. It mentions the opportunities as well as the threats that AI offers and highlights that "*...developments in the AI field can **deeply impact interactions between educators and learners and among citizens at large, which may undermine the very core of education, that is, the fostering of free will and independent and critical thinking via learning opportunities. Although it seems premature to make wider use of AI in learning environments, professionals in education and school staff should be made aware of AI and the ethical challenges it poses in the context of schools***" (Council of Europe 2019). Reference is therefore made to the need for teachers/educators and those working in the field of education to be informed and trained in the use of AI and, above all, its ethical challenges in this field. At the same time, the Council of Europe recognizes the importance of addressing issues related to data privacy, algorithmic transparency, and bias mitigation in the context of AI in education, and aims to ensure that the adoption of AI systems is aligned with human rights values and respects the dignity of every student.

The EU's Artificial Intelligence Act (AI Act), as already mentioned, is the first legal framework on AI, which addresses the risks of AI in various domains of use. Specifically, it defines four levels of risk for AI systems: *unacceptable, high, limited, and minimal (or no) risk*, referring different regulations and requirements for each of them. Focusing in the field of Education, the only reference in the document is in Annex III, where additional areas, including *education and vocational training* (such as student assessment in educational institutions), would classify autonomous AI systems as *high-risk*. Recognizing the high risk of AI systems use in Education, the UNICEF Global Learning Innovation Hub in collaboration with other partners<sup>2</sup> have developed the EdTech for Good Framework, a comprehensive tool that aims to identify and evaluate high-quality EdTech solutions that improve learning outcomes for children worldwide. EdTech for Good Framework prioritizes evidence, data security and adaptability and it is structured around five core pillars that contribute to the overall assessment of EdTech solutions: i. safety, ii. impact of learning, iii. designed for Children, iv. ready to reach all, and v. leave no one behind (Learning Cabinet, 2024).

At the same time, the Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027) is a renewed European Union (EU) policy initiative that sets out a common vision of high-quality, inclusive and accessible digital education in Europe, and aims to support the adaptation of the education and training systems of Member States to the digital age. The Digital Education Action Plan sets two priorities:

- Priority 1: *Fostering the development of a high-performing digital education ecosystem*, including digital education and training as well as digital education content framework and ethical guidelines on AI use

- Priority 2: *Enhancing digital skills and competences for the digital transformation*, including common guidelines for teachers and educators to foster digital literacy and tackle disinformation through education and training as well as recommendations on improving the provision of digital skills in education and training

We therefore understand that the contribution of digital education seems more crucial than ever, and that all educational institutions, including Universities and Research Centers, must contribute to this effort. However, in order to highlight the need for education in this field as well as to prioritize the design of AI literacy, it is important to understand the knowledge and attitudes of citizens themselves, especially young people, in this field. Next, as already mentioned, we will present some of the data collected in the context of the European funded project YouthGovAI.

### 3. Survey's results

The YouthGovAI project aims to empower young people to play an active role in shaping European AI governance. The key objectives of it include: i. enhancing the capabilities of educators in the non-formal educational sector; ii. improving the AI literacy among young people; iii. increasing their representation in AI governance discussions, and iv. disseminating information on AI's societal impact. In order to better understand youth's knowledge about AI as well as their attitude towards AI use, an online survey was conducted from April to May 2025. Following, we will attempt to present some of the key results (Katsamori, et al. 2025).

The YouthGovAI survey addressed to youth in Greece collected 56 responses. The majority of respondents (51.8%) were aged above 21 years old, while 26.8% belonged to the age group 19–21 years old. A smaller segment, comprising 19.6% of the sample, were aged between 16 and 18 years old, and just a 1.8% referred to youth aged between 13-15 years old. From an educational standpoint, the majority of the respondents (over 78.5%) had completed upper secondary education or were pursuing tertiary education, such as bachelor's or master's degrees.

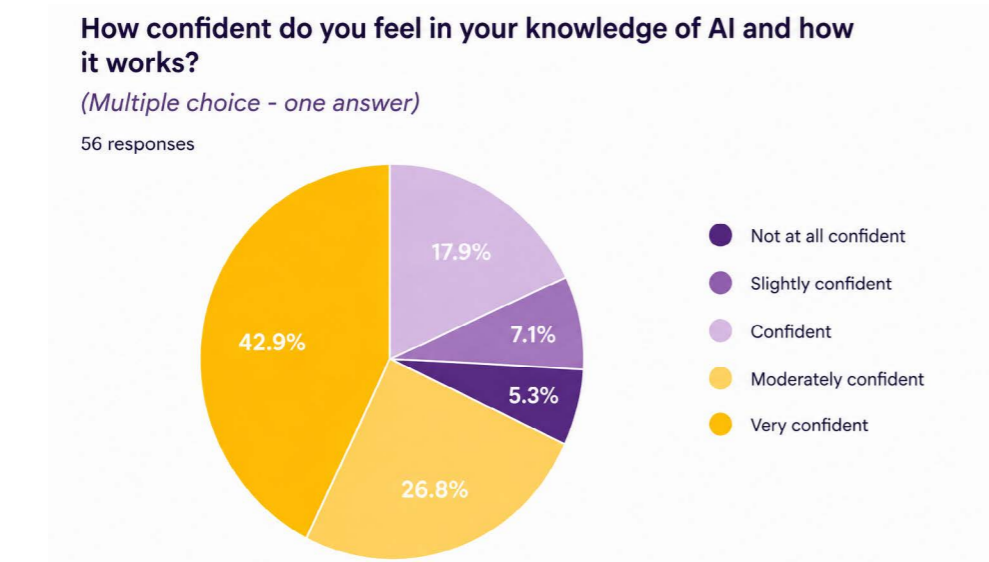
When participants asked whether they were familiar with the term 'Artificial Intelligence' (AI), 75% of the respondents reported that they had heard the term and were able to explain what it

<sup>2</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs Finland, ARM, Asian Development Bank and transdisciplinary partners across the EdTech industry.

meant. An additional 23.2% stated that they had encountered the term without fully understanding it and as the first comes to mind when thinking about AI, the most common responses included: ChatGPT (about 1/3 of the respondents), robots, technology, computer, automation, algorithms, data, and technological progress, respect, education, tik tok.

Concerning their self-assessed confidence about knowledge of AI and understanding how it works, according to Figure 1, the majority (42.9%) described themselves as 'moderately confident'.

Figure 1. How confident do you feel in your knowledge of AI and how it works?



At the same time, the majority of the respondents (33.9%) answered that they use AI technologies on a daily basis (Figure 2), part of its use is related to education (e.g. for school or academic work) (Figure 3).

Figure 2. How frequently do you use AI technologies in your everyday life?

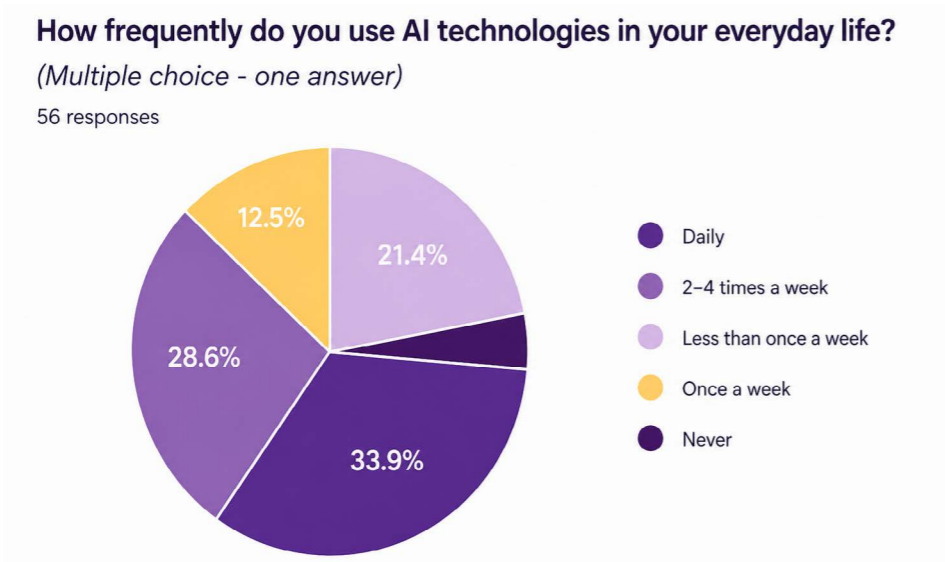
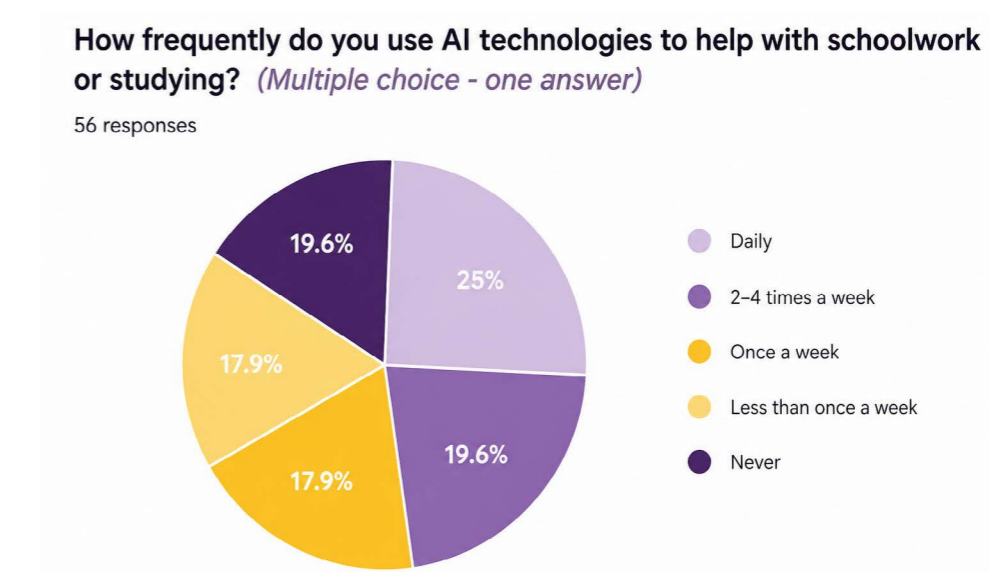
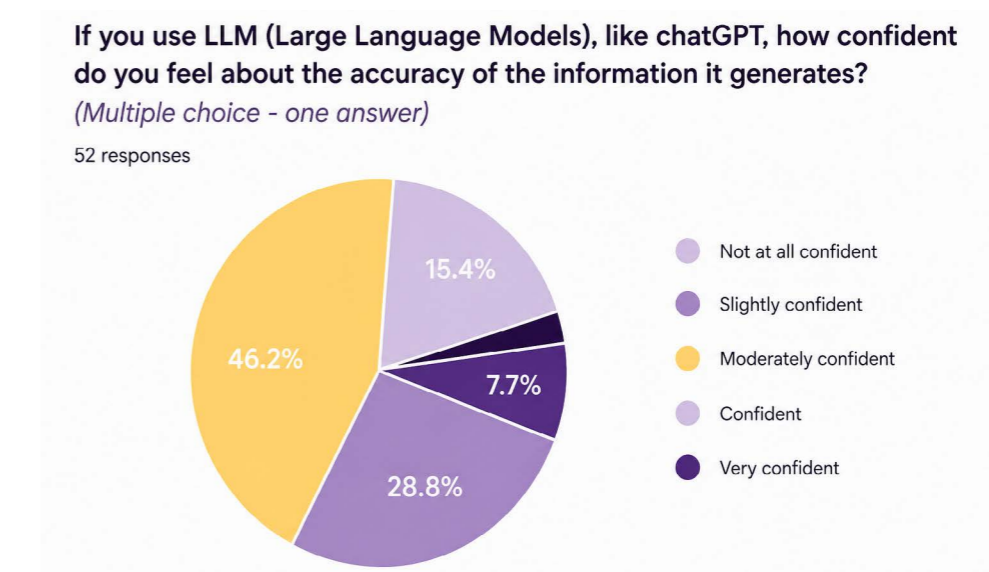


Figure 3. How frequently do you use AI technologies to help with schoolwork or studying?



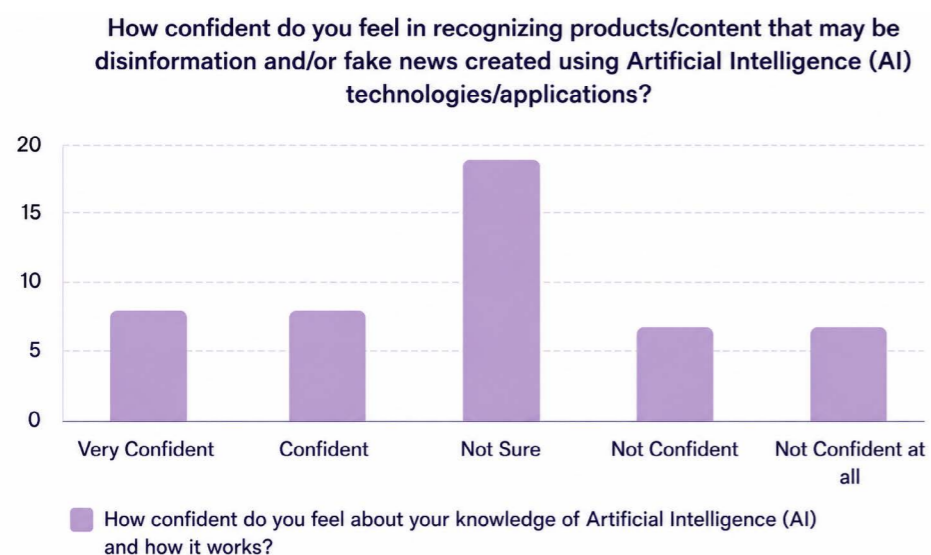
The next two questions included the phenomenon of misinformation, recognizing it as a threat to Democracy in the developing world. When they asked about their confidence about the quality and accuracy of information they receive when interacting with LLM-powered apps/chatbots, like ChatGPT, the majority demonstrated a moderate or low level of confidence (Figure 4).

Figure 4. If you use LLM, like chatGPT, how confident do you feel about the accuracy of the information it generates?



At the same time, the same uncertainty, they express when they asked to express their confidence about recognizing AI-generated disinformation or/and fake news (Figure 5).

Figure 5. How confident do you feel in recognizing products/content that may be disinformation and/or fake news created using AI technologies/applications?



#### 4. Conclusions

Survey's results provide compelling evidence that AI is part of young people everyday life, however this familiarity is not consistent with their personal knowledge and the cultivation of the necessary skills and competences in the field. The findings of the study showed that young people do not feel safe and confident in their understanding of how AI systems works and, at the same time, do not seem to approach the whole subject critically. A finding that should awake us up and make us think about the danger we pose every day to citizens, especially young people, through their interaction with AI systems without being able to effectively protect themselves from its dangers. As already mentioned, the challenges of the AI use we have to face nowadays varies. However, they could be categorized as both technological and non-technological ones; i. the first category is linked to the technical aspects of AI systems, including data quality and bias, privacy concerns, transparency and explainability, accountability, etc., and, ii. the second one is linked to the socio-technical aspects of AI systems, including ethical considerations, impact on social values, protection of human/children rights, etc.

Digital Citizenship Education aims to create an inclusive and democratic framework by i. ensuring a high level of privacy, safety and security for minors/youth online (addictive mechanisms); ii. preparing youth to consume information critically (combat disinformation); iii. making teachers/educators to re-think teaching methods for making learning process more attractive to all; iv. combating against any kind of stereotypical believes; v. empowering all students to be interested in new technologies; vi. encouraging students & teachers/educators to improve and cultivate their e-skills; and vii. awaring teachers/educators to be informed about AI policies and initiatives. The role of academic and research community has to work to that direction in order to ensure that all citizens, especially children and youth, have the same access to knowledge as well as prepare them in a way to approach it in a critical way. At the same time, the members of the academic and research community are among the key actors in the discussions on the development of a reference framework for the use of AI systems in various sectors including education aiming to safeguard and protect human rights and children rights in the digital world as well as to defend the core European values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

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## IX. The Role of the University in Safeguarding the Rights of Roma Children

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### Abstract

Roma children, among Europe's most marginalized populations, face systemic discrimination in access to education, healthcare, and social services. Universities hold a unique position of influence, not only as educational institutions but also as actors of social justice, policy research, and community engagement. Within this context, our presentation will analyse the role of universities in this field. This analysis explores the multiple roles universities can play in safeguarding the rights of Roma children, focusing on education, advocacy, research, and partnership with local communities. More specifically we will refer to a study and research project conducted by the Laboratory for the Study of Gender, Inequalities, and Discrimination of the Department of Social and Educational Policy, in connection with the teaching of the course Policy for Childhood Protection within the same department. The research focuses on monitoring the problems and difficulties faced by this specific group in the educational process and on exploring proposals and solutions.

**KEYWORDS:** Roma children; University; Children's Rights; Inclusive Policies

## 1. Introduction

Across Central and Eastern Europe, Roma children continue to face systemic discrimination and exclusion within education systems, denying them their fundamental right to quality education. Despite years of international focus and numerous policy initiatives, the educational attainment gap between Roma and non-Roma children remains alarmingly wide. In many countries, fewer than 20% of Roma children complete primary education, in stark contrast to over 90% of their non-Roma peers (UNICEF, 2011; Surdu & Kovats, 2009, FRA-European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2024). The situation worsens at higher levels: in South-Eastern Europe, only 18% of Roma children enroll in secondary school, and fewer than 1% access university-level education (World Bank, 2012). These figures highlight not only a deep educational divide but also a pattern of persistent marginalization. Such disparities are not isolated issue, they reflect systemic and institutional exclusion that undermines Roma children's opportunities for personal, social, and economic development.

Roma children face significant educational barriers rooted in institutionalized racism and deep-seated structural inequality. Social science research has highlighted both explicit and subtle forms of discrimination within schools, including bullying, stereotyping, and consistently low expectations from educators (Brüggemann, 2012). One of the most damaging practices is the unjustified segregation of Roma students into substandard or special education tracks (Friedman, 2014). In addition, many schools are unprepared to meet the linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic needs of Roma communities. Teachers often lack training in inclusive teaching methods that support diverse learners, and school curricula frequently overlook Roma history and identity, contributing to a sense of exclusion (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights [FRA], 2020). The persistent exclusion of Roma children from quality education not only reinforces cycles of poverty and marginalization but also represents a clear violation of international human rights obligations. Binding frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Education for All (EFA) initiative, and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) require states to guarantee inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all children—particularly those who are most disadvantaged (UNESCO, 2021). However, despite formally endorsing these agreements, many European governments have fallen short in implementing meaningful reforms. This disconnect between policy commitments and practical outcomes has been consistently criticized by civil society organizations, international monitoring bodies, and Roma advocacy groups, who point to a persistent lack of political will and accountability in addressing the deep-rooted educational exclusion of Roma communities (European Roma Rights Centre [ERRC], 2007; Amnesty International, 2015).

The Committee on the Rights of the Child has repeatedly raised concerns regarding the persistently low levels of birth registration among Roma communities, a condition with far-reaching consequences (UNICEF, 2011). Without official identity documentation, many Roma children are rendered invisible within state systems, facing denial of citizenship, which in turn bars them from accessing fundamental civil and social rights—such as obtaining a passport, national ID, or participating in democratic processes like voting (FRA, 2020). More critically, the absence of birth certificates deprives children of legal protection under child labor laws, anti-trafficking statutes, and legislation addressing early marriage and sexual exploitation (UNICEF, 2011). In times of crisis, unregistered children are less likely to receive emergency protection or reunification services, further exacerbating their vulnerability (UNHCR & Plan International, 2012).

The lack of legal identity directly contributes to lower school enrolment and delayed entry into compulsory education. When children are not recognized in official registries, they often miss

out on early childhood services and educational opportunities, perpetuating cycles of exclusion and marginalization (UNESCO, 2015). This barrier is compounded by high rates of poverty among Roma families, which limits their capacity to afford school-related expenses such as transportation, uniforms, books, and meals (World Bank, 2012). Economic necessity often forces Roma children to abandon school prematurely—boys may enter informal labor markets, while girls are more likely to assume domestic roles or face early marriage and motherhood, severely constraining their educational prospects (Friedman, 2014; Matache, 2017). Living conditions in isolated, overcrowded, and under-serviced Roma settlements further limit access to quality education. Such environments often lack electricity, study space, and access to hygiene and nutrition, making it difficult for children to engage in learning or complete assignments (Reicher, 2020).

It is also essential to acknowledge that the Roma population is not a monolithic group. Significant internal diversity exists along lines of geographical origin, tribal affiliation, language, religion, occupation, economic status, and residential patterns. Some communities remain largely distinct from both the majority population and other Roma groups, while others have undergone varying degrees of adaptation, though rarely full assimilation. This diversity complicates efforts to address educational exclusion and underscores the need for context-specific, culturally sensitive policies (Matache, 2017). Moreover, Roma identity itself is often unclaimed, especially among more educated individuals, due to the stigma and discrimination attached to it. This highlights the importance of fostering environments where Roma identity can be safely and confidently expressed.

The Roma, Europe's largest and most marginalized ethnic minority, continue to face profound and interlocking barriers to accessing quality education. These challenges are rooted in a long history of discrimination, institutional neglect, and systemic poverty. Although European and international legal frameworks—such as the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child—affirm the right of every child to education, Roma children remain among the most disadvantaged student populations across the continent (UNICEF, 2011; European Commission, 2020). One of the most pervasive forms of educational exclusion is the segregation of Roma students in school systems. Many Roma children are placed in Roma-majority schools located in socially and economically segregated neighborhoods, where infrastructure is poor, teaching resources are scarce, and academic expectations are low (FRA, 2020; ERRC, 2007). The ongoing exclusion of Roma children from quality education represents a profound social injustice and policy failure. It undermines the principles of equality, violates international legal commitments, and weakens social cohesion across Europe. Governments must move beyond rhetoric and adopt comprehensive, evidence-based reforms that center inclusion, equity, and dignity for all learners. Beyond moral and legal obligations, inclusive education presents a strategic opportunity to enhance learning outcomes and build more equitable and cohesive societies.

Poverty remains a fundamental driver of educational exclusion. Many Roma families live in extreme poverty, often in informal settlements without access to electricity, clean water, or sanitation (World Bank, 2012). Such living conditions make school attendance difficult and limit children's ability to study or complete homework. Additionally, children are frequently expected to contribute to household income through informal labor or caregiving responsibilities, further disrupting their education (Friedman, 2014). These disadvantages are frequently transmitted across generations; many Roma parents have had little or no formal education themselves and may lack the confidence or knowledge to support their children's schooling (FRA, 2016).

Gender inequality compounds these problems. Roma girls, in particular, face overlapping forms of exclusion stemming from both ethnic discrimination and restrictive gender norms. They

are more likely to leave school early due to domestic responsibilities, early marriage, or social pressures. According to UNICEF (2009), only 64 percent of Roma girls enroll in primary education, compared to over 90 percent of non-Roma girls. Nearly three-quarters of Roma women do not complete primary school, while only one-fifth of women in the majority population experience the same (Matache, 2017). Literacy and educational attainment among Roma girls remain consistently lower than that of both Roma boys and non-Roma peers, reflecting the gendered dimensions of educational exclusion.

Research confirms that mixed classrooms, where children from diverse cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds learn together, foster tolerance, social cohesion, and improved academic performance for all students (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; OECD, 2012). Investing in inclusive education systems is not only a human rights imperative but also a practical approach to breaking cycles of poverty and addressing the root causes of disaffection and instability (Reicher, 2020). Ensuring that Roma children have equal access to education is essential to building a just society where opportunity is not determined by ethnicity or social background.

Another critical issue is the disproportionate placement of Roma children in special education programs. These placements are often made without adequate psychological assessments and are influenced by prejudiced assumptions about Roma children's intellectual capacity (FRA, 2020; Ryder et al., 2014). The quality of these special education environments tends to be significantly lower than that of mainstream education. In Hungary, for example, schools with over 75 percent Roma enrollment reported that 30.8 percent of teachers were unqualified, compared to 17.4 percent in schools with fewer Roma students (Brüggemann, 2012). Many of these educators lack training in multicultural and inclusive pedagogies, limiting their capacity to engage Roma students effectively (Booth & Ainscow, 2011).

The broader quality of education in Roma-majority schools is often poor. These institutions frequently operate with minimal resources, dilapidated facilities, and low teacher morale. National curricula across many European countries remain largely monocultural and often exclude Roma history, language, and cultural contributions, reinforcing Roma children's sense of exclusion and leading to disinterest and early dropout (Reicher, 2020; UNESCO, 2015). Language barriers further exacerbate these educational challenges. Many Roma children speak Romani or other dialects at home and are introduced to the majority language for the first time upon entering school. Without access to bilingual instruction or targeted language support, these students struggle to engage with the curriculum and are often misclassified as having learning difficulties (UNICEF, 2011; FRA, 2020). The lack of cultural sensitivity and inclusive practice within schools can make the educational environment unwelcoming or even hostile, deepening Roma students' alienation (Parthenis & Fragoulis, 2016).

Early childhood education, a critical foundation for academic success, remains largely inaccessible to Roma children. Fewer than half of Roma children in Central and Eastern Europe are enrolled in preschool, which leads to poor school readiness and disadvantages that persist through primary and secondary school (UNICEF, 2011). In South-Eastern Europe, only 18 percent of Roma adolescents attend secondary school, and less than one percent reach tertiary education levels (World Bank, 2012). These statistics are not isolated data points but indicators of systemic failure.

Infrastructure deficits further worsen the educational experience of Roma children. Roma-majority and special schools are often located in unsafe or hazardous areas and housed in deteriorating buildings lacking basic sanitation and heating (UNICEF, 2011; OECD, 2012). Many Roma children arrive at school hungry or unwell, and the absence of integrated support services—such as nutritional programs, psychological counseling, or culturally responsive teaching—

contributes to poor educational outcomes and high absenteeism (FRA, 2020).

Despite the existence of numerous integration strategies and legal obligations, progress remains limited due to weak implementation, inadequate funding, and a lack of accountability. Education systems across Europe often do not collect or publish reliable data disaggregated by ethnicity, making it difficult to track progress or evaluate policies aimed at Roma inclusion (European Commission, 2020). Although inclusive education is widely endorsed in policy discourse, schools often lack the resources, training, or will to dismantle the deeply embedded inequalities that Roma children face (ERRC, 2007). The educational exclusion of Roma children in Europe is not merely a matter of limited access; it is the consequence of entrenched structural inequities and systemic neglect. The intersection of school segregation, poverty, linguistic marginalization, cultural erasure, gender discrimination, and ineffective policy enforcement creates a cycle of exclusion that deprives Roma children of their right to a quality education. Addressing this crisis requires more than rhetorical commitment. It demands targeted investment, comprehensive structural reform, culturally relevant pedagogy, and genuine participation of Roma communities in decision-making processes. Only through coordinated, equity-focused, and sustained action can the right to education be realized for Roma children across Europe.

## 2. Roma in Greece

The Roma population in Greece constitutes a long-established and integral component of the national demographic landscape. As Greek citizens, Roma individuals are, in principle, entitled to the full range of civil, political, social, and economic rights outlined in the Greek Constitution, including access to education, healthcare, housing, and political participation. These rights are grounded in the constitutional principle of equality before the law, as articulated in Article 4 of the Constitution of the Hellenic Republic. However, despite this formal legal framework, Roma communities in Greece continue to face systematic exclusion and marginalization on both institutional and societal levels.

In Greece, the Roma are not officially recognized as an ethnic minority but rather as a vulnerable social group with distinct cultural characteristics and persistent socioeconomic disadvantage. This classification reflects broader European Union policy frameworks that identify Roma as a transnational minority experiencing shared patterns of exclusion, while still allowing for national discretion in minority recognition (European Commission, 2011). Consequently, Greek policy responses to Roma inclusion are framed within a paradigm of social integration, focusing primarily on socioeconomic support rather than cultural or ethnic rights protections (Sobotka & Vermeersch, 2012).

Despite their legal citizenship, Roma in Greece continue to experience substantial structural barriers, including high poverty levels, residential segregation, unemployment, limited educational attainment, and inadequate access to public services. The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA, 2016) has identified Greek Roma as among the most socioeconomically deprived Roma populations in the EU. Their marginalization is further reinforced by the spatial and self-identification criteria employed in policy design, particularly in EU-funded programs. These criteria, while operationally useful, can contribute to the reification of Roma identity as synonymous with poverty or deviance, and thus perpetuate exclusionary narratives (Council of Europe, 2012; United Nations, 2007; Nika, 2020; Tzifakis & Tsardanidis, 2006).

Programs such as the National Roma Integration Strategy (NRIS) and earlier Integrated Action Plans, though well-intentioned, have faced chronic implementation challenges. Evaluations by the European Commission (2019) and the Greek Ombudsman (2018) highlight issues such as poor inter-ministerial coordination, insufficient Roma participation, weak monitoring mechanisms, and

inadequate resource allocation. Bureaucratic inertia and anti-Roma bias among public officials and local communities continue to impede progress (Kambouri & Tastsoglou, 2011; Gkofa, 2022).

In education, targeted interventions like the “Education of Roma Children” project have sought to address exclusion through intercultural programs and reception classes funded by the European Social Fund. However, as Georgiadis and Zisimos (2012) have shown, these initiatives often suffer from lack of continuity, limited community ownership, and minimal impact on enrolment and retention. The National Strategy for Roma Social Inclusion 2021–2030 represents a more integrated and strategic response to these longstanding issues. It embraces an intersectoral and rights-based approach aligned with the EU Roma Strategic Framework for Equality, Inclusion and Participation 2020–2030 (European Commission, 2020). The Greek Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (2023) emphasizes that the strategy links interventions across education, employment, health, housing, and civic participation, reflecting an understanding of the multidimensional nature of Roma deprivation. Active Roma participation is central to this framework, marking a departure from welfare-oriented approaches toward empowerment and shared decision-making (Vermeersch, 2012; O’Nions, 2011).

To institutionalize inclusion and accountability, the strategy outlines participatory governance mechanisms such as local action groups, Roma representation in monitoring bodies, and community-based initiatives. It also includes anti-discrimination measures—such as intercultural mediators in public services and training for civil servants and educators—that respond to critiques by the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC, 2019) and the Greek Ombudsman regarding systemic racism and exclusion. The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed existing inequalities within Roma communities, with overcrowded housing, poor sanitation, and lack of digital access compounding their vulnerability (FRA, 2020). The national strategy incorporates pandemic-specific emergency relief alongside structural responses to these systemic gaps.

A notable innovation is the strategy’s emphasis on robust statistical mapping, developed in collaboration with ELSTAT (Hellenic Statistical Authority), to overcome the historically fragmented and unreliable data on Roma populations. This shift toward evidence-based policy allows for more precise targeting and monitoring (FRA, 2016; European Commission, 2020). Tailor-made local interventions, based on needs assessments and stakeholder engagement, reflect this commitment to localized and adaptive implementation (Greek Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, 2021). The strategy also fosters partnerships with organizations like UNICEF Greece, ensuring alignment with international child rights standards (UNICEF, 2021; Council of Europe, 2020). Its child- and youth-focused measures promote empowerment, agency, and leadership, drawing from Article 12 of the UNCRC and the broader EU Framework on Roma youth participation (UNCRC, 1989; European Commission, 2020). The strategy’s gender-sensitive lens highlights the multiple layers of discrimination experienced by Roma women and girls, addressing their civic marginalization through targeted education, leadership, and advocacy initiatives (Amnesty International, 2021).

Institutionalized stakeholder consultation represents another key structural strength. Through ongoing dialogue with Roma communities, civil society, and local authorities, the strategy attempts to embed inclusivity and accountability across the policy cycle, reflecting recommendations from the ERRC and Council of Europe (ERRC, 2019; Council of Europe, 2012). Finally, the inclusion of performance indicators and feedback loops reflects a shift from ad hoc interventions to a results-based management model with the potential for long-term transformation (OECD, 2018; Greek Ombudsman, 2018). Nevertheless, education remains one of the most pressing challenges for Roma inclusion. The right to education, as codified in Articles 28 and 29 of the UNCRC, and further elaborated in General Comment No. 12, emphasizes quality, non-discrimination, and child agency as foundational principles (CRC Committee, 2009). These

obligations are reinforced by the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), whose General Recommendation No. 27 (2000) calls for targeted anti-exclusion policies for Roma communities.

In areas such as Examilia and Zevgolateio in the Corinthia region, Roma children continue to face severe disadvantages that hinder their access to and success in education. Studies indicate that poor infrastructure, inadequate school transport, cultural disengagement, and untrained educators create environments in which Roma students are alienated and underserved (Georgiadis & Zisimos, 2012). Poverty and gender also play a significant role, with Roma girls particularly affected by early school leaving, domestic burdens, and early marriage (Strataki & Petrogiannis, 2021). Language barriers and culturally insensitive diagnostic tools often lead to misdiagnosis and overrepresentation of Roma children in special education, compounding disadvantage and exclusion (Tzouriadou et al., 2019). Environmental factors, including unsafe neighborhoods, lack of basic utilities, and the absence of learning spaces—further inhibit educational progress. Schools themselves may be hostile environments marked by bullying, social stigma, and teacher prejudice (Amnesty International, 2021). Despite these challenges, evidence shows that Roma children thrive in supportive, inclusive, and culturally responsive educational environments. Studies by FRA (2014), OECD (2012), and the Council of Europe (2012) highlight the success of models that incorporate intercultural curricula, Roma teaching assistants, mentorship programs, and parental engagement. Holistic approaches addressing nutrition, health, and well-being, as advocated by the CRC Committee in General Comment No. 1 (2001), are necessary to ensure that education is accessible and meaningful.

In Greece, systemic reform is required to embed intercultural education, anti-racist mandates, educator training, and inclusive infrastructure across the school system. Educational desegregation must occur alongside broader poverty reduction and housing interventions, in line with CERD’s call for intersectional solutions. The international legal framework provides clear guidance, but sustained political will, coordinated implementation, and genuine Roma participation are critical to transforming Roma children’s right to education from aspiration into reality.

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## X. Academic Performance and Inclusion in a Greek Multilingual Classroom: A Culturally Responsive Teaching Perspective

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### Abstract

The last consecutive years much research has been conducted on Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) internationally due to the intense waves of migrant crisis all over the world. CRT focuses on cultivating cultural competence incorporating cultural traits of the refugee/migrant students aiming at a respectful and supportive environment. Families' involvement and higher expectations are two other major characteristics that assist students reach their full potential academically and socially. This research utilized qualitative interviews with open-ended questions with nine educators that work in Greek multilingual classrooms across Greece to investigate the implementation of CRT in Greek intercultural schools, DYEP and ZEP classes and how the Greek teachers embraced their learners' diversity. The findings indicate that CRT is highly associated with students' inclusion and academic performance helping them adapt to the new environment more easily and creating opportunities to be active participants in the learning process. Research results also reveals the challenges educators face while using CRT mentioning lack of training, language barrier and limited resources as the most common ones and suggestions are offered for its successful implementation in the Greek contexts in the future.

**KEYWORDS:** Culturally Responsive Teaching; Inclusion; Academic outcomes; Greek multilingual classrooms

## 1. Introduction

In the 21st century, global crises such as warfare, political instability and economic hardship have intensified migration, with thousands seeking better living conditions. Greece is one of the European countries that welcomed a great number of these populations. In 2025 30.000 out of the 120.000 refugees that Greece hosts are children (Greek Council for Refugees, 2025). The influx of refugee and migrant students highlights differences with teachers, due to distinct linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Many newcomers face language barriers (Celik et al., 2021; Ndibalema, 2024) and low academic outcomes linked to vulnerability or disparities (Aghajafari et al., 2020). Therefore, educators need to adopt multicultural approaches. Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) is considered essential for addressing such diversity (Szlachta & Champion, 2019). It fosters inclusive environments by incorporating students' cultural backgrounds, involving families and communities (Bachtsiavanou et al., 2023), and promoting cultural awareness and critical thinking (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Au, 2007). Students' identities are treated as assets, supporting both academic success and belonging.

This paper examines the role of CRT in intercultural schools, DYEP and ZEP classes in Greece. DYEPs are pre-integration classrooms designed to enhance students' cognitive, while providing psychosocial support and helping them adapt to school routines, teaching practices, and institutional rules (Galani & Stavrinidis, 2022). In addition to DYEPs, Zones of Educational Priority (ZEP) serve refugee, migrant and repatriated students with limited or no knowledge of Greek and function as parallel classrooms. While several studies in Greece have explored refugee education and language acquisition, few have investigated how CRT principles are implemented within both intercultural schools and DYEP/ZEP classes. CRT's impact on academic outcomes and inclusion is also examined, addressing the following research questions (RQs).

RQ1: Is CRT methodology implemented in Greek multilingual classrooms?

RQ2: Does it impact academic performance and inclusion of plurilingual students?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 An Introduction to Culturally Responsive Teaching

Banks (1989) was among the first to propose curriculum changes and innovative teaching methods for culturally and linguistically diverse students. Later, Gay (2000) defined Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) as an approach that incorporates students' cultural references and real-life experiences into learning to promote equity and empower them intellectually, socially, and emotionally. Over the years, similar concepts have emerged, including *Culturally Relevant Pedagogy* (Ladson-Billings, 1995), *Culturally Responsive Instruction* (Au, 2007), and *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy* (Paris, 2012). Despite the differences in the naming, they all celebrate diversity and aim to bridge the cultural gap between home and school.

CRT is grounded in three principles: high expectations, cultural competence, and critical thinking (Dickinson et al., 2015). Teachers adapt curricula, scaffold learning, and foster cooperation in respectful environments (Cheng et al., 2021). Cultural competence is achieved by representing students' cultures in instructional materials (Abdalla & Moussa, 2024), while critical thinking is cultivated through discussions of social justice (Byrd, 2016). Aceves & Orosco (2014) add further dimensions: instructional engagement, affirmation of culture, language, and racial identity, and promotion of social justice. By including cultural knowledge, encouraging identity, and addressing inequality, teachers create effective and inclusive classrooms.

CRT is multifaceted because culturally diverse students are continually evolving (Gunn et al., 2020). It is student-centered and authentic, connecting content with prior experiences. Through meaningful activities, alternative assessments (Ventouris et al., 2022), and skills for pluralistic

societies, CRT supports learning without undermining cultural origins (Siwatu, 2007). Teachers act as facilitators, linking cultural references with academic skills, while communication with families and cultural sensitivity further reinforce its effectiveness (Meléndez Guevara et al., 2020; Bachtsiavanou et al., 2023). The consistent evidence of CRT's effectiveness across international contexts informed the formulation of RQ1 which examines whether these methodologies are also being implemented in Greek multilingual classrooms.

### 2.2 Why Culturally Responsive Teaching?

Children's development and attitudes towards school depend on quality learning environments (Hamre, 2014). Incorporating students' cultural knowledge in lessons strengthens confidence and academic success (Kirby & Thomas, 2021). CRT acknowledges diverse learning styles, languages, and prior knowledge, equipping students with the skills to succeed in the host country while valuing their own culture (Obowemu, 2024). Multilingualism and cultural diversity are treated as assets, fostering participation and comprehension (Haniko et al., 2024). Furthermore, CRT emphasizes strong teacher-student and teacher-family relationships, enabling holistic support and deeper understanding of students' experiences (Berlian & Huda, 2022). Validating students' cultural backgrounds through collaboration with families fosters inclusion, trust, and respect (Naz et al., 2024; Bachtsiavanou et al., 2023).

A positive climate in the classroom grounded in CRT principles allows refugee and migrant students to feel safe, authentic, and included (Azzopardi, 2020). Conversely, ignoring cultural identities leads to distress, alienation, low literacy, and high dropout rates (Zahid, 2021). Since poverty and emotional struggles exacerbate these challenges (Schmidt, 2005), embedding cultural responsiveness into pedagogy enhances motivation, belonging, and achievement (Sarıdaş & Çobanoğlu, 2023). Indeed, CRT has been shown to improve attendance significantly (Dee & Penner, 2017), an important finding given migrant students' higher dropout rates (Stetser & Stillwell, 2014). For these reasons, CRT should be integral to all schools, not only those with large migrant populations. Building on this evidence, RQ2 was developed to investigate whether CRT practices in Greek multilingual classrooms also promote the academic success and inclusion of plurilingual students.

### 2.3 Teaching Methods and Practices of CRT

One central method during the implementation of CRT is contextual learning, where lessons are tied to students' cultures and everyday life. This approach reduces anxiety, fosters meaningful use of the target language, and strengthens connections between prior and new knowledge, strengthens motivation and academic outcomes (Haryono & Hikmah, 2023).

Differentiated Instruction (DI) is another core practice, addressing students' varied learning styles, interests, and linguistic levels. By rejecting one-size-fits-all models, DI supports individual strengths, autonomy, and equity (Tomlinson, 1999, 2021; Hockett & Doubet, 2021). Although beneficial, teachers report challenges in implementation due to time limits, classroom management, and large class sizes (Scarparolo & Subban, 2021).

Translanguaging also plays a vital role in CRT, challenging monolingual biases and enabling students to draw on their full linguistic repertoires (Seals, 2021). It enhances comprehension, identity formation, and participation while offering both cognitive and psychosocial benefits such as confidence and stronger teacher-student communication (Spyridonos et al., 2024). Empirical studies further show it increases linguistic awareness, problem-solving, and social engagement (Cenoz et al., 2022).

Rooted in constructivist theory, collaborative learning positions students at the center of the process, fostering autonomy, motivation, and language development through social interaction (Wang et al., 2024). Evidence shows it improves self-esteem and attitudes toward learning (Clipa &

Caramida, 2024). Scaffolding, first conceptualized by Wood et al. (1976), provides tailored support from teachers or peers, reducing frustration and enhancing comprehension (Johnson, 2021).

To synthesize the literature, Table 1 summarizes CRT’s core components and their hypothesized impact on inclusion and academic performance of refugee/migrant students.

Table 1. CRT’s core components and their hypothesized impact

Components	Hypothesized impact
High expectations	Enhances motivation, improves academic performance
Cultural competence	Increases belonging
Critical thinking	Develops awareness
Instructional engagement	Reduces anxiety, fosters meaningful participation
Differentiated Instruction (DI)	Supports equity, autonomy and academic achievement
Translanguaging	Enhances comprehension, self-expression and smoother adaptation
Collaborative learning & scaffolding	Improves cooperation, comprehension and positive attitudes towards learning

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Research Aim

The study investigates whether CRT is implemented in Greek multilingual classrooms (RQ1) and, if so, its impact on refugee and migrant students’ academic performance and inclusion (RQ2). It focuses on teachers’ perspectives, elicited through interviews, to explore classroom realities, instructional practices and challenges. The research also contributes to the limited and out-dated Greek literature on CRT, offering insights into intercultural schools and DYEP/ZEP classes.

#### 3.2 Sample and Participants

A qualitative design was followed, using semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions that provided insights into strategies, challenges and classroom realities. Nine teachers working with refugee and migrant students in Greek primary schools participated. The sample comprised three females (33.3%) and six males (66.6%), aged 25-45. Participants included six primary teachers. Most teachers worked in DYEP classes, with one in a ZEP class and one in an intercultural school.

Teaching experience with refugee/migrant populations was limited (0-2 years). All participants had Greek as their first/mother language with English as their only foreign language. While two-thirds had attended seminars on intercultural education, none held a master’s degree in the field. Geographically, 55.5% taught in urban areas (e.g., Thessaloniki, Larisa), 22.2% in semi-urban (e.g., Leros, Chios), and 22.2% in rural areas of Greece (e.g., Peonia, Sidirokastro). This distribution provides a broad overview of CRT practices across different educational contexts in Greece.

Table 2. Participants’ Profile

Years of teaching experience with refugees/migrants	Gender	Age	Origin	Educational background	Years of teaching experience with refugees/migrants	Foreign languages (except English)	Seminars about multicultural education	Type of class	Regions
1	Female	45	Greece	Primary school teacher	1	No	No	DYEP	Serres
2	Female	25	Greece	English teacher	0	No	Yes	DYEP	Larisa
3	Male	28	Greece	Special education teacher	2	No	Yes	Intercultural school	Thessaloniki
4	Male	25	Greece	Primary school teacher	0	No	No	DYEP	Sidirokastro
5	Female	31	Greece	English teacher	0	No	Yes	DYEP	Korinthos
6	Male	26	Greece	Primary school teacher	0	No	No	DYEP	Thessaloniki
7	Male	29	Greece	Primary school teacher	1	No	Yes	DYEP	Chios
8	Male	28	Greece	Primary school teacher	1	No	Yes	ZEP	Peonia
9	Male	25	Greece	Primary school teacher	0	No	Yes	DYEP	Leros

#### 3.3 Data collection

Participants were expected to give an interview answering thoroughly and giving examples from their personal experience to questions about the method of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT). While interviews face criticism for potential bias and socially desirable responses (Edwards & Holland, 2020), they remain valuable for in-depth exploration, adaptive questioning, and dialogic co-construction of knowledge (Jain, 2021; Knott et al., 2022).

The interview design drew on international and Greek sources, particularly the Culturally Responsive Practices Questionnaire (Penderi & Kokouvinou, 2019), CRT Self-Efficacy Scale (Siwatu, 2007), and Student Measure of CRT (Dickson et al., 2015). The sixteen open-ended questions were grouped into three sections: (1) presence of CRT in Greek multilingual classrooms, (2) its impact on academic progress and (3) its role in refugee/migrant inclusion and belonging.

#### 3.4 Data analysis

Interviews were conducted in Greek (mostly online) and recorded via mobile phone. Data were analyzed using Thematic Analysis (TA), which identifies, classifies, and interprets themes (Kiger & Varpio, 2020), following Yin’s (2015) stages: compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding. After transcription and familiarization, coding produced categories such as “curriculum adaptation”, “translanguaging”, “peer support” and “teacher flexibility” to name but a few. Themes were derived inductively from the interview data while being interpreted in light of existing CRT frameworks to ensure alignment with the study’s conceptual lens. This approach allowed the analysis to remain grounded in participants’ account while also engaging critically with established theoretical perspectives. These codes were grouped into the below themes (see also Figure 1:

- Teacher awareness of CRT occurred from the codes “stance toward inclusion”, “knowledge of CRT principles” and “training”
- Teaching strategies for multilingual students occurred from the codes “curriculum adaptation”, “translanguaging”, “multilingual materials”, “visual aids”, “classroom

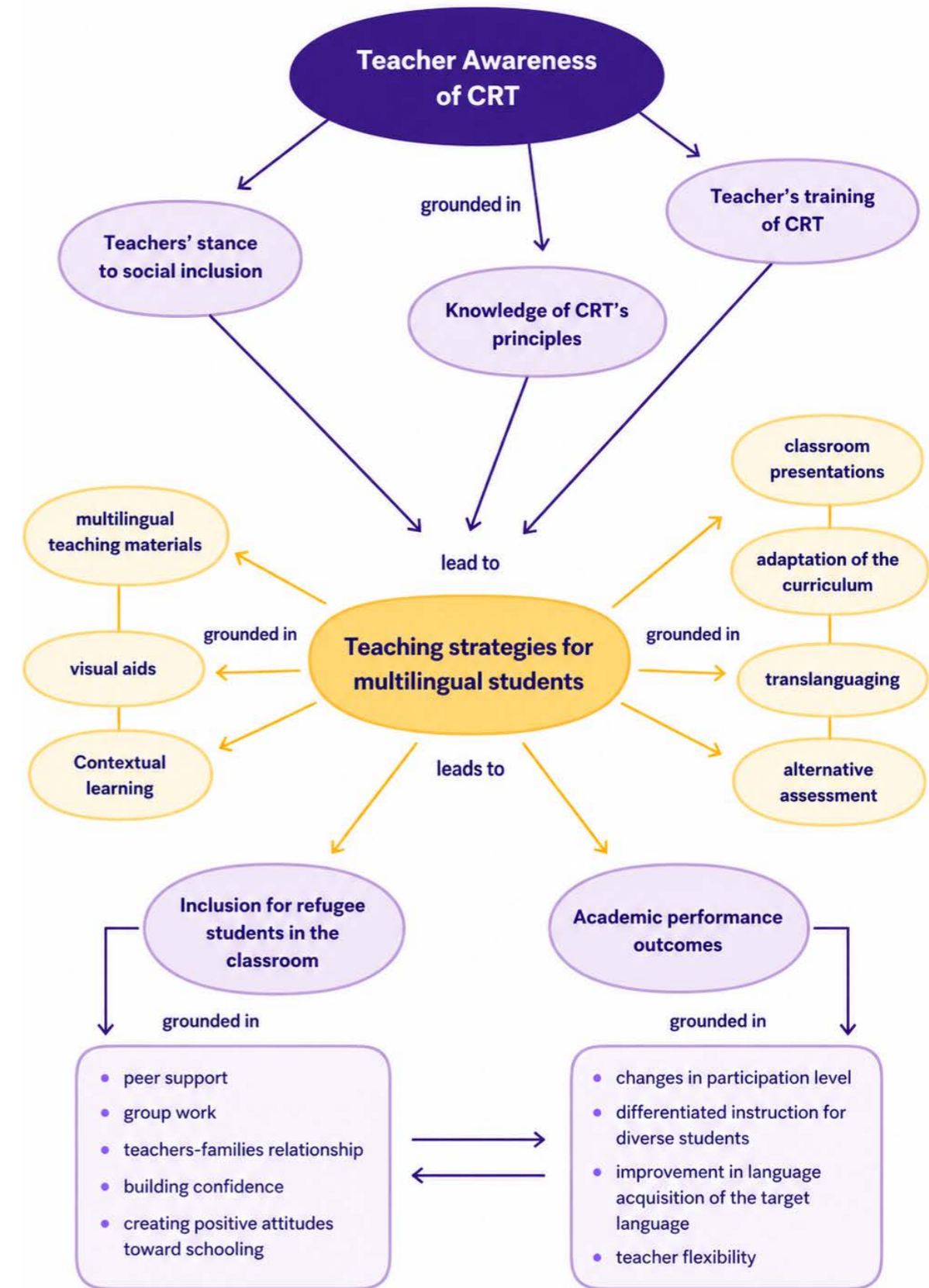


presentations”, “contextual learning” and “alternative assessment”

- Inclusion for refugee students occurred from the themes “peer support”, “group work”, “family engagement”, “confidence building” and “positive attitudes”
- Academic performance outcomes occurred from the codes “participation”, “differentiated instruction”, “language acquisition” and “teacher flexibility”

Interpretation involved thematic map to visualize relationships among codes, themes, and patterns (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). To strengthen reliability, the researcher engaged in iterative coding, revisiting transcripts to refine categories and ensure coherence across the dataset. Triangulation is one of the most widely used methods to increase the validity of qualitative research. In this research, triangulation was implemented using multiple participants, while the reliability between the codes was improved by the transparency provided through a clear code protocol and the corresponding developed database (Gibbert et al., 2008). Reflexive notes and analytic memos were also maintained, enhancing transparency and credibility of the thematic interpretations.

Figure 1. Thematic map for visual representation of the themes Teacher awareness of CRT.



### 3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were a priority in this research about CRT’s implementation, impact on inclusion and academic performance of refugee/migrant students. In line with Govil’s (2013) principles of privacy, anonymity, confidentiality, and avoidance of deception, participants received informed consent forms outlining the study’s scope, aims, voluntary nature, and right to withdraw at any stage. Pseudonyms were used to ensure anonymity.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Teaching Strategies for Plurilingual Students

The implementation of CRT in Greek multilingual classrooms was checked through questions about educators’ methods and strategies in order to involve students more actively in the learning process. Prevalent position in their teaching agenda has the visual aids such as videos and flashcards that visualize, sometimes with non-verbal ways, difficult concepts and simplify complex information.

Extract 1

... the approach usually includes the use of supportive tools, such as visual representations or translation activities from the students’ language into Greek, mainly to reinforce vocabulary. Also, differentiated teaching is often implemented. (T3)

Also, five participants mentioned that they are not absolute in the use of the target language and allow learners to use their first/mother language for note-taking, peer communication, self-expression, and cross-linguistic comparison during lessons in Greek or English. Teacher 2 emphasized translanguaging, highlighting that proficiency in the first language provides a strong foundation for acquiring additional languages and should therefore be practiced.

Extract 2

... Because their native language is the foundation for any other language they learn. So, this essentially lays the groundwork for a better academic journey in the future... (T2)

On the other hand, T4 is hesitant and uses translanguaging in moderation, while T7 explicitly declines the use of other languages rather than Greek in the classroom supporting that it is his aim to make students speak Greek and anything other than that deviates from the primary goal.

Another strategy mentioned by the participants is the adaptation of the curriculum using multilingual teaching materials. So, 66,6% uses books, stories and songs that present different cultures emphasizing those that reflect students’ linguistic and cultural backgrounds to facilitate better understanding and show respect to learners’ cultural identities.

Extract 3

...For instance, I make sure that the fairy tales we read in class feature characters with their own skin color or that represent their culture. (T1)

Most participants declare that the fact that they formulate their lesson plans depending on students’ personal experiences increases refugees/migrants’ retention and engagement, showing them how this knowledge is implemented outside the classroom.

Extract 4

The lesson takes place with the primary goal—my personal objective—of helping these students learn practical things that will be useful in their daily life in Greece. For example, recognizing certain signs, being able to verbally communicate their needs and desires... (T9)

Furthermore, translation tools, mainly Google Translate, were used by 77% of teachers to bridge home-school language gaps, particularly when students lacked proficiency in Greek and relied solely on their first language.

Extract 5

...Various tools, such as translators, dictionaries, and bilingual books, could make the implementation of culturally responsive teaching more effective. During my teaching in the classroom, I used translators on my device. (T5)

All participants reported implementing multicultural presentations featuring students’ traditions, food, songs, celebrations, and customs. T4 and T9 noted that initial activities involved “identity texts” (e.g., drawings), later expanded to photographs, cultural objects, traditional foods or short PowerPoint presentations.

Extract 6

...We have established a routine where every Friday, each child talks about their own country and explains customs and cultural elements that we are not familiar with... The students use the language of their choice...However, parents play a significant role in this by helping with presentations—whether it’s preparing a PowerPoint or bringing a local dessert. (T2)

Additionally, all of the participants agreed to alternative ways of assessment over standard tests, prioritizing learners’ ability to use the target language for everyday tasks and personal goals. Assessments were generally lenient, focusing on oral tasks such as dialogues and discussions. When tests were used, most teachers noted they were conducted in groups to allow peer support.

Table 2. Teaching Strategies for Plurilingual Students

Number of Participants	Teaching Practices
6/9	Visual aids (flashcards, videos etc.)
5/9	Translanguaging
6/9	Adaptation of the curriculum
5/9	Contextual learning
7/9	Translation tools
9/9	Multicultural presentations
9/9	Alternative assessment

### 4.2 Inclusion for Refugee Students in the Classroom

All teachers highlighted the role of collaborative activities within CRT in fostering refugee/migrant inclusion, relationship bonding and peer connections. T2 and T4 noted that exposure to diverse cultures and languages promoted tolerance and inclusion of refugee/migrant students. Participants overall emphasized that CRT strengthens bonds, supports cultural exchange and reduces stereotypes and the concept of being the “other”.



Extract 7

...it is more likely for refugee students to form friendships in the classroom, when culturally responsive teaching is implemented, as it promotes understanding, mutual respect, empathy, acceptance... (T9)

Additionally, over half of the participants - highlighted the role of scaffolding in collaborative tasks, where learners support peers by translating instructions, clarifying questions and creating mixed-proficiency groups that foster mutual assistance and a safe learning environment.

Extract 8

...the children see that while collaborating with each other, it becomes very easy to learn from their peers, use each other’s knowledge, and even feel like teachers themselves. (T8)

Most participants emphasized family and community involvement—through class visits, progress meetings, school events or coordination with camp staff—as a means of supporting refugee/migrant students. Such engagement, as T3 noted, fosters security and facilitates inclusion in the school environment

Extract 9

...The family is the main partner of the school in the academic development of the students. ...for example, we gather them for information sessions, organize educational workshops, and provide books from the school library. (T6)

The rest of the teachers had little or no contact with the parents due to language barriers and the fact that refugee/migrant families live far from the school so their commute to school is difficult. T4 characterizes the constant contact with them idealistic but he does agree that their contribution would be helpful, because children tend to imitate their parents.

Extract 10

Personally, I do not involve them. ... as I have observed they are not very interested in their children’s academic performance. ...There should be contact and involvement of the families. This could affect positively children’s stance towards school. (T4)

Table 3. Inclusion for Refugee Students in the Classroom

Number of participants	Inclusive strategies
9/9	Collaborative activities
5/9	Scaffolding
6/9	Families’ involvement

4.3 Academic Performance outcomes

All participants observe that CRT increases participation and engagement levels. When language teaching is integrated with students’ cultural characteristics, learners show greater motivation, interest and active involvement compared to when their linguistic and cultural backgrounds are overlooked. T4 and T5 further observed improved attendance following CRT implementation, as students began attending school regularly.

Extract 11

...as I’ve said, in the long run they (refugee/migrant students) were present every day in school and, not under compulsion, but with great joy. (T5)

T3, T8 and T9 improved academic outcomes through differentiated instruction. They stressed that tailoring teaching to students’ linguistic proficiency, experiences, needs, strength and mental state enhances task performance. Given that DYEPs and ZEPs are mixed-ability classes, even students from the same ethnic group require individualized approaches.

Extract 12

...Differentiated instruction certainly plays a very important role, as no child—even within the same ethnic group—has the same needs and opportunities. (T8)

All the participants say that the reference and presence of students’ cultural characteristics bridges home and school, so the environment is familiar, encouraging them to release the stress and anxiety. They unanimously supported CRT as a foundation for positive student-learning relationships, predicting long-term benefits for refugee/migrant learners.

Extract 13

It (CRT) can have long-term and positive impact on students’ academic success, not only in primary school, junior and senior high school, but overall in their future life. Because CRT creates essentially the basis for the development of a positive relationship of refugee students with education, boosts their self-respect, their social skills. (T3)

Table 4. Academic Performance Outcomes

Number of participants	Academic performance outcomes
9/9	Increased participation
3/9	Differentiated instruction
9/9	Long-term academic success

5. Discussion

5.1 RQ1: Is CRT methodology implemented in Greek multilingual classrooms?

The qualitative data showed that CRT is implemented in intercultural classrooms by teachers who use a variety of tools and methods. The incorporation of various stories, videos, games and multicultural materials – digital, printed, visual – is a prerequisite in the implementation of CRT and the promotion of intercultural skills (Karanikola et al., 2022; Penderi & Kokouvinou, 2019). Abdalla and Moussa (2024) stress that altering curricula to include learners’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds is essential for inclusive, empowering, and culturally affirming education.

All of the participants incorporate demonstrations and conversations about other countries rather than Greece into their everyday teaching, showing that, daily, they create opportunities to celebrate cultural diversity and build connections between home and school; two rudimentary principles of CRT methodology. CRT must extend beyond occasional events, requiring teachers’ consistent commitment to include students’ cultural identities, while such practices help develop global competences (Karanikola et al., 2022; Paris, 2021; Semião et al., 2023). Translanguaging also emerged as a significant practice, facilitated through subtitles, bilingual resources, and



translation tools. These enable comprehension, support linguistic comparisons, and foster mutual respect.

The role of translation in CRT is not clear and there is considerable disagreement in the literature. Although translation was criticized (Jolley & Maimone, 2022), other studies underscore its role in enhancing metalinguistic awareness (Urlaub & Dessen, 2022). The reality in Greece shows that many teachers do not use translanguaging in teaching Greek as L1, highlighting misconceptions (Karananou et al., 2022). The deterioration of Greek due to the dominance of a foreign language in the classroom arises from the ignorance, misinformation, and lack of knowledge about refugee/migrant education that Greek teachers have. These viewpoints that perceive students' languages as impediments are in contrast with Marakova et al. (2021) who declare that dual-language immersion approaches assist students in sustaining their L1 and developing the target one, promoting positive attitudes towards minority languages.

Finally, strong teacher-family relationships were emphasized, with participants organizing multicultural events, meetings, and collaborative activities to ensure parental involvement despite language barriers. These findings highlight a practical enactment of CRT, diverging from earlier studies (Penderi & Kokouvinou, 2019; Maligkoudi & Tsaousidis, 2020; Bachtsiavanou et al., 2023), which reported Greek teachers' reluctance to engage with families.

### 5.2 RQ2: Does Culturally Responsive Teaching impact academic performance and inclusion of plurilingual students?

The results of the study highlighted the importance of CRT in including students with refugee and migrant backgrounds into the educational process. The role of family involvement and collaborative approaches that contributed to the creation of friendly relationships among students was emphasized (Bachtsiavanou et al., 2023; Palaiologou & Prekate, 2023). Relationships between students create a climate of respect among students (Palaiologou & Prekate, 2023), reducing stereotypical and racist behaviour. CRT promotes cooperation. Cooperation between academically strong and weak students creates a climate of cooperation and mutual assistance in the classroom. With the role of the instructor, students feel more comfortable asking for help, while implementing a student-centered lesson with autonomous students.

Beyond family involvement and collaborative approaches, the role of differentiated learning was emphasized by participants. They reported that DYEP and ZEP classes are mostly mixed-ability classes with students of different ages and, therefore, educators have to be flexible, focusing on students' strengths and weaknesses. This view is consistent with literature references that emphasize the close relationship between differentiated instruction and CRT with the aim of creating a climate of respect, participation, and academic achievement (Hocket & Doubet, 2020).

Overall, the research results indicate that the use of CRT helps to develop a supportive environment in which students feel comfortable and participate more, emphasizing their migrant or refugee background. These results are consistent with literature references that emphasize the importance of CRT in the development of skills such as learning, critical thinking and language growth, as well as the development of friendships (Cantrell et al., 2022; Palaiologou & Prekate, 2023). The research findings not only highlight effective classroom practices but also point to broader policy implications for supporting plurilingual learners. Teachers should be equipped with intercultural and CRT-related pedagogical skills to address linguistic diversity and foster inclusive classroom practices. In addition, curriculum adaptations should move towards incorporating multilingual teaching materials, differentiated assessment strategies and opportunities for the implementation of translanguaging.

## 6. Conclusion

This research highlighted the important role CRT plays in Greek schools. CRT is present, fostering inclusion, belonging, equality, and academic engagement. Policymakers and academic institutions should prioritize systematic curriculum reforms that embed CRT principles across subject areas, while also investing in teacher training programs that equip educators with strategies such as translanguaging, differentiated instruction and culturally responsive methods. Training programmes, seminars or even the establishment of stricter prerequisites, such as master degrees on refugee/migrant education, should be mandatory, when teaching diverse groups of students. Schools should strengthen structured family engagement and actively promote intercultural competence as a core classroom practice to better support the inclusion and academic success of migrant and refugee students.

Research limitations include the small research sample, limited to Greek and English teachers in primary education. The extension of this research in other informants as well as on the attitudes of the students themselves is recommended. Further research is in progress.

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## XI. Kindergarten teachers' approaches regarding Child Rights; The necessity for educational programs

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### **Abstract**

The concept of children's rights is multifaceted, much like human rights in general, as it evolves and diversifies in specific space and time shaped by the historical and cultural contexts of individual societies (Balias, 2004; Karaman-Kepeneci, 2006). Acknowledging children's rights within a child-centered framework, where each child learns about their rights and respects the rights of others, requires that teachers are also aware of and respond to children's needs, with the aim of promoting the well-being and development of each child individually (Banko-Bal & Guler-Yildiz, 2021). Existing literature has highlighted the need for additional research on children's rights and their application in educational practice (e.g., Correia et al., 2019). However, in the Greek context, teachers' beliefs about children's rights and their training needs in this area have not been sufficiently explored to enable the design and implementation of educational programs related to the effective protection of children's rights. The purpose of this qualitative research was to investigate kindergarten teachers' knowledge and beliefs about children's rights and to record their training needs. The research sample consisted of eight teachers working in public and private kindergartens. Semi-structured interviews were used as the data collection instrument. The results of the study revealed differences in kindergarten teachers' knowledge of children's rights, as well as in their readiness to promote children's rights education, to advocate for them, and apply inclusive practices. Moreover, the findings pointed out the need for professional development training, mainly of an experiential nature, to support teachers in their psycho-pedagogical role. This research aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of teachers' training needs in order to design and implement appropriate programs and interventions.

**KEYWORDS:** Preschool education; Child rights; Preschool teachers; Professional development needs

## 1. Introduction

Children's rights, like human rights in general, are multifaceted and complex concepts, as they express essentially abstract political principles and therefore require interpretation when applied (Gamarnikow, 2011). Indeed, as the moral values they express are not static but dynamic, rights also evolve and diversify in space and time depending on the historical circumstances of different societies (Karaman-Kepeneci, 2006; Balias, 2004). In this context, Douzinas (2016) points out the contradiction and paradox in the way in which the "universality" of human rights is perceived and applied by different countries in the modern era. While there is relative consensus among states on institutional commitment to human rights and children's rights, violations, abuses, and ambiguities are constantly being recorded, which can be traced back to the way in which rights are interpreted and applied in practice by states (Pitsios & Antoniou, 2021). To overcome these contradictions, Pantazis (2011) argues that autonomous and emancipated individuals are those who should act boldly against state arbitrariness and social injustice, asserting and protecting human rights.

One of the settings in which children and young people can develop a solid awareness of human rights, i.e. develop the knowledge, attitudes, and skills that will enable them to take a critical stance toward the complexity and contradictions of rights, but also to take action when these are violated or ignored, is school. Educating children to be aware of their rights and to recognize the rights of others requires teachers who have a deep understanding and respect for children's rights, are able to teach children about their rights and also encourage them to exercise such rights in the educational process (Howe & Covell, 2005; Ucus, 2014). In fact, preschool age is a period of rapid development, laying the groundwork for social interaction, communication, and the sense of belonging, therefore kindergartens should serve as spaces that guarantee supportive conditions for children's protection and wellbeing (Theobald, 2019). Through a continuous understanding of children's rights (Correia et al., 2019; Osler & Solhaug, 2018) and their implementation through the collaboration of teachers and students (Henderson-Dekort & May, 2024), respect for every human being is cultivated (Manion & Jones, 2020). Nevertheless, as previously mentioned, challenges frequently emerge in protecting and promoting children's rights, stemming from the skepticism of both policymakers and even educators (Daly, 2020).

There is not much research in the international literature on children's rights and their application in educational practice, as it is pointed out that until recently such research was not a priority for researchers (e.g. Correia et al., 2019; Isenström, 2020). The majority of studies involved teachers from primary education (e.g. Isenström, 2020; Manion & Jones, 2020) or secondary education (e.g. Huić, 2022) while there are fewer studies in preschool education. Some studies in this field have shown that, while teachers are aware of children's rights and have a positive attitude towards them, they need more intensive and meaningful to support these rights in educational practice (e.g. Dogan et al., 2014; Hareket & Gulhan, 2016). For instance, Deb and Mathews (2012), in their research, sought to explore the attitudes and knowledge of parents and teachers regarding children's rights and their protection. The sample consisted of 300 participants and the data collection instrument was a questionnaire. The results of the study revealed, among other things, that the participants maintain a positive attitude towards children's rights (e.g., the right to health, education, exemption from work and marriage), however, some rights, such as the right to freedom of expression, was not considered necessary for children by a significant proportion of them.

Similarly, in Greece, teachers' beliefs about children's rights and their training needs in this area have not been sufficiently explored as to enable the design and implementation of appropriate educational programs related to the effective protection of children's rights. For this

reason, the present qualitative research aims to explore precisely these dimensions.

## 2. Research Methodology

### 2.1 Purpose of the study and Research questions

The purpose of this qualitative research is to investigate kindergarten teachers' knowledge and beliefs about children's rights and to record their training needs in this field. In particular, it attempts to address the following research questions:

- What do preschool teachers know about children's rights and how aware are they of how to protect them
- What are preschool teachers' perceptions regarding the cultivation and support of children's rights within the educational system and how do they conceptualize children's learning and the promotion of these rights in preschool education
- What are the most prominent needs of preschool teachers in relation to their training in promoting and protecting children's rights.

### 2.2 Research participants

The participants in the study were selected using purposive sampling (Newby, 2019: 281) based on the criterion of teaching children from migrant/refugee backgrounds and/or children with special educational needs. The research sample consisted of eight (8) female kindergarten teachers, one of whom held a doctoral degree, one held a second degree in psychology, and five held a master's degree in either linguistics or special education. Only two kindergarten teachers stated that they had attended long-term training seminars, one in special education and the other in intercultural education, while the rest stated that they occasionally participated in short-term "updates" on topics such as special education, intercultural education, or child abuse and neglect. In terms of their years of experience in education, three preschool teachers reported having little experience, 3-5 years, and five preschool teachers reported having 12-22 years of experience.

### 2.3 Data collection instruments and procedure

Data collection was carried out using semi-structured interviews, during which the aim was to highlight the subjective views of the kindergarten teachers and to obtain as much information as possible regarding the research questions (Cohen et al., 2008). Specifically, preschool teachers were asked to answer questions about their education and training on issues related to children's rights, their abilities and readiness as educators to promote and support children's rights, the actions and practices they implement in the kindergarten classroom, as well as whether they need further training on this issue and the areas on which they wish to focus on. The interviews were conducted between April and May 2025, and each semi-structured interview lasted 45-60 minutes.

This research was conducted after the written consent of the kindergarten teachers, while all rules of ethics and conduct were observed, their voluntary participation was ensured, their anonymity was guaranteed, and they were assured that they could withdraw from the study at any time or refuse to allow the data collected to be published. The research was approved by the General Assembly of the Department of Early Childhood Education of the University of Crete following a recommendation by the Department's Ethics and Conduct Committee (Approval number: 652/14-05-2025).

Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) was used to describe and analyze the data. Specifically, the material was comprehensively analysed by both authors in its entirety, and then an effort was made to identify the points/excerpts related to the research questions. The data were then organized, semantic patterns were constructed, and the authors proceeded with the data coding process. Finally, the codes were processed, merged and the dominant themes emerged.

**3. Results**

The analysis of the survey results regarding the beliefs and needs of kindergarten teachers with regard to the cultivation, development, and protection of children’s rights by schools, revealed the following five dominant themes which are presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Kindergarten teachers’ perceptions and professional development needs concerning the promotion of children’s rights

Dominant Themes	Codes
Conceptualization & Scope of Children's rights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rights to provisions</li> <li>• Rights to protection</li> <li>• Rights to participation</li> <li>• Rights to personal development</li> </ul>
The role of educational institutions in promoting and protecting children's rights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advisory</li> <li>• Supervisory</li> </ul>
Institutional support within the educational system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The fundamental right to education</li> <li>• Rights related to participation</li> </ul>
Ways of cultivating children's rights in educational practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rights as lived experiences</li> <li>• Rights as knowledge</li> </ul>
Professional development needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge gaps</li> <li>• The uniqueness of each child</li> <li>• Willingness to participate</li> <li>• Methods and ways of teacher training</li> <li>• Specific focus -oriented training seminars</li> </ul>

**3.1 Kindergarten teachers’ conceptualization and delineation of children’s rights**

All participating kindergarten teachers at this early stage define as children’s rights all those rights that fall under the category of benefits, such as health, care, education, family life, nutrition and recreation:

“I’ll tell you what the kids said today, which I think covers up everything. To have a home, care, warmth, toys, love, hugs, mom, dad, money. To have school, to have the right to peace” (N2).

At a second level, some kindergarten teachers focus on the rights to protection from abuse, exploitation, and discrimination. These are the rights whose absence directly affects human existence and the “right to dignity” (N4), as one teacher argued.

Other teachers referred to the category of rights relating to participation, such as the right to express an opinion:

“to have the right to express my opinion and have it taken into account, to have the right to disagree, to assert myself, to have the right to be angry” (N2).

Only a few teachers referred to children’s right to diversity in the sense of recognizing their different linguistic and cultural backgrounds and different learning conditions:

“Every child has the right to be a separate entity and to know who they are” (N1),  
 “to have the right to learn at a different pace and in a different way” (N2),  
 “every child should be able to defend their language and religion and say what they believe” (N7).

**3.2 The role of educational institutions in protecting children’s rights**

All teachers put the family first and then the state as the ones responsible for protecting and fostering children’s rights. Only a few teachers mentioned the school and teachers as being responsible to a lesser extent. The fact that the majority of teachers do not attribute specific responsibilities to the school may be due to the fact that they consider the school to be part of the state apparatus or that the majority of teachers perceive the role of the school to a certain extent as supervisory. In particular, some teachers referred to the supportive, advisory and facilitative

function of the school towards the family with regard to children’s rights:

“The school can act as a channel of communication with the family, helping the family to uphold the child’s right to a healthy family life. And after all, we always help a little in this regard, that is, when I see a child who has difficulties, learning or otherwise, we have a duty to help the family help the child” (N1).

Other teachers referred to a supervisory role in ensuring the protection of the child by the family:

“The school cannot do anything about food and shelter. However, it can help by contacting the authorities if it finds out that a child is being neglected by their family.” (N4)

“I believe that the role of the school is important in ensuring child safety. We must be vigilant, let’s say, in cases of violence or neglect because our position allows us to ‘see’ a little of what is happening at home.” (N6).

**3.3 Supporting children’s rights through the educational system**

According to their statements, the participating kindergarten teachers regard school as the institution with the right to educating in general and cultivating and developing participation rights, such as the right to identity, freedom of expression, etc. With regard to the right to education, all kindergarten teachers agreed that school provides this basic right, but at the same time they expressed the contradictions and omissions of the state in the implementation of this right in educational practice.

“Legally, school doors are open to all children; that is a principle.” (N6)

“... theoretically, public schools provide access to all children, but again, I believe that none of the rights of the child, are met in Greece.” (N5).

More specifically, teachers focused on the right to access education and the fact that compulsory basic education for all students is not institutionally supported:

“The state does not fully cover the social right to learning. Does everyone ultimately have the right to education? Roma, children with disabilities, and other vulnerable groups are somehow excluded from the education system” (N6).

They further emphasized education’s reproductive function and the ways in which social and economic inequalities are reproduced as educational disparities within schools.

“I believe that social inequalities and social-economic background clearly play a role and cannot be balanced by the school only. The school does not have the appropriate infrastructure, nor the appropriate staff to close these contradictions” (N4).

In this context, some kindergarten teachers focused on educational conditions (such as infrastructure, support from auxiliary educational staff, large class sizes, etc.) that prevent teachers from providing quality education to their students in order to mitigate educational disparities and consequently social inequalities:

“The right of children to differentiated education, which should exist, does not exist. Parallel support in schools is not always enough, and 25 children in one class is too many. Who will speak first? Who will express themselves first? It seems as if the state implicitly encourages leaving students undereducated, leading teachers towards producing simplified, stylized tasks that lead to easily attainable outcomes” (N2).

In addition, some teachers referred to the institutional silencing of the right of children with a migrant/refugee background -and not only- to practice their religion and to have their linguistic and cultural background utilized in school:

“The children of immigrants come to school with a specific language and a specific religion, and the school does not respect that. I think it treats them with a certain indifference... while it respects the children of the dominant group. It marginalises the other groups, as if it ex-



pects that since they are here, it is their obligation to integrate.” (N7)

With regard to the cultivation and development of participation rights, the participating kindergarten teachers argued that, in terms of the school curriculum and everyday school life, kindergarten is the level of education that can cultivate and develop them more than other educational levels:

“If we take the new programs, active citizens, skills workshops, eTwinning, etc., I think that kindergarten supports children’s right to act, to engage in knowledge, to acquire knowledge, to learn about other cultures, other religions, etc., so I think that, in theory, we are on the right track.” (N1).

When implementing all of this in the educational practice, some teachers did not hesitate to mention the obstacles and difficulties they face from the reactions of parents of the dominant group when the program deviates from ethnocentric norms:

“Many teachers may want to do things but are afraid of the reactions of some parents, because we have those reactions too. An introduction to another religion provoked reactions from parents who were very deeply religious at our school.” (N1)

Similarly, other teachers, in a self-critical mood, referred to the lack of qualifications and professionalism of some teachers in working effectively and in depth on the rights of participation in their classrooms:

“Being an active citizen is about rights, freedom of thought, freedom of expression, but to foster it right, teachers need to be highly inspired and motivated.” (N1)

“What many teachers do is go after programs just to get the participant’s certification without the children actually understanding what has been done in class. In other words, everything is done superficially and the goal is only achieved in theory.” (N2)

### 3.4 Approaches to fostering children’s rights in educational practice

Focusing on educational practice and teachers’ views on how they seek to inform, foster, and teach children about their rights, two trends appear to be emerging. Some teachers argue that rights are not taught but experienced and run through all aspects of school life. In particular, they mentioned that they try to put children’s rights into practice in the way they organize daily school life and the school environment in general:

“You establish rights from day one; rights are part of our everyday life.” (N2)

“Rights are a way of life. From the beginning of the year until the end, we make sure there is a welcoming environment for the children, e.g. we say good morning in the children’s languages, the children bring us fairy tales in other languages for the school library, a mother may come in class to talk to us about other cultures and religions, we never rule out children with special needs, and we reach a point where the children do not see a “problem” and are all one team. In other words, they are cultivated slowly by doing simple things” (N1).

Some kindergarten teachers also referred to specific methods and practices they adopt, which are student-centered and focus on the respect for children’s personalities and needs:

“Differentiated teaching, team work, work stations, visual aids, experiential activities, the school council, etc. are some of the actions taken.” (N7)

“I try to bring out their talents, give them the right to be confident, to feel good about themselves.” (N2)

They further discussed the approaches adopted across various subject areas, through which they attempt to enact children’s rights and initiate students’ understanding of these rights:

“Rights apply to everything, even math. Let’s share and split.” (N2)

Finally, they emphasized that the way teachers themselves behave in school, serves as a role model for the development and learning of rights. In this context, they referred to the good

cooperation between teachers and the cultivation of relationships of trust between teachers, students, and parents.

“Our behavior sets the example. You cannot behave in an uncollegial manner or treat children in an authoritarian and unfair way and expect them to behave differently” (N4).

“We strive to create an atmosphere of safety, respect, and trust in the kindergarten” (N7).

On the other hand, some other teachers seem to understand the cultivation of children’s rights through the development of specific thematic units within the framework of a single lesson or a project lasting several days. In this shallow way, they pass on to preschoolers, at best, only some random info about rights instead of making sure they develop social learning skills and behaviors, as shown in the following quote:

“Every November and early December, when is Children’s Rights’ Day, we organize a large project at our kindergarten. There isn’t much discussion, but through videos and crafts, we create group projects about their rights, display them in a place where the children can see them, and if something happens, we refer back to them.” (N3)

Similarly, some other kindergarten teachers stated that they associate rights with learning the rules of good behavior and children’s obligations towards school:

“I think that almost on a daily basis, children come into contact with rights through conflicts and disputes between them that need to be negotiated” (N10).

“Overall, schools appear to place greater emphasis on obligations rather than on rights. Priority is frequently given to fostering children’s compliance with rules and boundaries, while discussions of children’s rights remain limited, discussed only occasionally, if at all, on the Day of the Right of the Child” (N6).

### 3.5 Professional development needs of kindergarten teachers

According to the statements of the kindergarten teachers, it appeared that the majority of them, apart from a few short training seminars, had not attended targeted training seminars either on managing diversity in the classroom in general or on children’s rights in particular. In this context, they expressed their need for training on children’s rights, not only to learn about them, but also to be able to address them in the classroom and advocate for them.

“I don’t think my knowledge is sufficient to fully handle such cases, so it would be good to have more information and teacher training since we are called to deal with such incidents” (N5).

“Theoretical knowledge is certainly not the same as having experience dealing with such issues. The fact that I know how to communicate their rights to the children themselves, i.e. the knowledge, (that alone) does not mean that I can deal with children whose rights are being violated” (N3).

Some kindergarten teachers expressed their concerns and uncertainty about their readiness to deal with children’s rights in practice, especially when these rights are violated. In fact, focusing on the uniqueness of each child, they emphasized that, beyond general knowledge of rights, they need support and guidance in order to deal with each child’s case individually, based on their socioeconomic and cultural background, their biography, their specific needs, and other characteristics. Indicatively, they stated:

“Every case is so different that I will always have doubts about whether I am doing the right thing.” (N1)

“You cannot simply claim to be knowledgeable about refugees and therefore assume responsibility for a particular refugee child, given that these children are often traumatized. The question is, what exactly does the trauma involve, and what we should specifically pay attention to? Each child is different, and in order to respond appropriately, one must under-

stand the individual needs of each child.” (N2)

“But of course, every case is different. There is no manual for these things. So, you always have something to learn, something to improve.” (N4)

In this context, all kindergarten teachers expressed their need and intention to attend relevant training programs, highlighting either the challenges of the contemporary multicultural classroom or the widespread violation of children’s rights in modern society. They stated, in particular:

“Training is not only useful but also necessary, because there are so many cases where children’s rights are violated nowadays” (N5).

“It is very useful because our schools are now multicultural. There are children from other countries whose rights we must respect” (N7).

“The more informed we are, the easier it is to prevent and deal with incidents of abuse and neglect. [...] The more we learn, the more comprehensively we can help a child” (N8).

At the same time, they argued that for training to be useful and effective, it must be of high quality, meaningful, targeted, and not waste teachers’ time with vague recommendations, but rather engage them in an interactive manner with relevant case studies.

“I believe that training is obviously useful, provided that it is not done for the sake of it and does not waste time on platitudes, but is meaningful, involving participants in exchanging experiences about incidents, forming discussion groups, etc.” (N4).

“They should have theory, practical approaches, and, above all, be open to dialogue. [...] The ideal would be a combination of theory and practice” (N7).

“We need to have easily implemented activities and case studies that provide specific guidance on how to respond to various situations that come to our attention. [...] In general, there should be comprehensive guidance; we should not be confined to the theoretical framework of training.” (N8).

Some teachers also highlighted specific areas of focus in the training seminars they would like to participate in. In particular, they focused on:

- To acquire knowledge and be able to promote children’s rights in the classroom

“But we (first) need to know what children’s rights are and then how we can use them to educate them.” (N3)

- To be informed about the actions they should take when they become aware of violations of children’s rights

“The needs that are emerging now are more related to the support a child can receive when their rights are violated. To what extent can the school get involved? What actions should it take? It is not always easy.” (N8)

- Being able to understand children’s diversity due to their cultural background

“Cultures. It is very useful to know how each culture differs and how each cultural group will feel at home in a school environment, e.g. the Roma.” (N2)

- To acquire the competence needed so that they can deal with issues such as sexual abuse, protection of children’s privacy, domestic violence, and school bullying in kindergarten

“With regard to sexual dignity and sexual abuse, which we are seeing more and more, awareness needs to be raised from kindergarten level. Even for situations within the family or in the context of interaction with peers and bullying in general from people in the social environment, emphasis must be placed early on, because they affect the mental and physical health of children and later adults” (N4).

#### 4. Discussion

The analysis of the survey data showed that not all kindergarten teachers have the same level of knowledge about children’s rights, nor do they have the pedagogical readiness to promote

children’s education on rights and to advocate for them. This is attributed to the fact that, on the one hand, human rights are not an established field in teacher education and training and, on the other hand, defending and supporting rights requires specialized knowledge of institutions and their functioning, which not all teachers have (Choleva, 2025).

The research showed that some kindergarten teachers are more informed and have more thorough and in-depth knowledge of children’s rights, while others have only general, basic knowledge. However, all kindergarten teachers acknowledge that the school in general, and they themselves in particular, have an advisory and supportive role in the family’s efforts to ensure the protection and care of children, and where necessary, they consider it their duty to take a supervisory role. It also became apparent that all kindergarten teachers are able to discern the institutional contradictions, omissions, and silences of the state regarding the basic right of children to education, especially towards specific groups of children, as has been pointed out by other studies (Kontogianni & Michelakaki, 2018; Stergiou, 2019).

With regard to the possibility of developing rights in educational practice, all kindergarten teachers highlighted the flexible curriculum of kindergarten as an advantage over other levels in developing children’s rights. However, only the most experienced kindergarten teachers seem to consciously seek to cultivate and strengthen this awareness in children in an experience-based way and by actively promoting the principles and respect for rights in all phases of everyday school life. In contrast, less experienced preschool teachers perceive the teaching of rights through specific thematic units or activities, which, as has been pointed out in various studies, is not a particularly effective way of learning for children (Isenström, 2020).

Kindergarten teachers also acknowledged their lack of knowledge regarding the protection and promotion of children’s rights and expressed their need for training. In fact, they emphasized their desire for meaningful, targeted, and practical training and education on specialized, timely topics directly related to children’s rights in modern society and in modern schools. This confirms what various studies have shown, namely the need for teachers to engage in continuous professional development and support through experiential learning and systematic study and reflection on everyday school practice (Council of Europe, 2021; Robinson et al., 2020).

Finally, it should be noted that the research data in this study come from a small sample of kindergarten teachers and present some initial indications that should be further investigated in a larger sample of kindergarten teachers using other research methods. Future research would also be useful in exploring the attitudes and perceptions of teachers at all school levels, as well as in designing appropriate educational programs to inform and raise awareness among parents, children, and teachers on issues related to children’s rights. Research in this direction and related training could also be carried out with other target groups, such as students, police officers, judges, priests, social workers, pediatricians, nurses, academics, etc., and anyone else involved with children aged 0-18. Although the Convention on the Rights of the Child “... has established the global framework for the recognition, protection, and fulfillment of the rights of every child, everywhere and without discrimination” (Khalil, 2025, VII), its implementation in practice is a challenge worldwide.

#### 5. Conclusions

The findings of the present study highlight the complexity of kindergarten teachers’ perceptions and practices regarding the promotion and protection of children’s rights in early childhood education. Although participating teachers acknowledged the importance of children’s rights and expressed a positive attitude toward their protection and promotion, the results of the present study revealed significant variations in their level of knowledge, conceptual

understanding, and pedagogical readiness to implement rights-based educational practices. Some teachers demonstrated a relatively comprehensive understanding of children's rights, while others appeared to possess more general or fragmented knowledge, a finding that may be linked to the limited integration of human rights education within both initial teacher education and professional development programs. At the same time, teachers tended to attribute responsibility for safeguarding children's rights perceiving the role of the school mainly as supportive and crucial in cultivating children's awareness of rights.

The findings also revealed that some teachers approached rights as lived experiences embedded in the daily life of the classroom through inclusive practices, respectful relationships, and participatory learning processes and others treated children's rights mainly as thematic content addressed through occasional projects or activities, which may limit the depth of children's understanding of rights as everyday practices. A particularly significant finding concerns teachers' strong demand for targeted professional development in the field of children's rights, with participants emphasizing the need for meaningful training programs that combine theoretical knowledge with practical guidance and experiential learning. Overall, the study suggests that while kindergarten teachers recognize the importance of promoting children's rights and show willingness to support them within educational contexts, important needs remain in terms of knowledge, training, and institutional support, highlighting the importance of systematic professional development initiatives and educational policies that strengthen the integration of children's rights within early childhood education and empower teachers to effectively cultivate inclusive, democratic, and rights-based learning environments.

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## XII. Multilingual education matters: The role of academia in promoting its implementation

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### **Abstract**

The linguistic landscape has recently undergone changes because of constant migration, technological advancements, and the growing recognition of the benefits of multilingualism. Many children worldwide speak a home language that differs from the official language used in the school and societal context. Children's right to education was safeguarded long ago. Access to quality and inclusive education by respecting students' funds of knowledge is highly recommended, especially in the early years, because it belongs to basic human rights, constitutes the foundation for sustainable development, and promotes lifelong learning opportunities. Additionally, multilingual competence development belongs to one of the eight key competences recommended by the European Union for lifelong learning. However, monolingualism in the official languages is still the norm worldwide. In Greece, particularly, research indicated that students' multilingualism was not promoted in classrooms, as teachers felt rather unprepared, though new curricula that valued student linguistic and cultural diversity have been recently launched. Universities and academia members, given that they are key agents not only in knowledge transmission but also in individuals' training, development, and socialization, can play a critical role in promoting multilingual education starting from the early years, considering the contribution of this period to students' overall development. Multilingual education is not just about language; it is about creating inclusive, equitable learning settings where linguistic and other forms of diversity are valued, cultivating, thus, inclusive societies where every individual can thrive in a multilingual world.

**KEYWORDS:** Linguistic and Cultural Diversity; Multilingualism; Multilingual Education; ECEC; Academia Role

## 1. Introduction

Some of the traits of contemporary societies are globalization, people's constant migration, and technological development, which transform European societies into a mosaic of cultures and languages, as more than 7,000 (in-use) languages coexist in our world (UNESCO, 2025). Undoubtedly, all these changes affect education by causing linguistic and cultural diversity at schools, as many children worldwide speak a home language that differs from the official language used in the school and societal context (European Commission, 2021b; UNESCO, 2011). Helping young people from migrant/refugee backgrounds become well-integrated into education and society has been one of the main concerns on a European and international level. One of the most powerful tools for integrating students with linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds into schools and societies is education (European Commission, 2021; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019b; UNICEF, 2019; UNESCO, 2025). At the same time, the digital revolution contributes to integrating multiple languages into educational contexts (UNESCO, 2025).

More specifically, children's right to education has been safeguarded without discrimination long ago by: a) The United Nations Universal Declaration on Human Rights (1948/article 26) (<https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>) and b) European Convention on Human Rights (Council of Europe, 1953). In addition, Article 5 of the 1960 Convention and Recommendation fought against Discrimination in Education, recognizing "the right of the members of national minorities to carry on their own educational activities, including...the use or the teaching of their own language" (UNESCO, 2011, p. 10). At the same time, UNESCO and other international agencies have emphasized access to quality and inclusive education by respecting migrant/refugee students' funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) and using children's home languages as the medium of instruction to help them reach their full potential (European Commission, 2021; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019b; UNICEF, 2019; UNESCO, 2011, 2025). In this context, momentum for multilingual education has recently been growing, especially during the early years of schooling, which is gaining the public's attention, through several key global frameworks launched by UNESCO (e.g., 2003, 2011, 2025), UNICEF (e.g., 2019), European Commission (e.g., 2019a, 2019b, 2021), World Bank publications, and national language-in-education policies, because it impacts academic success, promotes lifelong learning opportunities, and constitutes the foundation for sustainable development (e.g., European Commission, 2021; UNICEF, 2019; UNESCO, 2025).

Multilingualism is not only a commonplace trait of humanity but also an important policy goal and approach that should be pursued considering its cognitive, social, and economic benefits; however, many learners with migrant/refugee backgrounds face difficulties in accessing quality and inclusive education, while monolingualism in the official languages is still the norm worldwide (UNESCO, 2025), including Greece as well. All in all, the present article, on the one hand, intends to elaborate on the importance of multilingual education, especially for young learners, championing their right to access quality and inclusive education in the languages they are familiar with, which supports their academic performance, cognitive and socioemotional development, social inclusion, and cultural identity, and, on the other hand, highlight the critical role of academia in promoting multilingual education.

## 2. Multilingualism and ECCE: Why does it matter?

Multilingualism is not a new concept, but it constitutes an inherent trait of the human experience, as between half and two-thirds of the world's population use two or more languages to communicate in their everyday life (Baker & Wright, 2021). Multilingualism, which is more common than monolingualism, can be defined as "the ability to use more than

one language in daily life" (UNESCO, 2015, p. 24). In Europe, the promotion of language learning and multilingualism is regarded as a top priority in its agenda with the aim to enhance equity, inclusion, and success in education and all walks of life (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2023). In fact, the European Union recognized multilingual competence development as one of the eight key competences needed for lifelong learning (European Commission, 2019a).

The cognitive, social, and economic benefits of multilingualism, particularly during the early years, are increasingly recognized, impacting both individuals and societies, as language(s) are not only a tool for communication and knowledge but also an integral part of cultural identity and empowerment (UNESCO, 2011). Namely, multilingualism boosts cognitive abilities, including memory, problem-solving skills, mental flexibility, and ease in learning new languages (Bialystok, 2021; Cummins, 2021). Moreover, it contributes to students' socioemotional development, as it boosts empathy, social inclusion, and cross-cultural understanding (Koch, Kersten, & Greve, 2024). Additionally, it enhances economic opportunities, boosts career flexibility, and promotes values, such as equality, dignity, and human rights, contributing to the development of cohesive and inclusive societies, as respect for the individuals' languages belonging to different communities is critical for peaceful cohabitation (European Commission, 2019b, 2021; UNESCO, 2011, 2025).

In this context, multilingual education, which has emerged as a strategy and policy that should be adopted to cope with the linguistic and cultural diversity of societies and classrooms—is defined as "the use of at least three languages, the mother tongue, a regional or national language, and an international language in education" (UNESCO, 2003, p. 17). At the same time, the Council of Europe (2022) recommended a holistic approach to education, plurilingual and intercultural education, which seeks to convert linguistic and cultural diversity into educational capital/"asset" for all learners by incorporating all the languages present in schools (the official language (s) of schooling, minority students' languages and cultures, and foreign languages). The term, particularly, plurilingual competence refers to the learners' ability to use all the available languages that they know to communicate in different sociocultural contexts (e.g., home, school) for different purposes (e.g., family communication, school studying), while intercultural competence describes the ability to approach others with understanding, respect, and openness. Overall, the model of plurilingual and intercultural education intends to: a) promote understanding and respect of students' linguistic and cultural diversity, b) promote language awareness across the curriculum, c) foster critical reflection on cultural diversity, d) cultivate critical digital literacy and digital citizenship, e) value the learner's voice, and f) support the inclusion of marginalized learners on equal terms with other learners with the aim to build inclusive and cohesive schools and societies.

Research indicates that multilingual education contributes to maintaining students' linguistic repertoires, improves learning outcomes, promotes respect for linguistic and cultural diversity, facilitates the building of inclusive learning environments, and boosts sustainable development (Bialystok, 2021; Cummins, 2021; Garcia, Johnson, & Seltzer, 2016; Nwachukwu et al., 2024). In particular, multilingual education supports literacy development, as using students' home language during teaching basic skills improves cognition and retention, making it easier to grasp new concepts and information, removes the additional cognitive load related to learning in an unfamiliar language, and eventually improves learning outcomes and performance in other subjects (UNESCO, 2025; UNICEF, 2019). After all, literacy skills acquired in a first language (L1) can be transferred to other languages, facilitating language learning (Cummins, 2021). Concurrently, the more the learning outcomes are improved, the more the learners' confidence is increased, cultivating their socio-emotional development (Cummins, 2021; UNESCO, 2025). As a result, their ability to express their emotions is cultivated and their socialization, their self-esteem, and their

overall well-being are improved. In addition, multilingual education that is based on learners' home languages and cultures fosters regular school attendance, enhances educational access, and inclusion of marginalized learners, playing, concurrently, a critical role in reducing dropout rates, inequalities, and prejudice, while fostering social inclusion (UNESCO, 2025). By leveraging learners' diversity, minority parents feel more engaged to actively participate in their children's school life, bridging the gap between home and school experiences, as language barriers usually prevent parents from communicating with teachers (Bachtsiavanou, Karanikola, & Palaiologou, 2023; Hajisoteriou & Angelides, 2016; Macleod & Tett, 2019). Multilingual education also contributes to sustainable development by maintaining minority groups' languages, cultural and linguistic diversity, and, thus, contributing to inclusive societies (UNESCO, 2025). Namely, by preserving and promoting minority languages through education, cultural and linguistic diversity is safeguarded, while communities preserve their identities. At the same time, multilingual education by reducing dropout rates and improving educational outcomes for marginalized groups fosters economic prosperity, as refugees/migrants have more chances to access higher education and vocational training, get equipped with the necessary skills to cope with the complexities of modern world, breaking, thus, the cycle of poverty and yielding positive results for their families, societies, and economies. In this way, multilingual education by turning diversity into an asset for both majority and minority groups contributes to reducing inequalities and prejudices for socially vulnerable populations, such as refugees/migrants, fosters a more harmonious and inclusive society, and promotes economic prosperity for all its members. Finally, by acknowledging and integrating minority languages into education, we ensure the longevity of linguistic and cultural diversity and provide learners with the proper skills and practices to face environmental challenges, such as energy consumption, natural resource reduction, and, thereby, support green economies.

Considering the cognitive, social, and economic benefits of multilingual education (Bialystok, 2021; Cummins, 2021), it is essential to start its implementation from the early years, as multilingualism is both a human trait and an effective educational approach. Good quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) programmes foster children's cognitive, linguistic, socioemotional, and academic performance as well as their overall well-being (European Commission, 2021). Disadvantaged children, particularly, such as refugees/migrants, whose lives are disrupted benefit the most from good quality ECEC, a critical period for disadvantaged students, as at this stage of education possible learning gaps can be detected deterring lower school performance and future drop-outs, and, ultimately reduce educational equalities (European Commission, 2021; UNESCO, 2021). However, research indicates that disadvantaged children have fewer chances to enroll in ECEC than their peers and that a substantial number of disadvantaged children never attend ECEC (European Commission, 2021), who often have lower school performance and higher drop-out rate because of the different SES, language and culture differences, disrupted school experience, discrimination, inadequate quality of instruction, and lack of parental involvement (UNESCO, 2021). One of the key actions suggested to promote a high-quality inclusive ECEC for all children is the implementation of multilingual education (Council of Europe, 2022; UNESCO, 2025).

UNESCO (2011, 2021), UNICEF (2019), and the European Commission (2021) advocated children's right to quality education in the languages they know, which boosts their academic performance and social inclusion, supports emotional and intellectual development, enhances school readiness, and preserves their cultural identity. Namely, using children's L1 in ECEC helps them enhance early literacy and numeracy skills, further empowering marginalized learners, as culturally-responsive pedagogies improve learning outcomes (Paris & Alim, 2017). When children feel that they reap the benefits of teaching, their socioemotional development is boosted, as

their self-esteem and self-confidence are increased (Farndale et al., 2016). Moreover, according to research, the more a child's L1 is developed, the more easily he/she acquires an additional language, as there is a cognitive and linguistic foundation, which facilitates language learning (Cummins, 2021). When multilingual education is applied in early years, it also enhances educational access and supports full inclusion of marginalized children and their parents, while reducing the chances of early school leaving and school failure (Council of Europe, 2022; UNESCO, 2011). Additionally, research indicated that language disparities are one of the barriers that discourage minority parents from communicating with teachers and schools, restricting their ability to actively participate in their children's education (Bachtsiavanou, Karanikola, & Palaiologou, 2023; Hajisoteriou & Angelides, 2016; Macleod & Tett, 2019). So, using a child's home language in early education helps bridge the gap between experiences at home and at school, which further contributes to children's academic achievement and their smoother transition from the home-based learning style to a more structured school environment (UNESCO, 2025).

Overall, multilingual education that draws on children's languages and cultures contributes to inclusive and cohesive schools and societies, as valuing learners' diversity ensures a smoother transition into formal education and enhances parental engagement, ultimately improving the learning experience. Thus, if we want our societies and economies to thrive, we should support everyone who is part of society from the first years of their lives, which is associated with later success in life (UNESCO, 2021; UNICEF, 2019).

### 3. Multilingual education in practice

Despite the benefits of multilingual education (improving learning outcomes, enhancing access and inclusion, supporting sustainable development) (Bialystok, 2021), monolingualism in the official languages is still the norm worldwide, as students, parents, and teachers usually resist schooling in L1 (UNESCO, 2025). Newly arrived migrant/refugee students are usually placed in mainstream classes and at preparatory/reception classes, mainly emphasizing the official language learning (European Commission/ EACEA/Eurydice, 2019). According to research, significant challenges are mentioned that hinder the effective implementation of multilingual education in practice. Among these are issues, such as policy conflicts, insufficiently trained teachers, a shortage of multilingual teaching materials and resources (Kirsch, 2021; Knudsen et al., 2020; Schwartz et al., 2023; Schwartz et al., 2024).

As far as Greece is concerned, it has officially adopted the following measures for refugee/migrant education: a) Reception Classes (Law 1404/1983), b) intercultural schools (Law 2413/96), c) afternoon Reception Facilities for Refugee Education (RFRE) (Official Government Gazette 3049 B'/23092016) -established in public schools near refugee camps for children aged from 6 to 15 years old-, d) kindergartens inside the RICs to prepare children for primary school (Official Government Gazette 3502/2016/B/31-10-2016) (Greek Scientific Committee for the Support of Refugee Children, 2017). Concurrently, new curricula have been recently launched that value student linguistic and cultural diversity. Despite the steps made to include refugee/migrant students in education, there is a way ahead for implementing teaching policies and practices that value children's home languages and cultures. According to research, refugee/migrant students, multilingualism remains "invisible" in the Greek state schools, as teachers mainly focus on the official language learning, Greek, expressing their concern about children's first language (L1) use (Chatzidaki & Tsokalidou, 2021; Fotiadou et al., 2022; Gkaintartzi, Kiliari, & Tsokalidou, 2015; Manoli, Mpentai, & Stellakis, 2025; Michala et al., 2024). The educators' difficulties in implementing multilingual practices can be mainly attributed to the monolingual policy adopted by Greece that emphasizes the dominant language learning (Fotiadou et al., 2022; Gkaintartzi,

Kiliari, & Tsokalidou, 2015), thereby reducing the visibility of student multilingualism and limiting the potential benefits of multilingual education.

It goes without saying that supporting multilingual students cannot be achieved without joint efforts among many stakeholders, such as Ministries of Education, policymakers, academia members, teacher educators, teachers, parents, communities, and the whole society (Manoli, Mpentai, & Stellakis, 2025; UNESCO, 2011, 2025). To foster learning spaces, especially in early education, that address the needs of linguistically and culturally diverse students, emphasis should be put on inclusive policies, new curricula, updated teaching materials, teacher training, and devoted teachers (Manoli, Mpentai, & Stellakis, 2025; Temiz, 2022). More specifically, an analysis of the sociolinguistic and educational context of each country should be conducted to promote inclusive educational policies based on language rights and implement the most effective programme of multilingual education, ensuring learners' right to instruction in languages they are familiar with. Moreover, the national educational policy should promote multilingual competence development (European Commission, 2019), which should be incorporated into the curricula from the early years, prioritizing home language use to facilitate literacy, language, and numeracy skill development and enhancing learners' identity. At the same time, appropriate culturally-responsive teaching materials should be designed according to multilingual learners' differentiated needs to ensure all learners' access to the content knowledge and value learners' linguistic and cultural diversity (Manoli, Mpentai, & Stellakis, 2025; UNESCO, 2011, 2025). Undoubtedly, the communities can have a prominent role in the process of multilingual education implementation, curriculum, and teaching material development. In this context, policies that emphasize the role of community and parent involvement in the multilingual education implementation should be promoted. Thus, forging relationships with parents/caregivers and communities is critical to enhance learning outcomes, especially during early education, and contribute to a smoother transition from home to kindergarten, children's first educational context. Furthermore, multilingual education should be integrated into teacher development programmes, as it is more about a mindset than a specific language approach. Namely, proper pre-service and in-service training based on multilingual education is needed to make teachers familiar with inclusive practices with the aim to foster a supportive, engaging, and culturally-responsive learning environment. In the effort to implement multilingual education, school leaders also play a critical role in supporting its implementation. Last but not least, each state should ensure financial support so that multilingual education can move from theory into practice.

### 3.1 The role of academia

Universities and academia members are key agents not only in knowledge transmission and individuals' training and development, but also in supporting multilingual education implementation. More specifically, academia members should collaborate with government agencies, such as Ministries of Education, to design inclusive policies that align with the goals and rationale of multilingual education to meet the demands of highly diverse classrooms (UNESCO, 2011, 2025). Moreover, academia members need to cooperate with policymakers to update and design new curricula for all grades of education and reframe teacher development programs oriented to multilingual education with the aim to disrupt monolingual policies and provide a more inclusive educational and social basis for all students (European Commission, 2021; UNESCO, 2011, 2025; UNICEF, 2019). Thus, there is a need to provide continuous and practice-oriented teacher development programmes based on multilingual education to help in-service teachers change their mindset and familiarize them with inclusive and pluralistic practices that value students' funds of knowledge, as pertinent research indicated that teachers received little training or that most of the programs participated in were theory-based (e.g., Fotiadou et al., 2022; Gkaintartzi,

Kiliari, & Tsokalidou, 2015; Manoli, Mpentai, & Stellakis, 2025; Michala et al., 2024). However, initial teacher preparation is of the utmost importance, so academia members should enrich the curricula of tertiary education with more (compulsory) multilingually and interculturally oriented courses to educate pre-service teachers how to apply culturally-responsive practices, such as valuing students' multilingualism and bridging home-school cooperation, with the aim to support their learning and reinforce their language and cultural identities. In this context, both pre-service and in-service training are needed to achieve teachers' constant reskilling and upskilling and render them able to embrace students' multilingualism, adopt a multilingual mindset, and apply multilingual approaches and practices (Manoli et al., 2025; Szczepaniak-Kozak et al., 2023). Additionally, academia members based on their expertise and knowledge could contribute to the designing of diversity-friendly teaching materials for all grades of education -formal and non-formal- that value students' funds of knowledge tailored for multilingual students' various needs, ages, and levels to transform the invisibility of student multilingualism into an advantage not only for refugee/migrant students but for majority groups, especially in countries that adopt monolingual policies, such as Greece (Chatzidaki & Tsokalidou, 2021; Michala et al., 2024). At the same time, universities and academia members through research on the effectiveness of multilingual education and research dissemination can contribute to the understanding of the impact of multilingualism in the educational and broader societal context and eventually to implementing multilingual education more effectively (Council of Europe, 2022; UNESCO, 2011, 2025).

Despite the key role of academia members not only in knowledge transmission but also in individuals' training and development, research on current academic interventions in teacher training related to multilingual education is rather limited. More specifically, Papadopoulou et al. (2019) intended to explore the effectiveness of a multimodal literacy course on 20 university students' ability to implement multimodality in ECEC, indicating the positive impact of raising students' awareness of applying multimodal pedagogies in schools. Additionally, Kompiadou, Tsokalidou, and Tsioumis (2020) aimed to support students' L1 and cultures through home-based and classroom-based activities, family involvement, and teachers' professionalization using ICT environments in ECEC in the context of a European project; the research findings indicated the effectiveness of the programme on promoting home-school collaboration, affirming minority identities, and empowering their "voices" and funds of knowledge, especially highlighting the contribution of family involvement not only for minority families and their children but also for teachers. Moreover, Manoli, Mpentai, and Stellakis (2025) aimed to educate and explore the practices of 10 in-service early childhood teachers being hired by the Ministry of Education to work in Refugee Identification Centres and four pre-service teachers of the Department of Educational Sciences and Early Childhood Education of the University of Patras selected to work in the Refugee Identification Centres on the islands of the eastern Aegean through a programme implemented under the auspices of the Greek Ministry of Education and the University of Patras; the research findings revealed that both pre-service and in-service teachers were rather unprepared to work effectively with refugees, though efforts were made to consider students' funds of knowledge, while emphasizing Greek knowledge development. Manoli (2025) also aimed at exploring whether a multiliteracies course could develop 20 pre-service teachers' multiliteracies skills, who attended the Department of Educational Sciences and Early Childhood Education of the University of Patras, and help them design and apply teaching material based on the four-knowledge process of multiliteracies in the highly diverse classrooms of kindergarten, demonstrating that the course had a positive impact on raising pre-service students' knowledge of multiliteracies and empowering them to design learning experiences using diverse semiotic

resources and linguistic repertoires. Similarly, Bisiri and Manoli (2025) explored the impact of a four-month teacher professional development programme designed to enhance multilingual awareness among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) educators in ECEC settings, revealing that the teachers managed to develop multiliteracies skills and designed multilingual and multimodal material suitable for contemporary ECEC classrooms.

#### 4. Concluding remarks

Acknowledging the global reality of multilingualism -it is both a fundamental human characteristic and an essential educational approach- the challenges and the opportunities it presents not only for minority but also for majority groups, integrating multilingual education into policy and practice is critical, as multilingual education is not just about language; it creates inclusive and equitable educational settings where every form of diversity is valued. In fact, multilingual education is more than an approach; it is a mindset, an integral part of a broader vision of inclusive education that regards diversity as an asset rather than a barrier, contributing, thus, to inclusive and cohesive schools and societies where differences are viewed as strengths (UNESCO, 2025). Despite the key role of academia members in effectively applying multilingual education and achieving the vision of inclusion and equity, there is rather limited research on the impact of academic interventions in teacher training. Therefore, more empirical research is needed to illustrate *how* academia has successfully navigated policy conflicts and trained teachers effectively in practice, thereby shifting the emphasis from *policy development* to necessary *action* and demonstrable *impact*, which should be applied during early education, considering the contribution of the formative years to children's learning and overall development.

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### XIII. An Overview of Child Rights Curricula & Instruction in Albania since the 1990s

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#### Abstract

Since the early 1990s, Albania has undergone a breakthrough transformation in its educational and institutional approach to child rights, following the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1992. This paper examines the evolution of child rights education in Albania, mapping developments across both pre-university and higher education settings. The post-communist period ushered in the depoliticization of curricula, the elimination of ideological content, and the introduction of human rights education with increasing alignment to international standards. While primary and secondary education integrated child rights more rapidly – supported by international donors and national reform bodies – higher education institutions adopted these changes more gradually due to structural inertia and the persistence of ideologically shaped academic cultures. Since the early 2000s, universities such as the University of Tirana, Shkodra, Elbasan, and Vlora progressively embedded child rights within study programmes in Social Work, Law, Education, and Psychology, often through modules rather than standalone courses. Despite notable progress, challenges persist, including limited access to contemporary Albanian-language resources, lack of pedagogical training among staff, and a gap between theory and practical application. This survey paper shall conclude by highlighting both the strengths and shortcomings of current curricula, and propose strategic recommendations at academic, institutional, and policy levels to strengthen child rights education, also by leveraging the potential of digital tools in the promotion of child rights as a civic and professional imperative in Albania’s ongoing democratic development, as has been experienced in the context of the ERASMUS+ CBHE Homo Digitalis project No. 101129182 by the use of such tools in humanities and educational media. In this context, the paper also presents the first formative efforts to establish a Child Rights Centre at LOGOS University College, the first of its kind in Albania.

**KEYWORDS:** Child rights in Albanian HEI’s curricula; Childre’s rights in “Logos” University College; Advantages and challenges in using Child rights in curricula

## 1. Child rights are not choices – they are obligations for any society that seeks to be human

Human rights and child rights are an essential part of international law and practice, being considered one of the main pillars of the development of just and democratic societies. In Albania, as part of the international community, great strides have been made to protect these rights, but challenges and the need for more commitment still remain. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) was adopted on 20 November 1989 by the United Nations General Assembly. Albania ratified this Convention on 27 February 1992 (Bayefsky, 2001; Arkiva e Punëve të Jashtme, date 27 February 1992), making it a legally binding instrument at the national level. With this ratification, Albania commits itself to respecting and protecting the rights of children, including the rights to protection, development, and participation. Depoliticization of the education system, to ensure a more impartial, professional and development-oriented education for pupils and society in a fair and equal manner, began precisely this year.

Before the 1990s, education in Albania was deeply politicized. Under the communist regime, education served as an ideological tool to spread and support indoctrinated political and moral education. Books, curricula, and teachers themselves were politically controlled. The ideological orientation of Albanian education is best illustrated by the 1976 Constitution, particularly in the section titled “C. Education, Science, Culture” in Articles 32 and 33, which state that: “The State carries out extensive ideological and cultural activities for the communist education of workers and for the formation of the new man. The State pays special attention to the comprehensive development and education of the younger generation in the spirit of socialism and communism.” In the Article 33 the decentralized organization of Albanian education across all its aspects is presented, stating that “Education in the Popular Socialist Republic of Albania is organized and directed by the State, is provided for all and for free; it is based on the Marxist-Leninist approach and combines instruction with productive labour as well as with physical and military education. The education follows the best traditions of the national, secular Albanian school” (Law Nr. 5506, dated 28.12.1976, Kushtetuta e Republikës Popullore Socialiste E Shqipërisë, Mëhilli 2016: 50).

After 1990, with the fall of the communist regime and the transition to multi-party democracy, a process of depoliticization of education began, mainly as part of broader democratizing reforms and the transition from a totalitarian to a democratic system. Albania was ranked as the most impoverished country in Europe, with its Gross National Product (GNP) per capita estimated at only around US\$380 (Karafili, Aliaj, Sula., 2024: 1; World Bank Group: 2015).

Among the first acts of depoliticization can be mentioned:

- (1) The abolition of ideological subjects, such as political and moral education through indoctrination.
- (2) The reform of school curricula, to adapt them to international standards and democratic reality.
- (3) The replacement of textbooks, to eliminate propaganda content.
- (4) The training of experts and teachers. (Karafili, Aliaj, Sula., 2024; Garunja 2018: 183-185)

Pre-university education (k-12) was characterized by a faster pace of depoliticization and was expressed by:

### 1.1 The sudden change of curricula and textbooks

Following the collapse of the communist regime, Albania’s education system faced the urgent task of redefining its role in a democratic society. The Constitutional legislation and the law on pre-university education defined the secular character of education and prohibited ideological and religious indoctrination in schools. These changes were incorporated into the provisions of Law No. 7952, dated 21.6.1995 “On the Pre-University Education System.” Article 7 emphasized that “The Public pre-university education has a secular character. In public educational institutions,

ideological and religious indoctrination is prohibited” implying that the promotion of political ideology and religious indoctrination during the teaching process was no longer permitted in public education, as part of the policy of depoliticization in pre-university (Law Nr. 7952, dated 21.6.1995, Kuvendi Popullor i Republikës së Shqipërisë).

Reforms in educational content (curricula and textbooks) after 1992 introduced profound changes in both content and orientation, aiming to replace ideological material with scientific, civic, and neutral content, as part of the process of transforming education after the fall of the communist regime. Materials that had long served as tools of political indoctrination were rapidly withdrawn from circulation, reflecting the country’s rejection of authoritarian ideology. In their place, new or provisional publications were introduced, stripped of overt propaganda and designed to create a more neutral learning environment. A particularly symbolic reform was the immediate removal of the subject of politically and morally indoctrinated education from both 8-year schools and high schools, a subject that had previously been central to shaping pupils’ approach (Lichnofsky, Pandelejmoni, Stojanov 2017:10). This measure represented not only a curricular change but also a deliberate distancing from the political dogma that had permeated education for decades.

In addition, the secondary 8-year school programmes involved content on human and child rights, as well as topics on health education (including sexually transmitted diseases such as AIDS), drug abuse etc. The initiative to promote human and child rights was a collaborative effort between the Ministry of Education (ME) and the European Network for Health. Civil society organizations, such as the National Centre for Health Education and the Association of Environmental Educators, also participated in parts of this program. During the first curricular reform period (1992–1996), UNICEF and the Soros Foundation provided ongoing financial support for the implementation of these projects (Sota 2014: 503).

Some subjects, such as Moral-Political Education (Bejleri 1987), which was taught before 1990, were replaced in 1992 with Social Education in primary schools and Civic Education in secondary schools (Mato, Mita, Grillo 1992; Mato, Mita, Grillo 1995; Mato, Mita, Grillo 1995; Mato, Mita, Grillo 1997; Mato 1998). In high schools, subjects like “History of the Party” (first and second years) (Baruti, Grillo, Bregu 1978; Instituti i Studimeve Marksiste - Leniniste pranë K.Q.të P.P.Sh. 1983), “Dialectical and Historical Materialism” (third year) (Uçi & Popa 1974; Universiteti i Tiranës 1981) and “Political Economy” (fourth year) (Akademia e Shkencave 1979; Akademia e Shkencave 1987) were removed from the curriculum and replaced with new courses focused on academic, civic, and scientific knowledge. These new courses included Psychology (Spiro 1995; Karaj 2004; Xhakollari 2017), Civic Education, and Revised Philosophy while in 1994 Sociology and Introduction to Philosophy (Fuga 1994; Hersh 1995; Didier 1994) were added reflecting the broader process of depoliticizing education and modernizing the curriculum.

The abruptness of these reforms demonstrates the urgency with which Albania sought to realign its educational system with democratic principles and international standards. At the same time, the rapid pace of change highlights the challenges of transitioning from an ideologically controlled system to one more open and pluralistic. Overall, the post-1990 reforms in curricula and textbooks marked a foundational step in the modernization and democratization of Albania’s education system.

### 1.2 Educational democratization reforms initiated by the State and international donors

From the early 1990s onward, Albanian educational reforms saw increasing involvement both by the state and by international donors, especially in the domain of basic (pre-university) education. Organizations such as UNESCO, UNICEF, and USAID played significant roles in promoting

standards of democratic education, political neutrality, and the elimination of ideological content in school curricula (World Bank, 2014; UNICEF Albania, 2024). These donor-supported reforms emphasized not just infrastructure and governance, but also the quality and content of instruction, seeking to ensure that textbooks, teaching materials, and pedagogical approaches reflected pluralistic and non-partisan values. Civil society actors, often in partnership with donors, also contributed through awareness-raising initiatives and teacher training to support these reforms. However, some claims – such as the establishment in 2001 of rights education centres across all Albanian cities, sponsored by NOVIB, CORDAID, TROCAIRE, UNESCO, UNICEF (Ministria e Edukimit dhe Shkencës & UNESCO 2002: 10-11), and under the supervision of the Albanian Centre for Human Rights – require further documentation to verify their scope and implementation etc.

In contrast to the rapid depoliticization seen in pre-university education, universities in Albania underwent this process more slowly, largely because of their more rigid, conservative structures and the enduring influence of faculty who were closely tied to the old ideological regime. Departments such as Political Science, History, and Philosophy have retained traces of ideological content longer than other disciplines, and reforms to university curricula have often required more profound structural changes that could not be implemented immediately. The higher-education reform literature confirms that, following the regime change in 1990, substantial inertia characterised higher education institutions, with centralized control over academic programmes and slower shifts toward academic freedom and autonomy (Karafili, Aliaj, Sula, & Tafaj, 2024).

Over time, however, some Albanian universities have begun to integrate modules and courses dealing with child rights within Social Sciences, Law, Psychology, and Social Work curricula, particularly after national legal reforms such as the adoption of the Family Code. For instance, the University of Tirana partnered with UNICEF to strengthen its social work curriculum to better address social welfare, protection, and rights-based content (University of Tirana/ UNICEF Albania, 2025). Moreover, international collaborations like EDULAW projects have helped teacher training programmes and education faculties introduce law and rights modules, contributing to the spread of rights-based education in higher learning (EDULAW, 2016-2019). In sum, child rights issues have started to occupy a growing role in higher education in Albania by the 2000s, reflecting the country's increasing commitment to legal and institutional protection of children, though some of the details of timing, scale, and which institutions participated are still under-documented.

## 2. HEI's and study programmes offering elements of child rights

Today, several universities in Albania have introduced child rights elements in their study programmes' curricula, offering opportunities for students to delve deeper into this important field. These programmes are more often than not to be found in such disciplines as Social Sciences (including Psychology, Social Work), Law, and Education. Some HEIs known to have included child rights' elements in their curricula are:

### 2.1 The University of Tirana (UT)

The University of Tirana, especially in the Faculty of Social Sciences and the Faculty of Law, has included topics related to child rights in its study programmes. Study programmes in the fields of Social Work and Political Science and Administration offer opportunities for students to specialize in the protection of child rights. This university also has collaborations with international organizations and has developed seminars, trainings, and activities for students, where policies and laws for the protection of child rights are discussed (University of Tirana & UNICEF Albania, 2025). This institution is particularly significant because it has a long history and opportunities to engage with government and international organizations working to protect child rights. This

collaboration provides students with valuable experience in this regard.

### 2.2 The University of Shkodra “Luigj Gurakuqi”

This university is known for its focus on Social Sciences, as well as on branches related to social care and child protection. The University of Shkodra “Luigj Gurakuqi” has made some strides toward engaging students in child-rights and protection topics, especially through its Social Sciences faculty. For example, in October 2023 an information session was held with students of the Social Work and Psychology Department in Shkodra, together with local child protection professionals and international partners, to raise awareness about trafficking and child protection issues (Terre des hommes/University of Shkodra, 2023). Additionally, in January 2014 a meeting on isolated children due to blood feuds was co-organized by the Ministry of Education, the University, and regional educational offices, involving students and professors across multiple departments—including Law and Social Work. (University of Shkodra, 2014) These events suggest institutional interest in child protection policy and practical training. However, explicit, formal programmes or curricula dedicated solely to child rights and long-term field project options for students are less clearly documented in accessible sources. The University of Shkodra has provided opportunities for students to be directly involved in the study of child rights and the implementation of these policies in the field.

### 2.3 The “Aleksandër Xhuvani” University of Elbasan

The “Aleksandër Xhuvani” University of Elbasan offers study programmes in Social Sciences, Psychology, and Social Work that address dimensions of children's protection and welfare. For example, the Faculty of Law at Elbasan recently inaugurated a Law Clinic in collaboration with OSBE, which combines legal education with *pro bono* legal services for citizens in need, thereby giving students practical exposure to justice issues including those affecting vulnerable groups (University of Elbasan & OSBE, 2025). Such institutional collaborations suggest that the university is engaging with external organizations in promoting both education and protection of rights. The University of Elbasan has supported children in need through training, collaborative legal services, and social welfare-oriented studies.

### 2.4 The University of Vloa “Ismail Qemali”

The University of Vloa “Ismail Qemali”, through its Faculties of Social Sciences and the Faculty of Education, offers programmes that include the protection and promotion of child rights. For example, Vloa hosts community service centres for children with disabilities, providing early intervention, therapy, and support both to children and their parents, in collaboration with NGOs and with municipal authorities. In addition, this university has collaborated with international organizations to provide opportunities for students to engage in addressing direct children's issues and protecting their rights. Training initiatives such as the “Youth Voice for Justice and Rights” project have included sessions in Vloa aiming to improve the handling of minors in the justice system, including friendly interviewing techniques for abused victims (Terre des hommes, 2024). The relevance of this case lies in the fact that the University of Vloa has a strategic position to engage in the protection of child rights, due to its engagement with international projects and the opportunity to provide educational opportunities in this field.

### 2.5 LOGOS University College

Logos University College, through the Faculty of Humanities and Linguistic Communication, places strong emphasis on the promotion and protection of child rights within its academic mission. In particular, the Department of Pedagogy and Psychology plays a central role in this commitment by offering two Bachelor study programmes in Teacher Training in Preschool Education and in Social Work. Both programmes systematically integrate themes related to child rights as part of their interdisciplinary curriculum. These topics are embedded across various courses, addressing

key issues such as child protection, child development, inclusive education, social welfare, ethical responsibilities, and the legal framework for safeguarding child rights. Through this approach, students are equipped with the knowledge, values, and professional competencies needed to support children's well-being and advocate for their rights in educational and social contexts.

Beyond the academic programmes, the Department of Pedagogy and Psychology has further strengthened its institutional commitment to child rights through the establishment of the Centre for Child Rights, recently opened by Senate Decision No. 16, dated 22.05.2025. The creation of the Centre was the outcome of an agreement with UNICEF Albania and the result of the persistent support and advocacy of Dr. Ghassan Khalil. The Centre aims to serve as a hub for research, training, awareness-raising activities, and community engagement, focusing on the promotion of child rights at both national and international levels. It focuses on collaboration between students, academic staff, and external stakeholders, contributing to evidence-based practices in education and social services.

Logos University College through its study programmes, interdisciplinary teaching, and the newly established Centre for Child rights, is a sound and systematic approach to fostering a culture of respect, protection, and advocacy for child rights.

### **2.6 Albanian University**

The Albanian University, a non-public higher education institution, through its Faculty of Social Sciences is also to be added. Two of this Faculty's departments, the Department of General Psychology and the Department of Legal and Political-Administrative Sciences offer study programmes that integrate elements of child rights and their protection within the curriculum.

The Department of General Psychology offers first and second cycle study programmes where such elements are introduced: Bachelor in General Psychology, Professional Master in School Psychology, Professional Master in Clinical Psychology, Master of Science in Clinical Psychology. More specifically the Psychology study programmes at the Albanian University offer different academic levels from undergraduate to advanced postgraduate levels, combining theoretical foundations with practical professional training. The Bachelor's degree in General Psychology prepares students to understand human behaviour, psychosocial challenges, and ethical responsibilities, with a particular focus on children and adolescents through clinical practice and internships. The Master's degree in School Psychology is specifically designed to train professionals to support students' emotional, social, and educational development within the school system, equipping graduates to work in pre-university education, community centres, and policy-making institutions. The Master's degrees in Clinical Psychology (Professional and MSc) emphasize evidence-based therapeutic methods, modern intervention techniques, and multidisciplinary treatment approaches, preparing graduates for work in hospitals, mental health centres, research institutions, and private practice.

Across all programmes, special attention is given to children's and adolescents' well-being, protection, and rights. Students are trained to address mental health needs, promote healthy development, and support vulnerable groups, including children facing psychological, social, or educational challenges. Courses cover ethical standards, child protection frameworks, psychosocial support, and inclusive practices, ensuring that future psychologists are equipped to advocate for child rights in clinical, educational, and community settings. Through this integrated approach, the programmes contribute to building professionals who not only provide psychological services but also actively promote the dignity, safety, and rights of children.

The Department of Legal and Political-Administrative Sciences offers the Professional Master in Criminal Sciences, licensed from 2009, which consists of 60 credits (ECTS) in total. This program focuses in teaching students with specialized knowledge in criminal law and procedural practice,

emphasizing respect for human rights. The program includes training on legal protections and safeguards for vulnerable populations, including children and minors. Students learn to plan and execute investigative and judicial actions that uphold justice while ensuring the rights of all individuals are respected. Through this program, students gain both practical skills and ethical awareness to contribute effectively to the enforcement of justice and the protection of child rights.

### **2.7 Barleti University**

The Barleti University has two Faculties addressing issues related to child rights: the Faculty of Economics, Governance and Law and the Faculty of Social Sciences, Tourism and Sports. The Department of Law, through its integrated Master of Science in Law program, combines academic expertise and practical experience in the justice system, preparing students to uphold legal standards and protect the rights of vulnerable groups, including children.

The Department of Education Sciences & Professional Training offers programmes in teaching, leadership, and applied education, including Special Education, Language and Communication, and Social Sciences. These programmes integrate child rights and protection into the curriculum, aimed at providing future educators with the knowledge, skills, and ethical awareness necessary to promote children's well-being in schools and educational settings.

### **2.8 The "Aleksander Moisiu" University, Durrës**

The Faculty of Education at Aleksandër Moisiu University includes three departments (The Department of Pedagogy, The Department of Sociology, The Department of Psychology) and the Centre for Continuing Education that integrate topics related to child rights and protection. The Department of Pedagogy offers programmes such as in Primary Education, Preschool Education, Teacher Training in Primary Education, and Teacher in Special Education. These programmes focus on ensuring that future educators are prepared to create safe, inclusive, and supportive learning environments. Students gain both theoretical knowledge and practical teaching experience to foster children's holistic development while promoting ethical and professional approaches in educational settings.

The Department of Sociology offers a Bachelor's program in Social Work and a Professional Master's (60 ECTS) in Social and Community Services. These programmes emphasize the protection and advocacy of vulnerable populations, including children, providing students with the skills to address social challenges and support child welfare through community and social services. Graduates are prepared to work in non-governmental organizations, public institutions, and community centres focused on safeguarding child rights and promoting social inclusion.

The Department of Psychology provides three programmes that integrate child rights into the curriculum: the Bachelor in Psychology, the Professional Master in School and Developmental Psychology, and the Master of Science in Social Science Teaching. Students are trained, among other topics, to understand children's cognitive, emotional, and social development, applying evidence-based and ethical practices to support and protect minors. The programmes prepare graduates for roles in schools, counselling centres, and research institutions where child rights and well-being are a priority.

Finally, the Centre for Continuing Education within the Faculty of Education offers a two-year professional program titled "Educator for Ages 0-3" and a Master of Science in Continuing Education (120 ECTS). These programmes focus on early childhood education and lifelong learning, embedding child protection and rights as central elements of professional training. Graduates are equipped to support young children's development and apply best practices that safeguard their rights in educational and care settings.

### **2.9 The "Eqrem Çabej" University of Gjirokastra**

The University "Eqrem Çabej" of Gjirokastra includes a Faculty of Education and Social

Sciences, which contributes in preparing future educators and promoting child rights through its academic programmes. Within this faculty, the Department of Educational Science and Teaching Methodology offers a range of programmes that integrate inclusive learning, the protection and development of children. The department provides a Bachelor's program in Preschool Education and a Bachelor's program in Elementary Education, both of which incorporate courses and practices that emphasize child rights, inclusive learning, and safe educational environments. Professional Master programmes in Primary Education Teacher Training (up to Grade IV) and in Special Education Teaching, focus on equipping educators with the knowledge and practical skills to address diverse learning needs, advocate for children's well-being, and ensure the protection of vulnerable groups within school settings. Additionally, the Master of Science in Early Childhood Development and Education is designed to provide advanced training in child development, learning theories, and educational interventions, with a strong focus on safeguarding child rights from early stages. Across all programmes, students are exposed to interdisciplinary approaches that combine educational theory, teaching methodology, and ethical responsibilities, preparing them to foster environments that respect, promote, and protect the rights of every child.

### 2.10 "Fan Noli" University of Korça

The last university on the list, taken as a reference regarding programmes that integrate elements of child rights, is the "Fan Noli" University of Korça. This University includes a Faculty of Education and Philology, which offers programmes in Teacher Training in Primary Education, Teacher Training in Preschool Education, and a two-year Professional Master study programme in Infancy and Early Childhood Education. These programmes integrate child rights into their curriculum in a similar fashion to the aforementioned programmes.

## 3. Courses delivered in HEI's

In teaching programmes in Albanian universities, the inclusion of topics related to child rights has become increasingly evident, especially after educational reforms and the orientation towards international standards for the protection and education of children. These rights are not studied as separate subjects, but are included as modules, sub-topics or separate chapters within existing courses. Here are some of the courses where issues related to child rights are addressed in the framework of teacher training:

### 3.1 Children's Development Psychology

This course addresses the psychological, emotional, and social development of children. It provides students with knowledge of children's needs and rights at each developmental stage, and examines the impact of violence, discrimination, or exclusion on child development. (Karaj, 2004, Xhakollari 2017, Agaj & Duli 2018).

### 3.2 General Pedagogy and Early Childhood Pedagogy

The General Pedagogy and Early Childhood Pedagogy course focuses on the fundamental principles of education and child development in early childhood. It emphasizes inclusive education and the protection of child rights as core values of the teaching process. Special attention is given to teaching methods that respect the dignity, freedom, and individuality of the child. The course also examines the role of the teacher as a pedagogical guide who supports children's emotional, social, and cognitive development. Furthermore, it prepares future educators to create a safe, ethical, and child-centred learning environment (Mialaret 1995, Dyla 1995, Murati 1998, Kraja 2001, Çelmeta & Mato 2024).

### 3.3 Ethics and Civic Education

The course Ethics and Civic Education introduces students to fundamental ethical principles and civic values within a social and educational context. It emphasizes human rights and child rights as essential components of moral and civic development. The course explores the

relationship between the individual, society, and the environment, highlighting responsible citizenship and social awareness. Special attention is given to the role of the school in shaping democratic attitudes and ethical behaviour among young learners. It also examines the teacher's professional responsibilities in respecting, protecting, and promoting pupils' rights. Through age-appropriate civic education content, the course fosters respect, cooperation, and social responsibility (Çelmeta, Mita, Grillo 1992, Mato 1995, Mato 1997, Mato 1998).

### 3.4 Inclusive Education / Special Needs

The course Inclusive Education / Special Needs focuses on ensuring the right of every child to quality education without discrimination. It emphasizes inclusive practices that support the participation of children with disabilities in regular classroom settings. The course introduces contemporary approaches to special education and inclusive pedagogy. Special attention is given to adapting teaching methods to meet diverse learning needs. It also explores strategies for collaboration between teachers, families, and support services. Overall, the course prepares future educators to create accessible, respectful, and inclusive learning environments for all children (Agaj & Duli 2014, ASCAP – UNICEF 2015, Çelmeta, Mita, Morina, 2021, Çelmeta, Kamani, Morina 2021).

### 3.5 Educational Legislation

The course Educational Legislation provides an overview of national and international legal frameworks governing pre-university education. It focuses on the protection of child rights within the educational system. Special attention is given to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its application in school contexts. The course analyses the legal responsibilities of educational institutions and professionals. Overall, it prepares future educators to understand and apply educational laws ethically and effectively (Botim i Qendrës së Publikimeve Zyrtare 2010, Lauwers & Zaçellari 2019).

### 3.6 Classroom Management and Student Relations

The course Classroom Management and Student Relations focuses on creating a positive, safe, and respectful learning environment. It introduces psychological and pedagogical techniques for effective classroom organisation and student engagement. The course emphasises the protection of pupils' emotional and psychological rights. Special attention is given to non-violent discipline and constructive behaviour management strategies. It also highlights the importance of respecting the child's voice and opinions in the learning process. The course explores teacher-student relationships based on trust, empathy, and mutual respect (Karaj 2008, Garo 2011, Gusho 2019).

### 3.7 Didactics of Primary/Preschool Education

This course includes teaching methods that promote active participation and respect for children's voices in the learning process. The course Didactics of Primary/Preschool Education focuses on effective teaching methods for young learners in early childhood and primary education. It emphasizes child-centred approaches that support children's psychological, emotional, and cognitive development. The course introduces practical models, objectives, and instructional strategies adapted to the needs of preschool and primary school pupils. Special attention is given to active learning and meaningful classroom engagement. It promotes respect for children's voices and encourages their participation in the learning process. The course also integrates human rights education as a key component of modern teaching practice (Komiteti Shqiptar i Helsinkit. 1994, Spiro 1995, Mato & Pasho 1995, Wall 1995, Dautaj & Nancy 1995).

## 4. Child Rights Teaching in Higher Education: Potential and Limitations

Preparing teachers to be aware of child rights is essential for creating a safe, fair and inclusive climate in schools. Teachers are often the first people who can identify violations of child rights

(violence, neglect, discrimination) and have a key role in the civic and ethical education of younger generations. Teaching child rights in higher education has several important strengths that make this field not only academically valuable, but also essential for the professional and personal development of teachers and students. Teaching child rights offers significant strengths for teachers, beginning with the enhancement of their role as civic educators, as it raises awareness of their social responsibility to foster a more just and inclusive society (Beqiri 2016, Canning 2022). At the same time, this field supports professional and interdisciplinary development by combining knowledge from pedagogy, law, psychology, and sociology, thereby equipping teachers with the skills needed to address complex and sensitive issues (Öntaş & Çarıkçı 2023). Moreover, since topics related to child rights remain understudied in Albania, educators have unique opportunities to engage in scientific research and contribute to academic publications. Finally, teaching this area encourages critical thinking and ethical reflection, helping teachers to guide thoughtful consideration of issues such as justice, equality, and the adult responsibility in protecting children (Beqiri 2016).

From the students' perspective, studying child rights provides knowledge that enhances both their personal and professional development. It increases their awareness and sensitivity to the needs and rights of children, a fundamental skill for any profession involving minors. This knowledge also equips students with the ability to identify and prevent violations such as abuse, neglect, or discrimination, ensuring they can respond appropriately in real-life situations. Furthermore, a deep understanding of child rights prepares students for the labour market in educational, social, and health sectors, improving the quality of their professional practice. In addition, students develop advocacy skills and learn to actively promote protective policies within their communities and workplaces, while their engagement with these issues often boosts motivation for social involvement, inspiring participation in volunteer projects and community initiatives (Uçuş & Dedeoğlu 2016: 93-94).

The teaching of child rights in Albanian universities is a developing field, but it faces some real difficulties, both for lecturers and students. These challenges are related to both the academic content and the social, cultural and institutional context in which higher education takes place. Lecturers teaching child rights face several notable difficulties that can affect the quality and effectiveness of instruction. A major challenge is the lack of contemporary bibliography in Albanian, as most resources are in foreign languages such as English or French, requiring translation and adaptation. This is compounded by the limited availability of specialized professional training, leaving many lecturers feeling unprepared to address the subject in depth. Additionally, institutional support is often insufficient, with a shortage of modern didactic resources such as practical guides, local case studies, and interactive platforms that could make learning more concrete. Lecturers must also overcome cultural taboos or misunderstandings, as sensitive topics like abuse, gender inequality, or children's participation in decision-making may encounter resistance or stereotypes, making open discussion in the classroom particularly challenging (Cunningham 2020, Duraku, Jahiu, Shllaku 2021: 1-9).

Teaching child rights is not just a theoretical component – it is a transformative process that equips students and teachers with the knowledge, values and competences to build a safer, fairer and more inclusive environment for children. It creates bridges between education and social protection, and positions Higher Education Institutions as a key-actors in the protection of human rights. The main difficulties are related to the lack of resources and pedagogical preparation, the separation of theory from practice, as well as cultural and systemic challenges. However, there is great room for improvement through curriculum reform, teacher training, and linking universities with child protection practices on the ground.

## 5. Challenges

Overcoming the challenges faced by teachers and students in teaching child rights in higher education institutions requires a comprehensive approach that addresses academic, institutional, and practical aspects. For teachers, this includes organising continuous training seminars and workshops on child rights, relevant laws, and international practices, as well as creating standardized, contemporary modules with clear concepts and materials adapted to the Albanian context (Ministria e Shëndetësisë dhe Mbrojtjes Sociale. 2021: 23). Promoting cooperation with international and local organizations, such as UNICEF, UNESCO, and Save the Children, can provide practical expertise, while offering grants and incentives for research can help enrich local literature and support academic projects (Ministria e Shëndetësisë dhe Mbrojtjes Sociale. 2021: 22). For students, deeper integration of child rights into the curriculum is essential, ensuring that the topic is treated comprehensively rather than as a peripheral subject. Developing field practices in institutions that work with children, such as kindergartens, schools, and community centres, allows students to connect theory with real-world experience. Additionally, creating student groups and debate fora encourages discussion, activism, and peer education, while using interactive teaching methods, including real case-studies, simulations, media analysis, and group projects, makes learning more vivid, engaging, and concrete (Ministria e Shëndetësisë dhe Mbrojtjes Sociale. 2021: 21-23).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

At the institutional and policy level, it is recommended to develop a national strategy for university education on child rights, providing a guiding framework that establishes standards and objectives for all higher education institutions offering training in this field. In addition, child rights should be introduced as a criterion in the accreditation of teacher education and social science programmes, ensuring that this component becomes mandatory in assessing the quality and effectiveness of study programmes. To support teaching and learning, digitized materials and resources is essential, including the creation of a national digital platform that offers free access to laws, case studies, international documents, and other educational resources for both teachers and students. The most effective approach is collaborative and interdisciplinary, with higher education institutions, state agencies, and social organizations working together to build sustainable capacities and strengthen the quality of child rights education across the country.

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#### XIV. Parental Agency and Children's Rights Education at the European Court of Human Rights. A Case-Based Inquiry into Legal Culture and Access to Justice

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##### **Abstract**

The act of seeking judicial remedies in matters concerning education and the right to education depends on a range of factors, including cultural values, legal systems, structural conditions, and the development of parental agency. This paper explores how and why parents turn to the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) in response to violations of their children's rights. The paper employs a qualitative analysis of ECtHR judgments, legal frameworks, and secondary literature to examine how cultural norms, legal barriers, and structural inequalities shape parental access to supranational justice. A total of six cases were selected based on thematic relevance and legal impact. Where relevant, media coverage and public discourse are also considered as influencing factors. Focusing on the Albanian context, the case of *X and Others v. Albania* (2022), concerning the educational segregation of Roma and Egyptian children, is used as a central example. An unreported but witnessed case is also included to highlight informal routes of parental grievance expression outside the legal system. The analysis reveals that while parental engagement with the ECtHR is often hindered by limited structural conditions, cultural values and insufficient access to legal aid, it can also serve as a catalyst for legal and policy reform or as a means to challenge existing laws. The paper concludes with recommendations for improving access to justice for marginalized families, including the expansion of legal support services, targeted public awareness campaigns, and inclusive educational policy reforms.

**KEYWORDS:** Parental agency; Right to education; Court; Cultural values; Structural conditions

## 1. Introduction

For centuries, education has evolved from a privilege of the few into a universal and mandatory societal obligation, shared by both the state and educators (Zogla, 2019: 83). Today, the right to education is recognized as a fundamental human right, intrinsically linked to human dignity and social inclusion. It represents one of the clearest examples of how rights defy static boundaries, simultaneously encompassing economic, social, and cultural dimensions (Beiter, 2006: 47). Despite its formal recognition, the enforcement of the right to education often depends on access to legal remedies. In Europe, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) serves as a critical supranational mechanism for addressing violations of this right. The ECtHR has played a significant role in shaping jurisprudence on children's rights and education, offering a venue for redress when domestic legal systems fail to provide adequate protection. However, access to the ECtHR is not automatic; it depends heavily on the agency of individuals - particularly parents - who are willing and able to navigate complex legal systems to seek justice on behalf of their children.

Children, as a legally and socially dependent group, are especially vulnerable to violations of their socio-economic rights. These violations affect them differently than adults, with potentially profound and long-lasting developmental consequences (Nolan, 2014: 123). Because children often lack the capacity to assert their rights independently, it is parents who typically serve as their legal advocates. The decision to pursue legal recourse - especially at the supranational level - requires both awareness and empowerment, which are not equally distributed across all families or societies.

One critical lens through which to understand these disparities is legal culture, defined as the set of attitudes, ideas, expectations, and values that individuals and communities hold regarding legal institutions and rules (Pérez-Perdomo & Friedman, 2003: 2). Like other cultural systems, legal culture can either facilitate or hinder access to justice (Adamopoulos, 2001: 28). As Merry (2006: 3) argues, for human rights to function as transformative tools, they must become embedded in the consciousness and practice of everyday people.

Within this context, parental agency - the capacity of parents to define goals and act independently to secure their children's rights (Kabeer, 1999: 437- 438) - becomes a central concept. Whether or not parents choose to engage with formal legal systems, particularly courts like the ECtHR, is influenced by a combination of internal motivation and external cultural, legal, and structural factors. While the internal motivation is too frequently shaped by religious considerations (Marple, 2017 :151), the cultural dynamics significantly shape the exercise of this agency. In collectivist societies, for example, individuals may prioritize community harmony and family responsibility over formal legal remedies, often perceiving court action as socially disruptive (Kim, 2001). Moreover, differing conceptions of whether education is primarily a state or family obligation affect whether parents believe they are entitled - or even expected - to hold the state accountable through legal means.

These choices are further conditioned by structural inequalities. Parents from marginalized or migrant backgrounds frequently encounter diminished agency due to limited legal literacy, economic precarity, past experiences of institutional discrimination, or a general mistrust of state systems (Merry, 2006: 10-15). According to Purnell & Fenkl (2024: 19), vulnerable populations include the following: the economically disadvantaged, racial and ethnic minorities (including those of mixed race or ethnicities), the uninsured and underinsured, older adults, children, the homeless, people with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), people who are stigmatised for whatever reason, which includes substance misuse, people with chronic health conditions and severe mental illness, rural populations, people with low acculturation and low levels of education, gender disparities, refugees and undocumented immigrants, distance to a health-care facility

and language difficulties, and an interpreter is not available.

These dynamics are vividly illustrated in the context of Albania, where access to justice remains uneven for marginalized communities, particularly Roma and Egyptian minorities. The case of *X and Others v. Albania* (2022), heard by the European Court of Human Rights, serves as a compelling example of how parental agency, legal culture, and structural exclusion intersect. The case involved allegations of educational segregation and systemic discrimination against Roma and Egyptian children, and it raises urgent questions about the accessibility and effectiveness of supranational justice mechanisms for socially excluded families. By exploring this case, the present study aims to uncover how legal mobilization occurs in response to educational rights violations—and what barriers prevent or enable parents from acting.

This paper investigates how and under what conditions parents engage the ECtHR in education-related cases concerning their children. It seeks to understand the cultural, legal, and structural dynamics that influence such engagement, focusing particularly on Albania as a case study. In doing so, it contributes to debates on access to justice and legal mobilization in child rights contexts across Europe.

## 2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case law analysis grounded in a socio-legal approach, with a focus on parental agency in litigation before the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) concerning children's right to education. The aim is to understand how and why parents initiate or participate in such cases, and what factors enable or constrain their access to justice. The primary source of data is the 'Guide on the Case-Law of the European Convention on Human Rights: Rights of the Child' (ECtHR, 2025), which provides a comprehensive overview of cases where children's rights are at stake. Additional information is drawn from full ECtHR judgments available on the HUDOC database. A total of six cases, ranging from 1976 to 2024, were selected for detailed analysis. The qualitative method is particularly appropriate for capturing the interpretive and context-dependent nature of parental legal engagement.

### 2.1 Socio-Legal Lens

The study adopts a socio-legal perspective, treating ECtHR decisions not only as legal outcomes but as windows into broader power dynamics, including the ways families access supranational justice. Concepts such as legal consciousness (Merry, 2006), Agency (Kabeer, 1999; Sen, 1999), and legal mobilization inform the interpretive lens.

### 2.2 Limitations

This research does not aim to statistically generalize from all ECtHR education cases but rather to provide in-depth qualitative insights into selected examples where parental action is visible and meaningful. It acknowledges that some parents may be absent from the formal legal record due to structural exclusion, legal illiteracy, or reliance on third-party representation. To illustrate this point, one unreported case - brought to the author's attention in her capacity as an education expert - is included as a witnessed example of informal grievance resolution outside the legal system.

## 3. Case Selection Criteria and data

This study uses a purposive, thematic, and impact-oriented sampling approach to select key ECtHR cases related to the right to education under Article 2 of Protocol No. 1. The cases in this study were selected from the "Guide on the Case-law of the European Convention on Human Rights - Rights of the Child (European Court of Human Rights, 2025).

Cases were selected based on the following criteria:

- Child-Centered Education Claim: The case involves a substantive issue concerning children's

right to education.

- Type of violation. Each case corresponds to one of the following clusters: Access and exclusion; Discrimination (ethnic, disability, nationality); Curriculum and parental values; Safety and dignity (e.g., corporal punishment, abuse)
- Legal or Policy Impact: The case has contributed to systemic reform, clarified state obligations, or influenced public debate or national legislation regarding children's education.
- Visibility of Parental Agency: The case offers clear evidence of parental initiative, legal mobilization, or conflict between parental rights and state authority.

The key concepts of parental agency, structural barriers, and legal mobilization were operationalized by translating them into these specific case selection criteria. These criteria served as the analytic lens guiding both inclusion and interpretation. Table 1 synthesizes the selected cases according to three key attributes: the type of violation, the degree of parental engagement (specifically, whether the complaint was parent-initiated), and the legal or policy outcome. While the broader conceptual framework informed the full analysis, Table 1 focuses on these core variables due to their relevance in assessing procedural agency and systemic impact across diverse legal and social contexts.

Table 1. Facts, parental engagement and outcome

Type of violation	Case Study	Facts	Parental engagement: Did they initiated the complaint?	Outcome of the court / Legal or Policy Impact	Type of violation
Safeguarding the right to education: general principles and objectives	1982: Campbell and Cosans v. the United Kingdom	The use of corporal punishment as a disciplinary measure in the State schools in Scotland	Yes, two mothers; the two appellants were initially unconnected (Fancourt, 2024)	Violation / influence on national legal reforms and human rights standards in education	Safeguarding the right to education: general principles and objectives
Safeguarding the right to education: general principles and objectives / Content and quality of education - Curriculum and educational support	1976: Case of Kjeldsen, Busk Madsen and Pedersen v. Denmark <sup>3</sup>	The integration of sex education in the state primary schools	Yes / parents of children	No violation	Safeguarding the right to education: general principles and objectives / Content and quality of education - Curriculum and educational support
Content and quality of education - Religious symbols	2009: Dogru v. Franc	Wearing headscarf at school and refused to take it off during physical education classes	Yes / Father	No violation of right to religious freedom and right to education	Content and quality of education - Religious symbols
Discrimination of children based on immigration status	2011: Ponomaryovi v. Bulgaria	Foreign children without permanent residence need to pay secondary-school fees		Violation	Discrimination of children based on immigration status
Discrimination and access to education based on ethnic origin	2022: X and Others v. Albania	Roma children placed in separate schools without any objective and reasonable justification	Parents and NGO	Violation	Discrimination and access to education based on ethnic origin
Violence in schools and other institutions	2024: Biba v. Albania	Pupil at the private school attended by the applicant's son had injured the applicant's son by launching a catapult projectile into his eye, resulting in 90% loss of vision in that eye / violence by schoolmate	Yes / Father	Violation	Violence in schools and other institutions

<sup>3</sup> Note: The case is available at <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre#%7B%22itemid%22:%5B%22001-57509%22%5D%7D>. (Last accessed 7.05.2025).

### 3.1 Albania Case

In the case studies regarding to violation of children rights to education in Albania, particular attention was paid also to both cultural and structural factors that influence whether and how parents seek legal redress for violations of their children's right to education. The analysis was guided by a dual framework that recognizes the role of cultural norms and perceptions, as well as structural vulnerabilities, in shaping access to justice. It is important to emphasize that, to date, only two education-related cases from Albania have reached the European Court of Human Rights.

- On the cultural level, three main aspects were considered.

(1) First, mistrust toward institutions was identified as a significant barrier, particularly in contexts where the legal system is perceived as corrupt, inefficient, or inaccessible. This is substantiated by empirical data from the Trust in Governance 2023 opinion poll (UNDP, 2023)<sup>4</sup>, which reports that only 33.4% of respondents in Albania expressed trust in the courts—a statistic that reflects the broader societal reluctance to engage with the justice system.

(2) Second, a general resistance toward authority - rooted in historical, political, or social experiences - was seen to deter individuals or groups from engaging with formal legal channels.

(3) Third, the influence of the media, including public interviews and media coverage, was noted as a cultural force that can either mobilize or suppress parental agency, depending on the framing of educational injustice and the visibility of similar cases.

- In parallel, structural factors were examined to understand the systemic constraints faced by vulnerable families.

(1) Access to legal aid emerged as a crucial determinant, as the absence of affordable legal support significantly limits the ability of marginalized parents to pursue legal claims.

(2) Geographic isolation, particularly for families living in remote or rural areas, was another barrier, making it difficult to physically access legal institutions or information.

(3) Economic vulnerability- often intersecting with other forms of disadvantage - was found to hinder the capacity to engage in long and resource-intensive legal procedures.

This combined framework informed the selection of cases and provided a lens through which to interpret variations in parental agency and engagement with the European Court of Human Rights. Cultural and structural factors that influenced parental engagement in the selected Albanian cases are summarized in Table 2. This table provides a comparative overview of how social trust, legal access, geographic location, and economic conditions intersected with parents' decisions to pursue or avoid legal action.

<sup>4</sup> Note: Please consult this document, available at <https://www.undp.org/albania/press-releases/presentation-trust-governance-2023-opinion-poll-findings> (Last accessed 7.05.2025).

Table 2. Cultural and structural factors

Case Study from Albania	Cultural Factors	Structural Factors
2022: X and Others v. Albania	Roma families marginalized, low institutional trust; Resistance toward authority - rooted in historical and social experiences - was seen to deter individuals from engaging with formal legal channels; collective society. Media coverage: low	Legal factors: High barrier; The case was initiated from European Roma Rights Center, <sup>5</sup> a civil society actor; State failed to prevent segregation Geographic isolation: The Roma families live in Korça, in a remote area Economic vulnerability: support minimal
2024: Biba v. Albania	low institutional trust; N/A Media coverage: low	Legal factors: Low barrier; Geographic isolation: No, the family live in Tirana Economic vulnerability: No, the child was enrolled in a private school.

**4. Discussion**

The selected cases illustrate diverse expressions of parental agency within the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) in relation to the right to education. The methodological framework - anchored in both legal criteria and socio-cultural context - reveals how parents’ capacity to initiate or support legal claims is closely tied to broader structural and cultural conditions. Across all selected cases, parental involvement was a consistent feature, either as individual applicants or through representation by civil society actors. Notably, in cases like Campbell and Cosans v. the United Kingdom and Kjeldsen, Busk Madsen and Pedersen v. Denmark, parents proactively challenged national education policies they believed violated their children’s rights. Even where the Court found no violation (e.g., in Kjeldsen and Dogru), the presence of active parental claims underscores the perceived legitimacy of formal legal recourse in those national settings.

In contrast, the Albanian case studies (X and Others v. Albania and Biba v. Albania) bring to light the ways in which structural vulnerabilities and cultural barriers influence parental access to justice. As shown in Table 2, cultural and structural conditions varied significantly between the two Albanian case studies. In X and Others, Roma parents were supported by the European Roma Rights Center (ERRC), highlighting how legal mobilization often depends on the intervention of NGOs in marginalized communities. The case also underscores how low institutional trust, collective cultural dynamics, and economic vulnerability hinder direct legal engagement. Additionally, limited media visibility may have contributed to weak public awareness and minimal pressure for systemic reform, despite the Court’s finding of a violation. Conversely, in Biba v. Albania, the parent - residing in the capital and with greater access to legal resources - was able to initiate a case independently. The relatively lower structural barriers in this instance (e.g., no economic vulnerability or geographic isolation) may explain the successful legal claim, though media engagement remained minimal, limiting broader public impact.

These findings reinforce the significance of contextual factors in shaping parental engagement with the ECtHR. While the legal framework of the Court allows for individual applications on behalf of children, the actual exercise of this right is uneven - contingent upon social capital, legal literacy, and institutional accessibility. The inclusion of empirical data, such as the Trust in Governance 2023 report indicating that only 33.4% of Albanians trust the courts, provides further evidence of cultural hesitation and perceived ineffectiveness of legal avenues in

<sup>5</sup> Note: The case is available at <https://www.errc.org/cikk.php?cikk=5149> (Last accessed 7.05.2025).

certain national contexts.

**4.1 Silenced by the System: A Case Known but Not Reported**

To highlight the practical barriers parents, face when trying to seek legal redress, I include here a case, although it was never formally reported to the courts.

Albania has many television channels, and most of them are owned by some of the country’s most powerful businessmen. People often debate their quality, but one cannot ignore the fact that these media have helped create some excellent journalists and strong TV programs. One of them is “Fiks Fare” Program. In English, we might call it “Fair and Square” or “Exactly – no more, no less”. It’s a satirical and investigative program that shows social injustices, corruption, and problems in the system — including in the education system. One of those cases was brought to me for advice. Although this case was never submitted to the Albanian judiciary or the ECtHR, I was directly consulted by “Fiks Fare” as an expert in education policy. As a result, I served as a witness to the procedural shortcomings described - particularly the school’s failure to provide timely and lawful communication with the family.

A mother from a small town in Albania asked help from the program after her son failed the subject of history during the regular academic year and was required to retake the exam in the autumn session - which he also failed. What made the case particularly troubling was not just the academic failure, but the complete lack of transparency and fairness from the school. According to the mother, neither she nor her son was ever formally informed by the history teacher and the class teacher that he was at risk of failing. The family came from a town, where everyone knows everyone. The mother claimed that the teacher responsible for the subject had never informed her or her son that he was failing history. More than that, the entire communication between the mother and the school was conducted in violation of the law and school regulations. She had received no formal notification from the school. According to the law, the school should have informed the parent at least one month before the end of the academic year. Instead, the school sent a notification in autumn - just one day before the exam. As a result, the boy failed again and lost the school year. What followed was a discouraging cycle of inaction. The mother approached the school administration, then the local educational directorate, but in both instances, she was met with institutional silence or evasion. No clear procedures were offered, no hearing was held, and no effort was made to provide the right, despite the legal violations.

The end of the story is even more sad. The son repeated the same academic year, but in another school. The mother never brought the case before any court. Instead, she chooses to have a solution for her case to a television investigative program.

**5. Conclusions**

The analysis suggests that parental agency in education-related litigation is not solely a matter of rights awareness or grievance, but is deeply embedded in the socio-legal environment. Structural constraints - such as lack of legal aid, economic hardship, and geographic remoteness - intersect with cultural dispositions toward authority and trust in institutions, shaping whether and how parents act to defend their children’s educational rights.

The role of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) must be reaffirmed not only as a legal mechanism of last resort, but as a vital instrument for protecting and evolving children’s rights across Europe. Beyond addressing violations of children’s rights that parents believe have occurred, the Court has issued decisions that have profoundly influenced national education systems and contributed to the development of broader human rights standards. These landmark or jurisprudentially significant cases mark turning points in the evolving relationship between parents, schools, and the state. A key example is the Campbell and Cosans v. the United



Kingdom (1982) case, in which the Court ruled against the use of corporal punishment in schools. This decision not only responded to the claims of two mothers but also triggered national legal reforms and reinforced protections for children within educational institutions. British Parliament outlawed corporal punishment in school in 1987 (Doepke et al, 2019: 279). Such cases exemplify how parental agency, when channelled through the ECtHR, can challenge state authority and set powerful precedents that reshape institutional practices and clarify the scope of children's rights. It is therefore essential to ensure that access to the ECtHR remains meaningful and equitable, particularly for vulnerable groups whose voices might otherwise remain unheard.

For countries like Albania, where systemic challenges persist - particularly regarding the protection of vulnerable groups such as Roma children - ECtHR jurisprudence plays a crucial role in setting legal and moral benchmarks. Case like *X and Others v. Albania* (2022) demonstrates how parental agency, when supported by legal advocacy and NGO engagement, can expose systemic exclusion and catalyse debate around state responsibilities. Notably, despite numerous documented and anecdotal violations in the education sector reported in media, only two education-related cases from Albania have thus far been brought before the European Court of Human Rights. This extremely limited number highlights the significant barriers - legal, cultural, economic, and institutional - that continue to prevent families from accessing supranational justice. This limited caseload also reveals the risk of systemic violations remaining unchallenged, especially in the absence of institutional trust, media coverage, or affordable legal support. In contrast, one documented but unreported case - shared with the author in her role as an education expert - illustrates how families may seek redress outside formal channels, such as via investigative media programs. Although this path may provide public visibility, it leaves legal violations unaddressed and allows schools to remain unaccountable under national or international law.

These cases reaffirm the need to make the ECtHR not only symbolically but practically accessible. Ensuring that it functions as a true guarantor of children's rights requires investment in legal aid, proactive outreach to marginalized communities, and the dismantling of cultural barriers to justice. Only through such measures can the transformative potential of parental agency be realized - not just in courtrooms, but in classrooms, communities, and systems across Europe.

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## XV. From Pledges to Practice: Academia's Role in Advancing Child Protection via Sri Lanka's International Conference on Child Protection 2025

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### Abstract

This paper details experiences and strategies in promoting child rights and generating related knowledge in Sri Lanka, centered around the International Conference on Child Protection (ICCP) 2025: "Broadening Perspectives". This event, hosted by the University of Kelaniya's Centre for Gender Studies in partnership with UNICEF Sri Lanka and the National Child Protection Authority (NCPA), was crucial for advancing child protection. It strategically aligned with Sri Lanka's renewed high-level commitments made in 2024 at the Ministerial Conference on Ending Violence against Children held in Bogotá. ICCP'25 was particularly vital for translating these pledges, specifically those strengthening the child protection workforce and building child-sensitive services for survivors, into actionable, sustainable strategies through evidence-based policymaking and multisectoral collaboration. The promotion of child rights leverages key partnerships between academia, government, and international organizations. Extensive awareness-raising activities, including targeted pre-conference workshops, ensured a localized and impactful approach. Regarding knowledge generation, ICCP'25 served as a critical nexus for national and international experts to share research and evidence-based solutions. The conference actively fostered multidisciplinary dialogue across law, health, education, and social work to address complex child protection challenges. A key objective was to facilitate the use of research outputs to inform policy development and advocacy, directly supporting the operationalization of national commitments.

**KEYWORDS:** Child Protection; Academia; Sri Lanka; Evidence-Based Policy; Multisectoral Collaboration.

## 1. Introduction

In Sri Lanka, safeguarding the rights and well-being of children remains a paramount national priority, yet the path from policy commitment to practical implementation is marked with challenges. Recent political and socio-economic crises have intensified the vulnerabilities faced by children, making robust protection systems more critical than ever. The urgency of this issue is well illustrated by data from the National Child Protection Authority (NCPA), which revealed that over 10,000 child abuse and related complaints were reported in 2024, with more than 8% involving sexual abuse. This persistent gap between policy and practice is notably compounded by deep-cultural beliefs that can hinder child protection, such as those impeding the delivery of comprehensive sexuality education, and the rapid emergence of new digital threats that outpace existing legal frameworks.

It was within this complex context that the International Conference on Child Protection (ICCP) 2025, held in July 2025, emerged as a landmark event. Kicked off with a high-profile inauguration ceremony at the BMICH in Colombo attended by over 100 government leaders, diplomats, and experts, the conference was framed from the outset as a call to action. As the Hon. Speaker of Parliament, Dr. Jagath Wickramaratne, declared at the opening, “This is not just a conference. This is an important contribution to the national discourse on ways to protect our children. This is a platform to act, not just reflect”. Hosted by the University of Kelaniya’s Centre for Gender Studies in partnership with the NCPA and supported by the European Union (EU) through UNICEF Sri Lanka, ICCP’25 served as a pivotal platform for academia, government, and civil society to converge. This paper argues that academia, through strategic initiatives like ICCP’25, plays an indispensable role in translating high-level child protection pledges into tangible, on-the-ground action. Academic institutions are uniquely positioned to fulfill this role by providing objective, evidence-based analysis; training the next generation of professionals; and serving as a neutral ground for convening diverse stakeholders. By fulfilling three core functions namely fostering multisectoral collaboration, generating evidence to inform policy, and promoting rights-based awareness, academia acts as a catalyst that bridges the divide between policy and practice. This paper analyzes the mechanisms through which academic leadership can drive sustainable improvements in the national child protection ecosystem, using the structure and outcomes of ICCP’25 as a detailed case study.

## 2. The policy landscape: Sri Lanka’s commitments to child protection

Sri Lanka has demonstrated a renewed commitment to child protection on both the national and global stages. A significant milestone was the country’s participation in the first-ever Global Ministerial Conference on Ending Violence Against Children, held in Bogotá, Colombia, in November 2024. Ahead of this conference, the Government of Sri Lanka made four key pledges that form the bedrock of its current child protection agenda. These commitments are:

- **Safe and enabling school environments:** Revise the 2016 Circular banning corporal punishment in schools to update guidance to better address strategies for eliminating corporal punishment and different types of violence in school, in alignment with the Government of Sri Lanka’s ongoing legislative process to ban corporal punishment of children in all settings by mid-2025. Pilot and scale nationwide capacity development for teachers on “positive discipline techniques” and 21 skills to prevent and respond to violence in schools, building on lessons learned from existing initiatives.
- **Response and support services:**
  - Set up a continuum of child-sensitive services for survivors of violence. The Ministry of Women, Child and Youth Affairs and Sports will coordinate with relevant ministries and stakeholders to create an effective response mechanism for reported cases of violence.

- I. Establish interagency standard operating procedures and referral pathways and address bottlenecks in case processing.
- II. A model of a continuum of services will be implemented in one province by the end of 2025, with plans for a national rollout by the end of 2027.
- Conduct a functional analysis to clarify the roles of the social services workforce in responding to violence. Develop violence response protocols and capacity-building initiatives, aiming for the completion of training for all relevant personnel by the end of 2026. These trainings will become institutionalized under the Ministry’s existing human resource development plans.

- **Legal and policy frameworks:** Complete the legislative process to ban corporal punishment in all settings by mid-2025. Following this, an implementation plan, inclusive of costed actions for each responsible stakeholder, will be developed by the end of 2025.

These international pledges have been integrated into national policy, particularly under the “Safe World for Children” pillar of the *A Thriving Nation, A Beautiful Life* framework, signaling high-level political will. Legislative momentum is also evident with a gazetted bill to prohibit corporal punishment. Speaking at the ICCP’25 inauguration, Hon. Minister of Justice Harshana Nanayakkara affirmed this direction, stating, “Child protection is a justice issue. We are committed to reform systems to focus on the best interests of children and ensure that every victim has access to child-friendly justice.” This perspective was reinforced by H.E. Carmen Moreno, EU Ambassador to Sri Lanka, who emphasized that justice for children must shift from retribution to reintegration, guided by “care, dignity, and a focus on their future.”

The need for these renewed commitments is underscored by persistent systemic issues. The pledge to prohibit corporal punishment addresses a practice which happens at home, in schools and in religious settings with long-lasting consequences ranging from physical to mental health. The commitment to establishing a continuum of care for survivors is a direct response to the challenges in rehabilitation, such as the lack of safe placements and the risk of re-victimization. Similarly, the pledge to strengthen the social service workforce confronts documented weaknesses, including role conflict, lack of training, and a lack of inter-agency collaboration that creates delays and risks for children. Finally, the need to address violence in schools is made evident by adolescent vulnerabilities linked to a lack of comprehensive sexuality education, leading to statutory rape and teenage pregnancies. As articulated in the ICCP’25 keynote address by Dr. Asvini Fernando, despite positive steps, services often remain insufficiently child-centered, lack professionalism, and are compounded by “inordinate legal delays.” This implementation gap underscores the critical role of academia in providing the evidence needed to guide these reforms effectively.

## 3. Academia as a catalyst for change: The ICCP’25 model

The ICCP’25 conference exemplified how academia can move beyond its traditional roles of teaching and research to become a dynamic force for social change. By acting as a convenor, knowledge generator, and awareness promoter, the University of Kelaniya, in partnership with the NCPA and UNICEF Sri Lanka, created a unique ecosystem for advancing child protection. The strategic objectives of the conference’s high-profile inauguration explicitly laid out this vision: to demonstrate the vital partnership between academia and policymakers in designing evidence-based solutions for addressing violence against children.

### 3.1 Fostering multisectoral and international collaboration

A primary function of the conference was to serve as a nexus for stakeholders who might otherwise work in silos. The inauguration alone convened high-level government officials, the diplomatic corps, UN partners, and leading academics, demonstrating a national consensus on the urgency of the issue. This collaborative spirit is essential, as the management of child abuse requires coordinated services from health, law enforcement, criminal justice, and social services.

The Vice-Chancellor of the University of Kelaniya, Senior Professor Nilanthi de Silva, captured this transformative ambition perfectly at the inauguration, stating, “Universities must not only study child protection, but they must also shape it. ICCP’25 is where that transformation begins.”

The conference also broadened perspectives by incorporating international expertise. The first symposium, “Child Abuse Management Challenges and Successes,” featured lessons from Australia, the UK, Thailand, and India. This global dialogue provided a comparative lens through which Sri Lanka could evaluate its own systems and learn from established models of excellence, such as the hospital-based Victorian Forensic Pediatric Medical Service in Australia, which uses a ‘hub and spoke’ model to provide specialized care.

### 3.2 Generating evidence and shaping policy

ICCP’25 was strategically designed to ensure that policy is informed by rigorous, locally relevant research. The academic and professional response was overwhelming, with 396 abstracts received. Following a rigorous peer-review process, 199 abstracts were accepted, selected for oral, poster, and snapshot presentations during the two-day event. This extensive body of research directly addressed the core challenges facing Sri Lanka’s child protection system, providing a robust evidence base for policy reform. The conference’s free paper sessions, symposiums, and panel discussions were structured around themes directly aligned with Sri Lanka’s national pledges, transforming academic findings into actionable policy insights.

- **Exposing systemic weaknesses and judicial bottlenecks:** Multiple studies provided empirical evidence of systemic weaknesses. Research by Meshel et al. (2025) on child sexual abuse cases revealed that while initial reporting was swift (97.9% within 24 hours), Attorney General’s recommendations took 1-6 years and court trials extended for 6-10 years, with 63% of cases remaining pending. This delay effectively denies justice. Similarly, research by Coswatte (2025) identified role conflict, poor training, and a lack of inter-agency collaboration within the child protection workforce, hindering effective responses. These findings provide a data-driven basis for advocating for reforms aimed at strengthening the social service workforce and establishing a continuum of care.

- **Identifying vulnerable groups and risk factors:** The conference generated specific knowledge on particularly vulnerable groups of children. Several studies explored the heightened risks faced by children of migrant workers, with one study finding that maternal absence leads to a 4.88 times higher risk of abuse compared to paternal absence (Meshel et al, 2025). Other research focused on the psychological maladjustment of children in alternative care settings and the unique barriers faced by children with disabilities, including cultural stigma and fragmented services. This granular evidence is crucial for designing targeted, effective interventions that reach the most marginalized children.

- **Addressing emerging digital threats:** A significant portion of the conference was dedicated to the evolving challenges of the digital age, a topic powerfully articulated in the oration by Prof. Rangita De Silva De Alwis on “Technology Facilitated Gender Based Violence.” Research papers notably examined the risks of deepfake technology and virtual identity theft in the metaverse, the use of generative AI to create child sexual abuse material, and the prevalence of cyberbullying. Prof. De Silva De Alwis contextualized these threats within a global framework, referencing the new UN Cybercrime Convention and highlighting how online misogyny mirrors and magnifies offline discrimination. This body of work provides a critical evidence base for developing modern legal and social responses to online child exploitation.

- **The intersection of culture, health, and protection:** The conference broadened perspectives by exploring how cultural norms and health issues intersect with child protection. Research was presented on the negative mental health impacts of cultural rituals like “Period Parties” and how deeply rooted religious and cultural superstitions have historically led to practices that harm children (Withana et al., 2025). This cultural analysis was complemented by research into the crucial role of parenting styles in preventing abuse and

the therapeutic potential of culturally sensitive interventions, such as Buddhist meditation, for trauma recovery (Dhammapali, 2025). This demonstrates academia’s role in examining and challenging harmful norms while identifying culturally appropriate solutions.

The direct link between this evidence generation and policymaking was a central theme. The Speaker of Parliament, Hon. (Dr.) Jagath Wickramaratne, affirmed this link, assuring that the conference’s insights would “be instrumental in shaping effective policies” and that recommendations would “be brought before the relevant parliamentary committees to inform our legislative process.” This commitment transforms the academic exercise into a direct contribution to national reform.

### 3.3 Promoting rights-based awareness and capacity building

The conference initiative extended beyond academic discourse to actively build capacity among key practitioners. A series of targeted pre-conference workshops were organized to translate knowledge into practical skills. The workshop on “Multidisciplinary Approaches to Ethical Reporting on Child Protection” trained future journalists that are currently mass media master’s students on child-sensitive reporting, a critical need identified in studies analyzing sensationalism and ethical gaps in Sri Lankan newspapers. Another workshop, the “Multi-disciplinary Management of Health Sector Response for Children subjected to Violence,” directly addressed the need to strengthen the skills of frontline service providers. Furthermore, a public debate on the topic, “News reporting related to children in this country can be elevated to a higher standard through an ethical approach,” engaged journalists and media students, tackling the issue of sensationalism and victim protection in media coverage. These activities demonstrate a commitment to ensuring that a rights-based approach is embedded not just in policy, but in the daily practices of professionals who work with children.

## 4. Conclusion and future directions

The International Conference on Child Protection 2025 served as a powerful testament to the vital and evolving role of academia in driving the child protection agenda in Sri Lanka. It successfully demonstrated that when academic institutions act as a strategic convenor and knowledge broker, they can effectively bridge the critical gap between high-level commitments and practical, evidence-based action. By creating a collaborative space for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers, ICCP’25 not only generated a wealth of localized knowledge but also built momentum for translating Sri Lanka’s pledges into a tangible reality for children. The conference model, combining international perspectives with local research, fostering dialogue between government and civil society, and linking evidence directly to policy imperatives, provides a robust and replicable framework for academic institutions to contribute meaningfully to national development priorities.

The success of the ICCP’25 model in Sri Lanka offers a compelling and replicable framework for other countries seeking to strengthen their own child protection ecosystems. The core principles of the model are universally applicable: a strategic tripartite partnership between academia, government, and civil society; a commitment to generating locally relevant, evidence-based research; and the direct translation of that evidence into policy and practitioner training. While the specific thematic focus and stakeholders would need to be adapted to the unique socio-political and cultural context of a given region, the underlying structure provides a robust blueprint for action. The model’s strength lies in its ability to create a nationally-owned and contextually-sensitive mechanism that bridges the often-vast gap between policy commitments and their practical implementation, making it a valuable template for leveraging academic expertise to advance child rights globally.

Moving forward, this model of academic engagement must be sustained and institutionalized

to ensure long-term impact. The rich body of research presented at the conference should be synthesized into accessible policy briefs and directly channeled to relevant government ministries and parliamentary committees. To formalize this interface, the creation of a dedicated “Child Protection Policy Lab” or a similar mechanism, led by the University of Kelaniya’s Centre for Gender Studies in partnership with the NCPA, could be explored. Such a body could provide ongoing technical expertise to support the legislative reform process. Furthermore, the multidisciplinary nature of the conference highlights the need to mainstream child protection modules across higher education curricula, ensuring that future doctors, lawyers, teachers, and technologists are equipped with a foundational understanding of child rights. By championing a culture of evidence, fostering sustained multisectoral collaboration, and embedding child protection principles into the next generation of professionals, Sri Lanka’s academic community can help ensure that the nation’s commitment to protecting every child is not just a pledge, but a lived practice.

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## **XVI. Training Educators in Experiential Activities on School Bullying within the Framework of Children’s Rights: A Pilot Implementation with Local Focus and Prospects for Expansion**

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### **Abstract**

The protection and promotion of children’s rights constitute a fundamental principle for establishing a safe, inclusive, and democratic school environment. In this context, a pilot program of experiential activities was designed and implemented, focusing on the prevention of school bullying and the reinforcement of children’s rights. The program is grounded in the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and is aligned with Greek Law 5029/2023 (“Living in Harmony -Breaking the Silence”), which introduces institutional measures for the prevention and response to school-based violence. This initiative was implemented by UNICEF, with scientific and pedagogical guidance provided by the Child Rights Centers of the University of Patras and the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, in collaboration with the Regional Directorates of Education of Western Greece and Central Macedonia. The contribution of the academic teams was pivotal both in the reflective development of the educational material and in the training of teachers and evaluation of the intervention. The program was applied to students in the fifth grade of primary school and the second grade of lower secondary school, aiming to foster participation, empathy, communication, and emotional regulation within the school setting with an emphasis on the active participation of students through experiential activities. Prior to and throughout the pilot phase, close collaboration was established among all stakeholders, particularly with the classroom teachers who implemented the program. This paper presents the structure, methodology, and key tools of the program, highlighting its potential for expansion and integration into official education policy in Greece.

**KEYWORDS:** Children’s Rights; School Bullying; Stakeholders; Experiential educational prevention program; Cooperation

## 1. Introduction

School bullying is a global phenomenon of serious concern which brings non positive short- and long-term consequences (Olweus, 2009), a serious phenomenon, also, in Greece since long time (Sapouna, 2008). Olweus (1993) describes bullying as deliberate, recurring aggressive actions directed at an individual, carried out either by one person or by a group. A common characteristic is the imbalance of power. The victim finds it difficult to defend themselves. The phenomenon of school bullying emerges as a behavioural or disciplinary challenge that can lead to long-term psychological issues, mental disorders (Wang, 2023). Also, it diminishes peer cooperation (Wang & Chen, 2023) school belonging, academic performance and increases absenteeism and relationship difficulties and social withdrawal (Zahrani, 2024). School bullying, as a fundamental rights issue, directly undermines children's dignity, well-being, and participation in the school community. Addressing bullying, therefore, is not simply a matter of managing conflict but a matter of child protection (Wekerle, 2024), of upholding the principles enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989), to which Greece is a State Party.

UNCRC establishes the obligation of States to protect children from all forms of violence (Article 19) and to ensure education that promotes respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms (Article 29). It also affirms children's rights to express their views (Article 12) and to participate in association and expression within the school community (Articles 13 and 15). Complementing these provisions, Sustainable Development Goal 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) reinforces the call for peaceful, inclusive school environments that uphold the child's rights to dignity, participation, and protection. Integrating SDG 16 into anti-bullying initiatives situates such interventions within a broader rights-based and policy-driven framework. Greek Law 5029/2023 ("Living in Harmony – Breaking the Silence") provides the domestic mandate for prevention and response to school-based violence. The Law 5029/2023 is a national Greek strategy to safeguard students' rights and promote a culture of respect, participation, and non-discrimination in schools.

Addressing school bullying necessitates the implementation of preventive interventions, which are widely recognised as essential (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011; UNESCO, 2019). However, legislative and policy frameworks, while indispensable, must be complemented by robust educational strategies and practical tools to ensure their effectiveness in the daily realities of school life (Rigby, 2020), alongside sustained professional development and support for teachers to address challenges with consistency and confidence (Yoon et al., 2016). Evidence from meta-analyses shows that whole-school, rights-based and social-emotional learning approaches are among the most effective in reducing bullying behaviours and improving school climate (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). These approaches aim to build empathy amongst students, strengthen cooperation and a sense of belonging, fostering in this way a school culture of respect and inclusion (Pitsou & Koios, 2025). Based on this perspective, this experiential bullying prevention programme was designed and is presented below in this paper. Its purpose is to act as a practical step by step guide for educators, with the potential to be adapted, evaluated, and eventually applied nationwide.

This article contributes to the evolving body of academic literature on educational bullying prevention programs by framing such interventions within a child rights-based approach, one that upholds students' rights to protection, participation, and inclusion in safe and supportive learning environments. The opening section introduces the link between school bullying and both international and local binding frameworks, highlighting the importance of such intervention programs. It then provides a detailed description of the program, followed by an exploration

of the significance of its potential for expansion and integration into Greece's official education policy. The conclusion highlights the value of such programmes, particularly when they grow out of collaboration among different institutions and stakeholders who share a commitment to protecting and promoting children's rights in education.

## 2. Programme Design and Structure

### 2.1 Educational Framework

The pilot programme was delivered in ten sessions over five weeks, with two 45-minute lessons held each week. The sessions were organised in a way that gradually built students' skills. The goal was to first raise awareness and clarify terms, then develop self-protection strategies, and finally encourage active citizenship. Two main pedagogical approaches shaped the design.

The first was Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). This approach focuses on building self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. SEL is defined as the process through which children learn to recognise and manage their emotions, set and achieve goals, show empathy, maintain positive relationships and make responsible choices (CASEL, 2020). In the pilot, activities were sequenced so that younger students began with emotional literacy and self-regulation, before moving on to cooperative problem-solving and finally to small group projects that linked respect for peers with wider school community well-being. Research has shown that SEL can reduce aggressive behaviour and improve academic engagement (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). For this reason, SEL was chosen as the central methodology for helping students prevent and respond to bullying.

The second approach was a Rights-Based Approach (RBA) to education. Under this perspective, bullying prevention was explicitly framed as part of a child's right to safe, inclusive and high-quality education. Core principles such as participation, non-discrimination and the best interests of the child were the key values that were also applied directly in the classroom daily routine (UNESCO & UNICEF, 2007). The RBA views learning as both a developmental process and a legal entitlement, enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). In this perspective, students are active rights-holders, while educators are duty-bearers responsible for upholding those rights. In the pilot, this approach was implemented in various ways. For example, lessons linked anti-bullying themes to rights such as safety and participation, whilst teaching methods ensured that all students had a voice and rules were created collectively via a classroom contract. In doing so, the RBA positioned prevention within a broader vision of inclusive, participatory education that consistently puts the best interests of the child at the centre (Lundy, 2007; Quennerstedt, 2011; Pitsou et al., 2025).

### 2.2 Partnerships and Roles

The pilot programme was built on a partnership that brought together international expertise, academic knowledge and local education authorities. Each sector played a different but complementary role, helping to ensure both technical quality and practical implementation. UNICEF served as the overall coordinator and lead implementing agency, providing the operational framework, facilitating stakeholder engagement, and aligning the programme with national and international child rights and education strategies. It also oversaw the adaptation of content to be age-appropriate, culturally relevant, and consistent with the UNCRC. The Child Rights Centres of the University of Patras and the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki provided the scientific and pedagogical foundation, refining both educational materials to reflect the dual framework of SEL and RBA, and teacher training modules that integrated principles of RBA with practical classroom strategies. The Regional Directorates of Education of Western Greece and Central Macedonia facilitated the programme's integration into the school system by identifying participating

schools, supporting teacher selection, and providing administrative coordination, while also gathering feedback from schools to inform iterative improvements during the pilot phase. At the school level, trained classroom teachers acted as the primary agents of delivery, conducting the specific program and tailoring examples and discussions to their students' contexts, with their early involvement fostering ownership and smooth integration into existing timetables.

### 2.3 Target groups

The programme was implemented with two distinct target groups. For Grade 5 pupils in primary education, the focus was on introducing SEL competencies and rights-related concepts through age-appropriate language, concrete examples, and the use of visual aids to enhance comprehension and engagement. For Grade 2 students in lower secondary education, the emphasis shifted towards facilitating deeper discussion, fostering peer-led activities, and establishing explicit connections between anti-bullying principles and broader notions of civic responsibility. The pilot phase involved 36 schools in Western Greece and 25 schools in Central Macedonia, engaging 62 teachers in the former region and 48 in the latter. The classroom sessions were implemented between March and April 2025, following preparatory teacher training delivered in February of the same year.

Prior to classroom delivery, participating teachers attended two half-day training workshops designed to equip them with the knowledge and skills necessary for effective programme implementation. The training covered an understanding of the core SEL competencies and RBA principles; the effective use of session plans; strategies for managing sensitive disclosures and adhering to safeguarding protocols; and techniques for facilitating participatory discussions without reinforcing stereotypes or engaging in victim-blaming. Each teacher received a comprehensive session guidebook, serving as both a reference and a practical tool to support the consistent and faithful delivery of the curriculum.

### 2.4 Structure of the programme

The pilot implementation followed a unified curriculum framework while adapting to the distinct educational and socio-cultural contexts of the two participating regions -Western Greece and Central Macedonia. This dual-regional approach allowed the programme to be tested in both urban and semi-urban/rural environments, ensuring a robust assessment of its adaptability and impact. In Western Greece, the programme was delivered in 36 schools (20 primary and 16 lower secondary), engaging 62 trained educators. Schools were selected in collaboration with the Regional Directorate of Education, ensuring geographic diversity and inclusion of different school sizes and socio-economic profiles. Class sizes ranged from small rural cohorts to larger semi-urban groups. Delivery was integrated into existing timetables as two 45-minute sessions per week over five weeks, requiring coordination with school leadership to avoid disruption of core academic subjects.

In Central Macedonia, the programme was implemented in 25 schools (14 primary and 11 lower secondary) with the participation of 48 trained educators. The region's schools were predominantly urban, with a higher proportion of students from migrant and refugee backgrounds. This demographic profile informed certain pedagogical adaptations, including the provision of multilingual glossaries for rights-related concepts, increased use of visual aids, and culturally responsive case examples. Across both regions, the programme structure comprised four key phases: In February 2025, all participating teachers attended a two-stage professional development sequence. This included an in-person introductory or hybrid workshop (e.g., Central Macedonia's session on 13 February 2025) focused on experiential learning methods, SEL competencies, and the RBA, followed by three virtual follow-up meetings for ongoing skill development and peer exchange. Each educator received a comprehensive guidebook, session

plans and activity sheets to support fidelity to the programme while allowing contextual flexibility. Sessions were conducted in March-April 2025.

Rather than adhering rigidly to the full ten-session sequence, educators were provided with the flexibility to select and implement those activities they deemed most appropriate for their specific classroom contexts. The implementation employed interactive and participatory methodologies, including role-play, group reflection, art-based discussion (e.g., analysis of Edvard Munch's *The Scream*), and the co-construction of classroom agreements. The decision to provide educators with flexibility aimed to ensure responsiveness to the needs of diverse classroom contexts. Even if educators were not required to implement all ten sessions in a fixed sequence, they had structured and clear guidance, as each one of them was expected to adhere to the core pedagogical principles of the programme. Moreover, implementation was supported through regular communication to monitor implementation fidelity across educational settings.

All in all, regional education supervisors and academic partners provided continuous pedagogical and safeguarding support through virtual consultations, and structured feedback loops. This real-time monitoring enabled minor adaptations to address emerging challenges and maintain alignment with the programme's dual pedagogical foundations (SEL and RBA). This structured, multi-phase delivery model ensured that the programme was both consistent in its rights-based, skills-building approach and adaptable to local needs, laying the groundwork for potential national scale-up.

### 2.5 Structure of the Ten Sessions

The programme was organised into ten (10) sessions that were developed progressively and allowed students to build new skills step by step but also revisit key ideas along the way.

*Session 1: Getting to Know Our Rights* – introduced the idea of children's rights and set the tone for a safe and respectful classroom.

*Session 2: Feelings and Reactions* – helped students identify emotions, name them, and understand how they influence behaviour.

*Session 3: Understanding Bullying* – clarified what bullying is, what forms it takes, and how it differs from ordinary conflict.

*Session 4: Empathy in Action* – included role-play and perspective-taking activities to strengthen empathy.

*Session 5: Speaking Up Safely* – developed assertive communication, such as using "I" statements, and taught when and how to ask for help.

*Session 6: Bystanders Make a Difference* – showed the important role of bystanders and gave practice in safe ways to intervene.

*Session 7: Working Together to Solve Problems* – introduced cooperative problem-solving and consensus-building.

*Session 8: Our Classroom Agreement* – guided the class to create their own rights-based rules and commitments.

*Session 9: From Classroom to Community* – connected classroom actions to wider social change, including links to Sustainable Development Goal 16.

*Session 10: Celebrating Our Learning* – gave space for reflection, feedback, and the sharing of class commitments, reinforcing both personal growth and collective responsibility.

All sessions used interactive methodology, group reflection and explicit links to children's rights. Activities were designed to be simple and adaptable, so that trained educators could run them without any special equipment or great time commitment.

### 3. Potential for Nationwide Expansion

The pilot showed that teachers in daily classrooms were able to deliver the experiential programme successfully when they had a manageable amount of focused training. As educators have discussed, what actually makes the model easier to expand is that it uses school routines that already exist and builds on them, requires only simple materials that can be found in Greek schools and connects directly to current laws and policy frameworks that the Ministry of Education, Religious Affairs and Sports (MoERAS) has recently announced. In practice, this means that the programme can move from a small pilot to wider use.

The design fits closely with Law 5029/2023 (“Living in Harmony – Breaking the Silence”), which calls for safe educational contexts that enhance student voices and respect their personalities. This is also evidenced through the number of cases that have been reported through that stop bullying initiative of MoERAS. It also reflects both Greece’s obligations under the UNCRC -especially Articles 12, 19, and 29- and is in line with Sustainable Development Goal 16, which focuses on safe and inclusive societies and the protection of children’s rights. Due to all the above, the programme can easily be adapted by schools.

Three mutually reinforcing pathways are proposed for national rollout. First, a *Train-the-Trainer* model (Fulgencio & Asino, 2021; Servey et al., 2020), coordinated through the Regional Directorates of Education, would prepare selected educators to serve as local trainers, thereby building sustainable internal capacity and reducing long-term reliance on external organisations. Second, integration into the Ministry of Education’s in-service professional development frameworks would institutionalise the approach, embedding it as a standard component of teacher training. Third, the creation of an open-access digital resource hub -housing session plans, guides, and multimedia materials, including training videos and peer-exchange forums- would facilitate equitable access for schools in remote or resource-constrained areas.

Insights from the pilot highlight several enabling conditions for successful scale-up: early engagement of school leaders, teachers, parents, and students; flexibility to adapt examples and discussion prompts to local culture, language, and student interests; provision of continuous educational support through mentors or online networks during the first year; and the establishment of robust safeguarding infrastructure consistent with the provisions of Law 5029/2023. Nationwide implementation has the potential to significantly enhance students’ capacity to identify and address bullying in ways that respect rights, strengthen school climates founded on trust, empathy, and active participation, reduce tolerance for discriminatory behaviour, and increase teacher confidence in the preventive and constructive management of bullying. It would also contribute measurably to Greece’s fulfilment of its obligations under both the UNCRC and SDG 16.

Potential challenges include variability in school readiness, which could be mitigated through phased introduction beginning with core modules; perceived competition with academic subjects, addressable through integration into thematic weeks or civic education periods; and teacher turnover, which could be managed by maintaining updated training rosters and offering regular refresher courses.

While outcome evaluation falls beyond the scope of this paper<sup>6</sup>, any national rollout should

<sup>6</sup> In this footnote, some preliminary findings on the programme’s impact and evaluation are briefly presented, as evaluation lies beyond the main scope of this paper. Preliminary results collected from educators in the region of Western Greece and Central Macedonia through a Google Form survey. Preliminary findings from 37 educators in Western Greece indicate that majority (86.4%) felt either quite or very ready to initiate relevant changes within their schools, suggesting a strong empowering effect of the intervention on teacher preparedness. Also, according to their perceptions, students appeared as the most motivated group to participate in prevention actions, followed by teachers and school leadership. Parents were viewed as somewhat less involved but still generally supportive. Moreover, preliminary findings from 66 educators in Central Macedonia, indicate that most teachers (51.5%) would feel probably able to handle incidents of school bullying effectively, while 13.6% felt fully confident. Regarding the programme’s perceived impact, 41.7%

include a light-touch monitoring framework to collect teacher feedback, student reflections, and completion rates. This monitoring would serve as a formative mechanism for the continuous refinement of both content and delivery, ensuring that the programme remains adaptable and responsive to the needs of diverse school contexts.

### 4. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to present an experiential bullying prevention programme involving various institutions and stakeholders. The pilot phase of the experiential bullying prevention programme showed that although can be a challenge for some schools, it can also be both feasible and useful to bring SEL and a rights-based perspective into daily classroom routines. This worked best when teachers had proper training, when schools partnered with local stakeholders and when the effort was backed by local and national policy. Instead of thinking of bullying only as a result of misbehaviour and looking into punitive actions, the programme connected it with children’s rights under the UNCRC, with Greek Law 5029/2023, and with the wider goals of SDG 16. In this way, prevention activities also encouraged democratic participation and a stronger sense of inclusion in school as a whole community. The fact that the programme was tested in two different regions—Western Greece and Central Macedonia—and still worked well, shows that it can be adapted smoothly by educators and even fit into different socio-economic settings. Teachers said they felt more confident handling sensitive situations, while students were more willing to take part in activities that built empathy, respect, and positive peer relationships. Because the design is simple and low-cost, schools can put it into practice without heavy administrative or financial pressure.

Looking ahead, schools will be able to keep investing in teacher training, peer-support groups and safer school structures so that the quality remains intact. Linking the programme to national curricula and creating accredited training modules for educators would also help build sustainability. Overall, the pilot provides a concrete and evidence-based model that links legal and international commitments with something educators and schools can use every day. Expanding this approach across Greece could change not only the way schools deal with bullying, but also how they create fair and inclusive environments for every child.

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## XVII. Transformative children's rights research: from compliance to fulfilment

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### Abstract

Despite significant criticism regarding the role of research in the field of children's rights, it can actually enhance the agenda for children's rights in real-life contexts through a transformative approach. Such an approach implies going beyond simply monitoring States' compliance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and moving from scientific rigour to ethical commitment, using research processes to enhance children's personal development and, consequently, the exercise and fulfilment of their rights. Therefore, research should be a critical, theoretically grounded, and contextually relevant process that aims to provide a more detailed understanding of children's conditions and needs. This article claims that research can establish a meaningful perception of children's rights in diverse societies and serve as a tool for voicing children's opinions to influence debates, interpretation, understanding of children's rights and contribute to shape interventions and policy at both national and international levels (Ruggiero, 2025)<sup>7</sup>. This article does not provide a detailed analysis of the research in the children's rights and childhood studies fields but aims to shed a very first light on the role that research can play when it goes beyond compliance and monitoring. It is an initial effort to explore how research can contribute to enhancing the process of two-way translations of human rights between children's living reality and national and global discussion, building on the analogy with the two-way dynamic used by Ruggiero and Hanson in relation to Independent Children's Human Rights Institutions (2020).

**KEYWORDS:** Children's rights research; Transformative research; Evidence-informed policymaking, Bottom-up approaches, Rights-based governance

<sup>7</sup> This article is an expanded and revised version of a contribution previously published in French by the author. While the overall structure remains similar, the present article further develops the conceptual framework, strengthens the analytical positioning, and engages more explicitly with key debates in children's rights research and CRC Convention governance.: Ruggiero, R., (2025). Recherche transformatrice sur les droits de l'enfant : de la conformité à la réalisation. In J. Zermatten (Ed.), *Tracer un chemin ! Itinéraires institutionnel, juridique et humain : 30 ans de l'Institut international des droits de l'enfant*, Institut International des Droits de l'Enfant (IDE) ISBN 978-2-8399-4902-6.

## 1. Introduction: children's rights research as part of the human and social science research family

Human and social science research refers to the systematic inquiry and investigation into various aspects of human behaviour, societies, and social phenomena. This type of research encompasses a wide array of disciplines, such as law, sociology, psychology, anthropology, economics, political science, geography, history, and linguistics. (Case, B., and Vander Weele, T. J., 2024 and Bhandari, 2023). In other words, human and social sciences research, characterised by its rigorous research methods, is not just an academic pursuit. It gathers empirical evidence and analyses data to critically understand, explain, and predict human behaviour, societal patterns, cultural practices, economic systems, political processes, and other social phenomena. Its practical applications are far-reaching, playing a crucial role not only in advancing academic knowledge, addressing societal challenges, but also in informing policy and decision-making processes (Stone, 2002. Matthews, 2024). Human and social sciences research employs a variety of methodologies and approaches, including, among others, qualitative and quantitative techniques, surveys, experiments, observational studies, archival research, case studies, and theoretical analysis (Matthews, 2024 and Bhandari, 2023).

The main goals of human and social science research can be classified into the following clusters:

- *Advancing theoretical and critical knowledge*: for example, by developing and refining theories, frameworks, and models of understanding of human behaviour and social phenomena, contributing to the overall body of knowledge in the academic field.
- *Examining the complexity of human behaviour, societal structures and dynamics*: for example, by investigating the various aspects of individual and collective human conduct (such as cognition, emotions, motivations, decision-making processes, social interactions, and cultural practices) and the structures, institutions, norms, values, power dynamics, inequalities, and cultural patterns that shape societies and influence human behaviour within them.
- *Addressing social challenges to inform policy and practice*: for example, by seeking to identify and analyse social problems, inequalities, conflicts, and challenges, to propose solutions and inform policy-making contributing to social change and improvement of well-being and enhancing societal development.

Children's rights research as an interdisciplinary research field plays a crucial role in advancing knowledge, fostering critical thinking, promoting social understanding, and addressing the complex challenges facing individual children and the societies in which they live. Therefore, it is primarily situated within the human and social sciences. More precisely, this interdisciplinary research field is rooted in disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, political science, and education, and drawing on law and the humanities to critically examine children's lives, rights, and societal constructions of childhood to advance theoretical and critical knowledge and address social challenges by informing policy and practice.

However, since nearly four decades from the adoption of the CRC, children's rights research has been criticized that, despite the important production of this academic field pushing for advancing theoretical and critical knowledge on children's rights, examining the complexity of children's behaviour, and understanding societal structures and dynamics, for a series of reasons, it did not always manage to address social challenges related to children to effectively inform policy and practice related exercise of children's rights. This is mainly due to limitations that include, among others, the conceptualisation of children's rights solely as legal provisions. The research focus on compliance monitoring, with a methodological approach that still neglects children's voices in the research process, and a certain myopia in the contextualisation of research processes within everyday realities. To address these challenges, this article will provide

an initial exploration on the positioning of research as a tool for transformation, informing policy and practice, dedicated to children, exposing *adultist* assumptions and legitimising children's agency through interdisciplinary and context-rooted research. It does not aim to empirically document specific case studies illustrating the impact of what I call 'transformative research' on public policy, litigation or professional practice. Its objective is primarily conceptual and programmatic. The term 'transformative research' is increasingly used across the humanities and social sciences. However, there is currently no established definition or conceptual framework specifically dedicated to transformative research on children's rights. Existing work addresses key dimensions of this transformation, such as participation, research ethics, and criticism of compliance logic, without, however, articulating them in a coherent conceptualisation of research as a process contributing to the realisation of children's rights. This article aims to contribute to precisely this conceptual space. In this article, transformative research on children's rights refers to a critical, theoretically grounded research approach rooted in children's life contexts, which goes beyond simply assessing states' compliance with the CRC to actively contribute to the effective realisation of these rights. It conceives research not only as a tool for producing innovative academic knowledge, but as an ethical, relational and political process centred on children's lived experiences, recognising them as rights holders and social actors, and enabling a two-way translation between local realities and national and international debates on children's rights. Its transformative nature lies in its ability to influence the understanding, interpretation, and implementation of children's rights across policies, practices, and forms of governance.

The main idea is that, by grounding the understanding in interdisciplinary evidence, with a focus on living realities and including children's perspectives, research can enhance the fulfilment of children's rights and ultimately contribute to their well-being in their living contexts. Therefore, a central aim of this article is to reconceptualise children's rights fulfilment by moving beyond a purely top-down approach and foregrounding grassroots perspectives, based on empirical insights from social science research on human rights, international relations, sociology, socio-legal studies and anthropology (e.g., De Feyter et al. 2011; de Sousa Santos and Rodríguez-Garavito 2005; Liebel et al. 2012; Goodale and Merry 2007; Hanson and Nieuwenhuys 2013). "In other words, in addition to processes that translate global rights into local systems, the localisation of human rights implies a transfer from local to global, of knowledge and experiences stemming from local human rights practices to national and international human rights institutions. These, in turn, impact the development and interpretation of human rights laws and policies at the international level (De Feyter 2007; De Feyter and Parmentier 2011; Oré 2011)." (Ruggiero and Hanson, 2020, page 4). However, one always has to start from the certitude that knowledge is part of the solution to societal issues affecting children, but not in itself a panacea to all of them.

## 2. The place of research within the CRC Regulative Approach

In 1989, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) was adopted with the core ambition to enhance democracy, the respect for children's human rights, and to ensure equal application of the CRC in the overall territory of each State Party that ratified it (Ruggiero and Hanson, 2020). To fulfil its core ambition, the CRC Committee primarily focuses on States' responsibility and encourages them to adopt what Hoffman (2019) defines as a 'regulative approach' to the implementation of the CRC, which calls for the integration of the CRC within domestic legislation. This process secures the justiciability and enforcement before national courts, as well as the establishment of a referral system capable of providing remedies for violations (Hoffman, 2019).

Furthermore, the Committee recommends the establishment of a central monitoring system and the creation of coordination and collaboration mechanisms, with the intention to

ensure the coherence of the State's compliance efforts regarding the CRC (CRC Committee 2003; CRC Committee 2002). The core ambitions of the regulative approach are, of course, important normative commitments. However, the CRC Committee's stance regarding the implementation of the 'regulatory approach' does not appear to take into consideration two main factors: the complexity of devolutions of States powers between the central, regional and local level, which heavily impacts the fulfilment of human rights of children at the local level and it "overlooks how local perspectives on human rights can rework or initiate human rights claims" (Ruggiero and Hanson, 2020, page 3). Therefore, through a 'regulatory approach, the CRC Committee, in its General Comments and Concluding Observations, mainly highlights a one-way dynamic. This approach primarily observes changes that move from the global level down to the local context. "It adopts a norm diffusion or top-down perspective (Zwingel 2012) and thereby overlooks the complexity inherent to ... 'human rights localization' that implies the 'return to the global' from local human rights experiences (De Feyter 2007; De Feyter and Parmentier 2011)" (Ruggiero and Hanson, 2020, page 4). Research can play a crucial role in this return to policy and practice from local to national and global contexts, drawing on the experiences of children.

It is worth underlining that this article will not provide a detailed analysis of CRC Committee jurisprudence. However, it will instead give an overview of how research emerges in a selection of its General Comments. From this analysis, research is interpreted in a broad and functional sense, and the Committee rarely restricts it to academic and scientific research activities. In fact, the CRC Committee refers to research mainly as a '*routine tool of governance*' to:

- *Underpin evidence-informed policy-making decisions*: through data collection, monitoring and evaluation by statistical data gathering, administrative data and indicators. It is a process mainly embedded in the State's governance of self-monitoring and evaluation (CRC Committee 2003, paras 48 and 46). This is particularly evident in relation to the use of tools such as Child Impact Assessments (CIA) and Child Impact Evaluations (CIE), which are regarded as routine tools of governance (CRC Committee 2003, para 45), children's budget analyses and monitoring of the economic effects of policy as evaluative practices within state administrations (CRC Committee 2003, paras 51–52. See also CRC Committee, 2013a, para. 99; and CRC Committee, 2013b, paras. 78–81, CRC Committee, 2021 para. 23 and on public budgeting see CRC Committee, 2016)
- *Increase the accountability and transparency of the governance*: by producing an "annual publication of comprehensive reports on the state of children's rights throughout their jurisdiction", to be widely dissemination and used to trigger debate on such reports, including in parliament and in society at large involving children and minority groups in the process (CRC Committee 2003, paras 49), to enhance accountability and to inform policy-decisions. Furthermore, the presence of mandated reporting processes to the CRC Committee also provides "...a unique form of international accountability for how States treat children and their rights." (CRC Committee 2003, paras 71) (CRC Committee, 2016, paras 64-111)
- *Voice children in the governance processes*: by legalising participatory and rights-based methodologies and methods. The Committee explicitly recognises the key role of children in research processes, underlining that "in many cases, only children themselves are in a position to indicate whether their rights are being fully recognized and realized. Interviewing children and using children as researchers (with appropriate safeguards) is likely to be an important way of finding out, for example, to what extent the crucial right set out in article 12, to have their views heard and given due consideration, is respected within the family, in schools and so on." (CRC Committee 2003, para. 50).

The production of statistical and administrative data, the use of indicators and the analysis and evaluation of policies with the involvement of children can, of course, have an academic or scientific nature. However, the CRC Committee does not refer to the academic nature of these governance-related research endeavours, to preserve the value of an independent process of

analysis of the State's efforts in compliance with the CRC, undertaken by third entities. This is evident when it lists 'academic institutions' along with other entities in ensuring independent evaluation of progress, considering "...as essential the independent monitoring of progress towards implementation by, for example, parliamentary committees, NGOs, academic institutions, professional associations, youth groups and independent human rights institutions ...". (CRC Committee 2003, para 46). Furthermore, the Committee also values the importance of collaboration by State Parties with "appropriate research institutes" recognising academia as one of them (CRC Committee 2003, para 48. See also Ruggiero, 2022).

A clear distinction must be made here between research employed as a governance tool and academic research on children's rights, as their respective purposes, rationales, and effects differ significantly. Within the regulatory framework of the CRC, research is primarily regarded as a functional instrument for ensuring compliance, promoting accountability, and evaluating public policies. Such research typically consists of statistical data, indicators, impact analyses, and reports intended to measure the progress of States Parties in implementing the Convention. This approach reflects a top-down, technocratic model of governance that is closely associated with mechanisms of self-monitoring and accountability.

In contrast, academic research on children's rights is characterized by analytical independence and a distinct purpose to novel scientific knowledge. Rather than focusing on measuring compliance with international standards, its primary objective is to generate an innovative critical, contextualised, and theoretically informed understanding of the circumstances in which children's rights are experienced, negotiated, and fulfilled. The CRC functions not only as an assessment framework but also as a foundation for examining the translation of rights into local contexts and for analysing how these contexts influence the interpretation and development of standards. Academic research does not replace governance tools; instead, it reveals their limitations by highlighting aspects of children's experiences that are often overlooked by indicators, reports, and compliance frameworks. Transformative research on children's rights is therefore rooted in this conception of academic inquiry and adopts a critical perspective toward governance mechanisms.

### 3. Research in the field of children's rights: between critics and synergies

Since the 1990s, children's rights research has grown significantly, driven by the adoption of the CRC in 1989, expanding the knowledge of children's rights. It contributed to the strengthening of children's status as "people in their own right," and influenced both policy and practice (Quennerstedt, 2013, pages 233 and 245. See also Reynolds et al. 2006 and Lee, 2005). However, building on the work of Ann Quennerstedt, the primary concern remains that research in the children's rights field often uses the CRC as a tool to shape research processes and agendas by defining the topics of analysis. In her interpretation of Reynaert et al. (2012), Quennerstedt rightfully underlines that the implementation of the CRC "...becomes a matter of following the instruction in order to fill the gap..." so that research concentrates on the explanation of the CRC provisions and assess the measures undertaken to align the realities to the instructions provided in it (Quennerstedt, 2013, page 236 and 237). Furthermore, also drawing on her interpretation of Reynaert et al. (2012), she argues that research should move beyond the idea that the CRC, as legal provision is "valid in all settings and circumstances". Thus, she pledges for a stronger attention to this "consensus issue" underlining that as legal instrument, outcome of a political and social historical process, the CRC "...has limited potential to clarify and explain the complexities within human rights." (Quennerstedt, 2013, page 241 and 244. See also Arce, 2015).

Following on from this criticism, this article does not merely summarise the arguments, but

seeks to reframe them by explicitly placing them within the context of the governance of the CRC. The original contribution of this analysis is threefold. First, it establishes an explicit link between critiques of child rights research and the governance mechanisms of the CRC, showing that compliance logics have also shaped the practices and purposes of academic research. Secondly, it proposes applying to research the bidirectional translation model generally used to analyse interactions between international standards and local practices, conceptualising research as an intermediate space linking children's experiences to national and international normative arenas. Thirdly, it contributes to a reconceptualization of the notion of the realisation of children's rights, not only as a political or legal objective, but as an analytical horizon for research itself.

Children's rights research can provide this depth dimension of analysis that no legal national or international instruments can offer, including the CRC. Thus, for transformative research, the CRC should be the starting point of a critical analysis of its functionalization within different living settings and circumstances. Research with a bottom-up approach can provide this understanding, starting with the questioning of local needs and drawing on the living experience of children (Tarulli and Skott-Myhre, 2006). This process should be realised with a twofold objective: to investigate whether and how the CRC, as a legal instrument can intervene to fulfil needs through the guarantee provided by the recognition of rights, and how living experiences can shape the human rights discourse and policy from local to national and global levels.

However, to use children's rights research as a transformative tool, it needs to be further rooted in living settings. Therefore, to better contextualise the research process a key component is the inclusion of children lived experiences and voices in the setting of the research agenda and in the rolling out of its process. Today, despite several criticisms, human and social sciences have proved to be an effective tool in voicing the concerns of vulnerable groups in our society. An example is provided by Goedhart et al. (2021) in their narrative review, which describes and critically analyses the features of the consultation process for citizens belonging to vulnerable groups in health research and policy-making (see also Amann and Sleigh, 2021). The same applies to children's rights research as a tool voicing children's needs and influencing policy and practices development. We transitioned from research on children to research with children, and the methodological approach of the latter can be classified into three categories: child-led research, children as co-researchers, or youth participatory action research (Bakhtiar et al., 2023). Of course, child participation in research is also open to criticism; for example, it is perceived as a process and a space created by adults to enable children to express their opinions – a risk of power dynamics (Twum-Danso Imoh, 2023 and Arce, 2015). A risk that, relying on Spyrou's position, might be reduced if research practices are grounded in reciprocity, mutuality, and relationality, where children are not merely sources of data but co-producers of knowledge. Such approaches involve “knowing-with rather than knowing-about” children, emphasising co-researching, respect, care, and solidarity. In this way, research not only documents children's needs but also becomes a transformative tool that supports their dignity and rights (Spyrou, 2024, pp. 6–10). Notwithstanding the work that still needs to be done, research proved to be a tool that can provide children with space to express their own views, reflect on their experiences, articulate their interests and describe children's needs, but also outline advocacy and policy strategies to ensure the daily fulfilment of children's rights.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> For example: Ofosu-Kusi, Y. (2023). Deliberative disobedience as a strategy for claiming rights and representation in the family: The case of Accra's street children. In B. Sandin, J. Josefsson, K. Hanson, and S. Balagopalan (Eds.), *The politics of children's rights and representation* (pp. 205–226). Palgrave Macmillan. Reynaert, D., Formesyn, N., Roets, G., and Roose, R. (2023). *Combating child poverty in the childhood moratorium: A representational lens on children's rights*. In B. Sandin, J. Josefsson, K. Hanson, and S. Balagopalan (Eds.), *The politics of children's rights and representation* (pp. 227–250). Palgrave Macmillan. Javidan, P. (2024). False divisions and dubious equivalencies: Children's rights during the COVID-19 pandemic. In S. F. Regilme (Ed.), *Children's rights in crisis: Multidisciplinary, transnational, and comparative perspectives* (pp. 46–70). Manchester University Press. Sorensen, L., Willis, C. N., Asal, V., and Breger, M. L. (2024). Paddling the pupils: The legality (or not) of corporal punishment in schools. In S. F. Regilme (Ed.), *Children's rights in crisis: Multidisciplinary, transnational, and comparative perspectives* (pp. 23–45). Manchester University Press.

In practice, a transformative approach to research on children's rights is not characterised by a single methodology, but by a set of epistemological, ethical and analytical choices that guide the entire research process. It involves, upstream, formulating research questions based on children's lived experiences and the concrete conditions for the realisation of their rights, rather than solely on normative or institutional gaps. It also requires particular attention to power relations in the production of knowledge, recognising children not as mere sources of data, but as actors who can contribute to defining issues and interpreting results. Therefore, it is distinguished by the way in which research results are used, not only to assess policy compliance, but also to foster a two-way flow of knowledge between local contexts, academic debates and national and international governance arenas.

This conception of transformative research has distinct implications for researchers, institutions and public decision-makers. For researchers, it means moving beyond a strictly descriptive or evaluative stance to take a critical and ethically engaged position, while preserving the analytical independence inherent in academic research. For research and training institutions, it calls for the recognition of more contextualised, interdisciplinary forms of knowledge production that are sensitive to children's voices, including in academic evaluation and funding criteria. Finally, for decision-makers and actors involved in the governance of children's rights, this approach invites them to consider research not simply as a tool for monitoring or legitimising existing policies, but as a source of questioning that can challenge dominant frameworks of interpretation and open new policy avenues for the realisation of children's rights.

#### 4. Conclusion

The article seeks to propose an analytical framework for rethinking the role of research on children's rights, not as a simple tool for observation, evaluation or compliance monitoring, but as a critical and intermediary space that can contribute to the realisation of children's rights. In this sense, it deliberately precedes future empirical work, which it seeks to enable by clarifying the normative, ethical and analytical foundations of a transformative approach to research.

Therefore, the ability of research conducted with a transformative approach *as a tool in the middle*, able to support a *two-way* translation between children's living reality and national and global discussion, interpretation of children's rights and policy, even in the work of the CRC Committee, still requires further exploration.

However, this article highlights that research, as a governance process of monitoring achievements, is meant to improve States' accountability towards international standards. It is a governance tool that falls outside the scope of academic research, as also defined by the same Committee as an independent external entity of analysis (*research as governance tool vs. academic research*). The confusion of these two, eventually complementary, processes, their respective roles and final aims, risk to reduce children's rights academic research to a checklist disconnected from children's everyday realities by providing an account of the implementation gaps in a specific context, but without addressing the challenges of local lived conditions, for example in terms of access to education, poverty related issues, child labour, etc.

A transformative children's rights research agenda would allow to understand if and how the CRC as legal instrument may be invoked to protect rights and fulfil needs, for example in litigation settings, to understand the conditions, barriers, and opportunities that in a given living context allow (or not) respect for children's rights and to ultimately shape policy and the human rights discourse and understanding from local, national and international level.

Livingstone, S., and Bulger, M. (2014). A global research agenda for children's rights in the digital age. *Journal of Children and Media*, 8(4), 317-335.  
Livingstone, S., Third, A., and Lansdown, G. (2024). Children vs adults: Negotiating UNCRC General comment No. 25 on children's rights in the digital environment. In *Handbook of media and communication governance* (pp. 414-428). Edward Elgar Publishing.

In conclusion, it should be emphasised that transformative research on children's rights, as outlined in this article, should not be confused with participatory research, action research, socio-legal research, or rights-based monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, although it may draw on certain tools and methods from these areas. Its specificity lies in its explicit anchoring in children's rights as a normative framework, as well as in its ambition to contribute to the realisation of these rights by critically articulating children's lived experiences, legal frameworks and governance dynamics at different levels. In this sense, the transformative dimension refers not only to local change or individual empowerment, but also to the capacity of research to influence modes of knowledge production, interpretations of rights and, ultimately, the policies and practices that shape children's daily lives. This conceptual clarification reaffirms the specific role of academic research on children's rights as an intermediate, critical and independent space, capable of transcending the logic of conformity to contribute to a more situated, ethical and effective understanding of the realisation of children's rights.

In summary, this article proposed rethinking the place and role of research on children's rights from a transformative approach capable of transcending the logic of conformity that dominates both the governance of the CRC and certain academic research practices, by linking existing critiques to an analysis of governance mechanisms and mobilising the bidirectional translation model, it claims that research can be conceived as an intermediate space linking children's lived experiences to the normative and policy frameworks that structure the realisation of their rights. The specific contribution of this approach lies in the re-conceptualization of the fulfilment of children's rights as an analytical horizon for research itself, rather than simply as a result of public policy.

This perspective opens up several avenues for future research. In particular, it invites further analysis of the institutional and methodological conditions that enable research to maintain its independence while influencing normative debates, empirical exploration of the dynamics of bidirectional translation in different contexts, and examination of how knowledge produced with and from children's experiences can contribute to the lasting transformation of child rights governance frameworks.

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## XVIII. The use of AI in an interactive session on bullying in a primary school

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### Abstract

Bullying remains a critical violation of children's rights, undermining their dignity, safety and development under Articles 19 and 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The academic community plays a key role in promoting and disseminating these rights in society by establishing special centers that act as knowledge hubs within universities. However, the establishment of Child Rights Centers by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in Greece started in 2023 and further exploration is needed on how to collaborate with an equally important stakeholder to promote a culture of mutual respect, the school. This proposal, as part of the pilot project "Actions against bullying," presents an innovative intervention that integrates Artificial Intelligence (AI) within an interactive session on bullying in school, aiming to enhance Emotional Literacy while developing key soft and hard skills of the 21st century, including those related to AI Literacy – AI Ethics to prevent bullying. The 45-minute intervention was implemented in a mixed class of 12 5<sup>th</sup>-grade students and 2 1<sup>st</sup>-grade students in a school in the regional unit of Aetolia and Acarnania in Greece. Through hands-on activities that included a web-based tool (Teachable Machine) to train a machine learning model to understand children's emotions through their facial expressions and reflective discussions, students showed greater empathy and improved ability to express emotions and moral concerns about new technologies. Teachers' observations and student feedback suggest a positive change in emotional vocabulary, quality of peer interaction and responsible use of AI tools. This research contributes to the broader discussion about human-AI interaction and safe and ethical use of AI, particularly when children are exposed to AI in and out of the school setting.

**KEYWORDS:** Bullying; Emotional Literacy; AI Literacy; Teachable Machine; Human-AI Interaction

## 1. Introduction

School bullying is a long-standing and multidimensional phenomenon that continues to concern the educational community worldwide, as it undermines children's fundamental rights such as dignity, safety and normal psychosocial development. According to Articles 19 and 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), every child has the right to be protected from all forms of violence, abuse or exploitation, while education should aim at the full development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical capacities.

The academic community plays a key role in promoting and disseminating children's rights in society, notably through the establishment of specialised centres that act as knowledge hubs within universities. These centres are reference points for research, education, advocacy and the promotion of information on children's rights, bridging the gap between academic knowledge and practical application. However, the official establishment of such Child Rights Centres by international organisations such as UNICEF in Greece is relatively recent, with the first centre to be established in collaboration with the University of Patras in 2023 (*UNICEF and the University of Patras Establish the 1st Child Rights Centre in Greece, 2023*). This early stage of development necessitates further exploration of ways in which academic initiatives can effectively engage with other key stakeholders, particularly schools, which are at the forefront of shaping a culture of mutual respect and advocacy for children's rights on a daily basis (Burrige & Chodkiewicz, 2017).

An academic initiative to bridge this gap between Child Rights Centres and schools came in the form of the pilot project "Actions against bullying (Δράσεις κατά του σχολικού Εκφοβισμού)", which was designed and implemented by UNICEF, with academic support from the Child Rights Centers of the University of Patras and the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki in collaboration with the Regional Directorate of Primary and Secondary Education of Western Greece and Central Macedonia.

In the modern educational environment, tackling bullying requires innovative approaches that combine traditional methods with new technologies. Artificial Intelligence (AI) is emerging as a powerful tool that can contribute significantly to the prevention and treatment of bullying, offering new possibilities for the development of students' Emotional Literacy and social skills. According to recent research, integrating AI into educational programmes can enhance students' ability to recognise and manage their emotions, develop empathy and improve their interpersonal relationships (Indellicato, 2024; Sethi & Jain, 2024).

This research introduces an innovative intervention that incorporates AI within an interactive session on bullying at school. This intervention was implemented in a mixed class of 5<sup>th</sup>-grade and 1<sup>st</sup>-grade students in a Greek school, as part of the aforementioned pilot project. The aim of the intervention was to enhance students' Emotional Literacy, alongside the development of basic soft and hard skills necessary in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, including those related to AI Literacy and AI Ethics for the prevention of bullying.

The research attempts to answer the following research questions:

**RQ1: To what extent do students identify emotions compared to AI?**

**RQ2: What are students' perceptions of human expression/recognition of emotions and "expression"/recognition by AI-enabled systems?**

**RQ3: How does an interactive session using AI influence empathy and bullying prevention?**

The importance of this research lies in its contribution to the broader debate on the interaction between humans and AI, as well as its safe and ethical use, especially when children are exposed to AI in and outside the school context (La Fors, 2020). In addition, this research provides valuable insights into the effective integration of AI into educational programs aimed at preventing bullying and promoting students' emotional intelligence. In an era where technology

plays an increasingly important role in education, understanding how AI can be used to enhance Emotional Literacy and foster empathy is critical to the formulation of effective educational practices and policies.

## 2. Theoretical framework

The establishment of Child Rights Centers by UNICEF in collaboration with academic institutions, such as the University of Patras in Greece from 2023, is an important step towards the dissemination and implementation of the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). These centers act as knowledge and research hubs, contributing to the formulation of policies and practices that protect and promote children's rights, including the right to a safe and supportive educational environment. However, in this early phase, pilot projects like "Actions against bullying", and the implemented initiatives during these projects, will provide valuable insights and highlight challenges that need to be addressed for the effective engagement with key stakeholders, as parents, teachers and students.

### 2.1 Models for the prevention of bullying

Various models and programs have been developed internationally for the prevention of bullying, such as the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (*Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, Clemson University, n.d.*) and KiVa (*KiVa Is an Anti-Bullying Programme | KiVa Antibullying Program | Just Another KiVa Koulu Site, n.d.*). In Greece, important initiatives for preventing/addressing incidents of school violence and bullying [Ενδοσχολική Βία και Εκφοβισμός (Ε.ΒΙ.Ε)] include the workshops and other activities provided by the Institute of Educational Policy [Ινστιτούτου Εκπαιδευτικής Πολιτικής (ΙΕΠ)]. Additional initiatives, such as the Greek Center for Safer Internet (SaferInternet4Kids), provide educational material and guidance on how to tackle cyberbullying, which is a growing problem in the modern digital age.

### 2.2 Emotional Literacy and Socio-Emotional Learning

Emotional Literacy, defined as the ability to understand, express and manage emotions, is a fundamental component of this research (Salovey & Sluyter, 1997). Developing emotional literacy in children can empower them to better manage social interactions, build healthy relationships and deal with challenges such as bullying incidents. By incorporating activities that encourage students to recognise, understand and express their own and others' emotions, this intervention seeks to strengthen their emotional intelligence and resilience. The CASEL framework (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning) provides an integrated model for social-emotional learning that includes five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, interpersonal skills and responsible decision-making (*Fundamentals of SEL, n.d.*). These competencies are critical for bullying prevention as they allow students to develop empathy, manage their emotions and resolve conflicts in a constructive way. Improving social and emotional skills in teachers or students can therefore contribute to a more positive and healthier educational environment (Guillermo et al., 2022).

Experiential learning is also an important theoretical pillar of this research. According to David Kolb's theory, experiential learning is a process where knowledge is created through the transformation of experience (Kolb, 1984). The intervention sessions incorporate experiential techniques such as role-playing and simulations, allowing students to experience and reflect on situations related to the expression of emotions.

### 2.3 AI Literacy and AI Ethics

AI Literacy involves understanding the possibilities and limitations of AI, as well as its ethical implications (Long & Magerko, 2020). As AI technologies become increasingly prevalent in children's lives, it is critical to equip them with the knowledge and skills to interact with these technologies

critically and responsibly. This research explores how AI and AI tools, such as Teachable Machine (Teachable Machine, n.d.), can be used in educational settings to promote discussions about the ethics of AI, privacy and the impact of technology on society (Oyelere et al., 2022). Furthermore, AI can be leveraged to understand, interpret and respond to human emotions, offering novel approaches to enhance learning environments and human-AI interaction, from reacting to/improving the emotional state of teachers or students (Alvarez et al., 2022; Llurba & Palau, 2024; Seo et al., 2025), to the creation of emotionally intelligent chatbots (Bilquise et al., 2022) and empathic pedagogical conversational agents (Ortega-Ochoa et al., 2024).

AI Ethics is an emerging field that examines the ethical principles and values that should govern the development and use of AI systems. Issues such as fairness, transparency, accountability and respect for human autonomy are central to this field. In the context of education, ethics in AI involves considering how AI systems can be used to support students' learning and development while ensuring that their rights and privacy are not violated (La Fors, 2020).

Recent research has highlighted the importance of integrating AI Ethics into education, particularly concerning emotion recognition and social interaction. For example, Khare et al. (2024) point out the uncertainty in the performance of emotion recognition models based on facial expressions, highlighting the need for a critical approach to the use of such technologies. Similarly, Aydemir & Seferoğlu (2024) find that while students perceive the benefits of using AI in educational contexts, they also recognise the importance of the human factor and express concerns about ethical issues.

The present research synthesizes the above theoretical approaches, proposing an interactive session for the use of AI in the prevention of bullying and the enhancement of emotional literacy. By enriching traditional models of bullying prevention with elements from experiential learning and AI Literacy, the intervention seeks to provide students with a multidimensional experience that enhances both their socio-emotional skills and their critical thinking about technology.

### 3. Methodology

The present intervention was carried out as part of the pilot project "Actions against bullying", which was designed and implemented by UNICEF, with academic support from the Child Rights Centers of the University of Patras and the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki in collaboration with the Regional Directorate of Primary and Secondary Education of Western Greece and Central Macedonia in March and April 2025 in 36 schools in Western Greece and 25 in Central Macedonia targeting 5<sup>th</sup>-grade and 2<sup>nd</sup>-grade Primary School Students. The intervention was implemented in a mixed primary school class in Aetolia and Acarnania with grades 5 and 1. The 5<sup>th</sup>-grade consisted of 12 students and was selected because the class teacher participated in the pilot program. Given their small number, the inclusion of the 1<sup>st</sup>-grade students (n=2) did not affect the main intervention for Grade 5 and allowed a bounded feasibility probe with younger learners. Additionally, the pilot project targeted 2<sup>nd</sup>-grade students and therefore the participation of the 1<sup>st</sup>-grade was deemed adjacent and appropriate. The intervention was designed as a one-hour lesson of 45 minutes, focusing on the integration of AI/Machine Learning to enhance Emotional Literacy and address bullying.

A web-based tool, Teachable Machine, was used that allows users to train their own machine learning models in an easy and playful way. The students, under the guidance of the Teacher of the 5<sup>th</sup>-grade and with the help of the principal of the school, trained a model to recognize different human emotions based on facial expressions. This experiential activity was aimed at understanding AI and introducing how it works. The process involved capturing and categorizing images of different facial expressions through the webcam connected to the classroom interactive

whiteboard, thus creating a small dataset on which the program was trained (Figure 1, 2). This helped students to identify and discuss the details in the expression of emotions.

Because the activity involved brief image capture of students' facial expressions, written parental/guardian consent was secured. Furthermore, only pupils who felt comfortable and gave affirmative assent participated. Images were processed only on the classroom interactive whiteboard to train the demonstration model, and both the images and the model artifacts were deleted immediately after the intervention, with no uploads, storage, or further processing.

Figure 1. The installation in the classroom

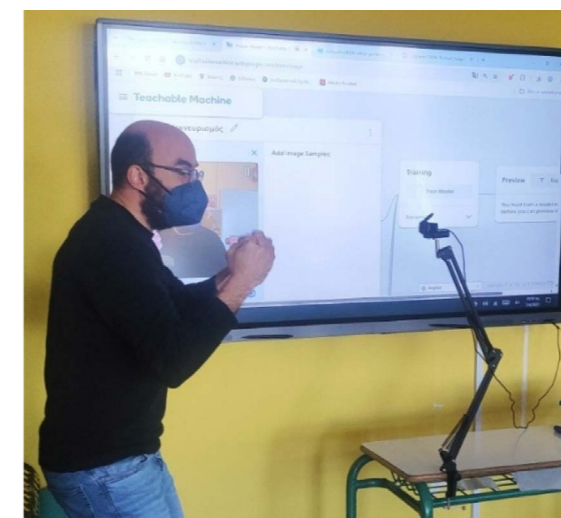
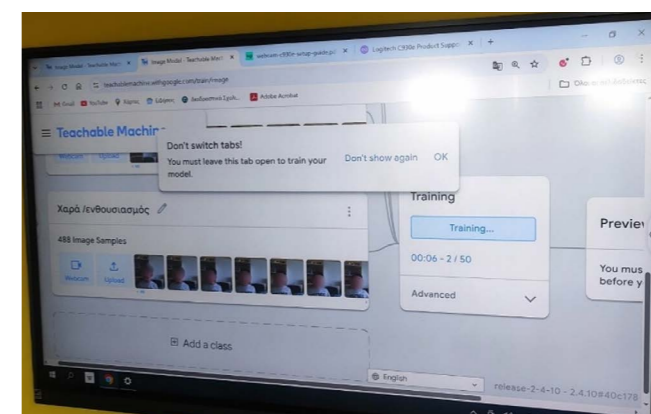


Figure 2. Data collection and training of the model



Data collection methods were mainly qualitative, based on direct observation of students' interactions and engagement with the AI tool. Notes were taken on their verbal and non-verbal responses, including discussions, questions and problem-solving approaches. In addition, informal feedback was collected through discussions with students during and after the intervention. This approach allowed for a rich, contextualized understanding of the impact of the intervention on students' learning and social empathy.

The intervention followed the framework for experiential sessions on bullying in school, as it was presented during the webinars of the pilot study, in which the teacher participated. Table 1 describes the proposed activity in more detail.

Table 1. An interactive session on bullying in school using AI

Objective and expected results	<p>Aim: To enhance emotional intelligence through the recognition and expression of emotions to prevent bullying.</p> <p>At the end of this session students are expected to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>better understand the emotions of others.</li> <li>express their emotions more clearly.</li> <li>reduce the number of misunderstandings that may lead to bullying situations.</li> </ul>
Activities	<p>Introduction:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The teacher explains the aim of the activity and introduces the Teachable Machine tool and explains how it can be trained for example to identify emotions.</li> </ul> <p>Introduction to the Teachable Machine:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students enter the Teachable Machine homepage.</li> <li>They will need a webcam to record facial expressions and a table/cards of emotions (e.g. anger/annoyance, sadness, fear, joy/excitement).</li> <li>The teacher guides the process and shows how the tool works.</li> </ul> <p>Training the model:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Each student is selected to train the program to recognize a specific preselected emotion.</li> </ul> <p>Alternatively, a ready library/data set can be used instead (e.g. (Facial Expression Dataset, n.d.) (In this option, licences may apply to some datasets.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Photos or facial expressions are used and recorded live and the program is trained.</li> </ul> <p>The better the quality and the bigger the amount of data, the more effective the emotion recognition model is likely to be.</p> <p>Photos and model training are stored/performed locally not online and deleted after the meeting for data protection reasons.</p> <p>Competition between the Teachable Machine and the classroom:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Each student cuts out the emotion cards.</li> <li>One by one, the students go up to the front of the class with their cards.</li> <li>The teacher shuffles the cards and the student draws one at random.</li> <li>The student looks at the card and tries to express the emotion through pantomime/charades (facial/body expression only).</li> <li>The other students try to guess and show their card with the emotion they think is represented.</li> <li>The teacher notes on the board if most children got the emotion correct.</li> <li>The Teachable Machine then analyses the expression in real time and notes whether it agrees with the class.</li> </ul> <p>The process is repeated for as many students as desired.</p> <p>Reassessment (if there is time):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The program is retrained with additional expressions from more students, maybe from other classes as well.</li> <li>It is checked if the accuracy of the model has improved in identifying emotions.</li> </ul>
Reflection	<p>The classroom collectively reflects on how often each of the students correctly recognizes the emotions of others and how often they correctly express their own emotions so that the other person can perceive them, avoiding misunderstandings.</p> <p>Additional questions were asked:</p> <p><i>“How can we more effectively recognize the feelings of others? Are all emotions recognized with the same ease/difficulty?”</i></p> <p><i>“How can I better express my feelings, and what is the importance of facial expression?”</i></p> <p><i>“Has technology helped in the process of recognizing emotions, and how important do you think emotion recognition and expression will be in human-robot interaction/human-AI(-enabled devices) interaction?”</i></p> <p><i>“What are the limits of technology, and what is the importance of human empathy?”</i></p> <p><i>“How can improving emotional intelligence lead us to better communication, concern for our fellow human beings, and reduce negative behaviors such as bullying?”</i></p>

The inclusion of two 1<sup>st</sup>-grade students provided an opportunity to observe the interactions and learning of different age groups. On the one hand, the 5<sup>th</sup>-grade students were able to express more fluently their thoughts about emotions and interaction with AI/Machine Learning and on the other hand, the playful way in which these complex concepts were approached with the help of Teachable Machine enables smaller classes and younger students to participate and develop valuable hard skills, such as a basic understanding of how AI works and the role of humans in developing such applications. Soft skills such as ethical/critical thinking, empathy and collaboration/teamwork were also sought to be cultivated.

**4. Results**

*RQ1: To what extent do students identify emotions compared to AI?*

The 5th-grade Teacher first asked the students in what ways emotions can be expressed. The students responded that emotions can be expressed through speech, i.e. communication, sounds/crying/laughter and facial/body expression in general. The teacher then told them that in this intervention, they would focus on facial/body expression and handed out to each of them an A4 paper with 8 emotions (Table 2). It was then discussed to what extent all of these emotions

can be expressed with equal ease and recognized by the person opposite. Since the students concluded that some emotions such as compassion are not expressed/perceived with the same ease, they chose 4 to continue (anger/annoyance, sadness, fear and joy/excitement – highlighted in Table 2). After a short presentation of the Teachable Machine platform, the students, who wished to do so (12/14), stood up in turn in order to take pictures of their facial expressions with the connected webcam for each of the four emotions they selected. More specifically, three different students participated in each emotion, taking 150 - 200 photos within a few seconds, collecting for example 630 shots for sadness, 447 for fear and 488 for joy/excitement. The model was then trained by simply pressing one button and waiting about 2 minutes for the model to complete. Some of the advanced configuration options were not used. Upon completion of the training of the model, the class proceeded to cut out the emotions on the paper and play pantomime/charades, where students had to use only their facial/body expressions to present one of the four emotions they would randomly select. The other students had to try to correctly identify the emotion (Figure 3). At the same time, the trained model also had the opportunity to guess the correct emotion (Figure 4). Regarding the first research question, it was found that all students correctly identified the emotion that their classmate in front of them was imitating, while the model had particular difficulty in identifying fear and sadness (Table 3). This provided an opportunity to discuss the importance of expressing and recognising emotions in the school environment thus potentially avoiding misunderstandings that can lead to bullying incidents.

Table 2. Emotion cards

anger/annoyance	sadness
fear	joy/excitement
anxiety	surprise
shame	compassion/sympathy

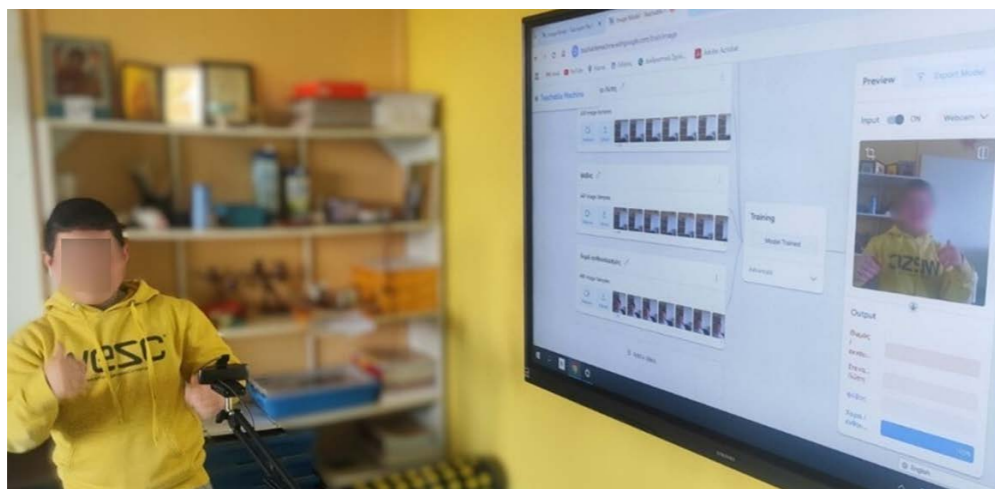
Table 3. Emotion recognition results

Emotion	Students	AI
anger/annoyance	100%	✓
sadness	100%	50%
fear	100%	x
joy/excitement	100%	✓

Figure 3. Pantomime/Charades and recognition of emotions by peers (fear)



Figure 4. Pantomime/Charades and recognition of emotions by the AI model (joy/excitement)



**RQ2:** *What are students' perceptions of human expression/recognition of emotions and "expression"/recognition by AI-enabled systems?*

In the next stage of the intervention, 5 students shared some thoughts related to the second research question, reflecting on the reliability of AI in recognizing emotions, firstly, and secondly, in expressing emotions for a better human-AI/robot interaction.

Student 1: *"Communication between people is very important. Boys and girls should have the freedom to share their thoughts and feelings to avoid misunderstandings and possibly bullying."*

Student 2: *"AI is trained by data, which humans feed into its training. The bigger/better/fairer/more ethical the data set, the better/fairer/more ethical the model potentially is."*

Student 3: *"Humans excel in empathy compared to AI."*

Student 4: *"AI is not allowed to make conclusions about people based on some data, limiting their freedom. E.g., an AI-enabled robot police officer is not allowed to arrest a human if they have not committed a crime, just because of the increased probability they believe exists."*

However, some students argued that a robot police officer is allowed to be stricter and "not have feelings" or "show sympathy".

Student 5: *"AI, whether implemented in the form of a robot educator or in the form of a platform within and outside the school context, should be empathetic, supportive and helpful to students. The same applies in the case of a robot doctor/nurse, where the presence of empathy should be particularly prominent."*

**RQ3:** *How does an interactive session using AI influence empathy and bullying prevention?*

Regarding empathy and prevention of bullying, it was observed that after the intervention the incidents of misunderstandings between classmates decreased. At the same time they seem to express their feelings more often, especially when they have been annoyed by a behaviour and be more apologetic when they have hurt someone.

## 5. Discussion

The students seem to perceive to a large extent the physical signs of emotion perception (facial expression, speech, gestures, posture), showing to a satisfactory extent equally the ability to express and perceive emotions. Their view of the difficulty of expressing and recognising some of these may be observed due to the difference in their intensity, e.g. terror > fear > anxiety (Plutchik & Kellerman, 2013). Several studies also find the Teachable Machine tool useful and easy

to use for teaching machine learning, particularly using visual materials to K-12 students (Oyelere et al., 2022), which was also evident in the present intervention. The fact that the trained model did not adequately recognize fear and distress/sadness may be due to the limited/uncurated dataset or may fall under the general limitation of such models of emotion recognition based on facial expressions, as research has highlighted the uncertainty in their performance (Khare et al., 2024). The views expressed during the session come to complement research showing that generally the student population perceives the benefits in using AI in chatbots/automated assessment processes/adaptive learning systems, but also the importance of the human factor (Aydemir & Seferoğlu, 2024), adding to issues of ethical use of these tools. The data from the present study can contribute to the research field of AI in teacher education and professional development, human-AI(-enabled devices)/robot interaction and the contribution of emotion recognition/expression to teaching and children's mental health in general, as well as to any lesson that utilizes AI in various forms.

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. The limited sample size and geographic coverage, combined with the short duration of the session, restrict the ability to generalize the findings to other populations and educational contexts. A more prolonged intervention with follow-up evaluations would be necessary to determine the long-term impact on students' Emotional Literacy and social interactions. While this approach provides interesting qualitative data, it may be subject to observer bias and lack the rigor of standardized measures. Future research could benefit from having a control group and incorporating quantitative measures, such as pre- and post-intervention questionnaires or standardized tests, to provide a more objective evaluation of the effectiveness of the intervention. Finally, the focus on a specific AI tool (Teachable Machine) limits the possibility of generalising the findings to other AI applications or platforms.

In summary, this exploratory study provides promising insights into the potential of using AI as a tool to enhance socio-emotional learning and promote ethical discussions in the classroom. Future research should focus on developing and evaluating more comprehensive curricula with embedded AI that can be applied to different age groups and educational settings.

### Ethical Use of AI Tools

During the preparation of this article, the authors used DeepL and Grammarly (AI tools) for language translation from Greek to English (GB) and text correction/polishing. After using these AI tools, the authors reviewed and edited the content as necessary, and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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## XIX. From School Classroom to the Academic Community and Backwards: STEAM Education as a Pathway for the Promotion of Child Rights in Early Childhood

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### Abstract

UNICEF has warned that the world is facing a new and enhancing era of crisis for children worldwide, because of several interconnected geopolitics, economics, technological and global issues. Therefore concerted systematic effort is necessary to secure the rights and promote the well-being of all children. Academia's contribution can have a multiplier effect on the social value and footprint of child rights. University of Thessaly and the Department of Early Childhood Education particularly, support academic research and actions related to promoting Child Rights, as Child Rights Centre. Due to an intercultural action-research with the participation of 15 children at an early childhood setting in three successive research cycles, an annual educational program was implemented with intercultural child-based perspective and interdisciplinary STEAM approach. Thematic Modules and Activities correlated to Child rights are presented. The theoretical model emerged, could be integrated into the professional training in universities and academic curricula of Pedagogical departments, or through academic seminars and workshops at the Child Rights Centers, so that educators can approach children's rights from various scientific fields, including STEAM education. It aims to create an educational system that promotes acceptance for all in a pluralistic society and engages students in a journey toward social transformation through research and learning. It envisions curricula that encourage all students to construct meaning, develop scientific and social skills, claim their rights, engage in social action and active citizenship, so they can address global issues.

**KEYWORDS:** Children's rights; Intercultural STEAM Education; Social transformation

### 1. Child rights in the new era

UNICEF has warned that the world is facing a new and enhancing era of crisis for children worldwide, because of several interconnected geopolitics, economics, technological and global issues (UNICEF, 2025). Therefore concerted systematic effort is necessary to secure the rights and promote the well-being of all children.

Children rights are human rights, universal and non-negotiable. Children have the same general human rights as adults and also specific rights that recognize their special needs. Human Rights have been central pillar of the United Nation's work from its inception in 1945 with the adoption of the Charter of the United Nations. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes every child as an individual with rights, not as possession of his/her parents. It sets out the rights that must be realized for children to develop to their full potential and offers a vision of children with rights and responsibilities appropriate to their age and stage of development (UNCRC, 1989).

The Convention serves as the foundation for the efforts and actions that are needed to uphold children's rights and well-being, from several systems. Society includes a mixture of social structures, institutions, individuals, groups and communities that need to be equally mobilized to effectively uphold child rights. As UNICEF argues "*crucial importance is to rethink and strengthen systems as the entirety of networks of structures, institutions, policies and processes that enable the delivery of critical services for children*" (UNICEF, 2025). These systems as governments, businesses, institutions and communities must address both present global challenges and also prepare for the future challenges.

### 2. Universities and Academic Community about Child Rights

Universities are educational institutions which have vital importance for sociocultural and economic development, and for building the future, as stated in the World Declaration on Higher Education (UNESCO, 1998).

UNICEF considers universities among the key agents that socialize individuals, help to shape their perceptions and constitute the ideal vehicle to promote the child rights agenda across society. Therefore, Academia's contribution can have a multiplier effect on the social value and footprint of child rights. The university education can play a significant role in supporting social development beyond purely academic learning. By fostering social values, principles, and norms, higher education institutions can actively promote democracy, human rights, and active citizenship (Laker, Naval & Mrnjaus, 2014).

UNICEF with the contribution of Dr Ghassan Khalil, has established Child Rights Centres in many Greek universities. The Child Rights Centres are "knowledge hubs within universities that serve to promote and mainstream child rights in society". At the Brochure of the Child Rights Centres Initiative in Greece (2025) it is argued that the Centres can serve as an overarching enabler for making the Convention on the Rights of the Child a reality for every child and on the other hand, universities can also benefit from the establishment of Child Rights Centres to serve as a point of reference for children's rights. Child rights, in which Academia should invest, are fundamental to sustainable development, because children are not just beneficiaries but crucial agents of change. Their realized rights (education, health, protection) empower them to actively build the inclusive, sustainable future envisioned by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by the UN in 2015, and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), breaking cycles of poverty and driving progress across all goals.

University of Thessaly and UNICEF have signed a Memorandum of Cooperation. A Child Rights Centre, strongly fostered by the academic community, has been established with Prof. Magos

acting as coordinator. Concurrently, University of Thessaly and the Department of Early Childhood Education particularly, support several academic and social actions related to promoting Child Rights. The Department also encourages the completion of doctoral dissertations relevant to the field. One of these dissertations highlighted a theoretical model which combines an intercultural child-based perspective with an interdisciplinary learning approach (Tsoukala, 2024).

### 3. From School Classroom to the Academic Community and Backwards: STEAM Education as a Pathway for the Promotion of Child Rights in Early Childhood

Tsoukala as an early-career researcher and member of the academic community conducted a PhD dissertation titled '*The contribution of STEAM Education in the intercultural sensitiveness of early childhood students*' (2024). The research was implemented in a school classroom (early childhood education setting - kindergarten) based on an intercultural action-research with the active participation of children. Findings were announced at the doctoral dissertation committee and the academic community was also informed. The theoretical model proposed in the research could be integrated into the curricula and pre-service early childhood teachers' training of Departments of Education, so that future educators can approach children's rights interdisciplinary. Hence, a circular process from the academic community to school classroom and backwards from the classroom to teachers' training, university curricula and academic community is emerged.

#### 3.1 Theoretical background of Intercultural Integrated STEAM Education

The theoretical framework of the research was grounded on interdisciplinary Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts & Mathematics (STEAM) education, and especially Integrated STEAM Education, in addition to intercultural, inclusive, and global education, through the lens of multiliteracies, education for social justice, and children's rights theories.

Science, Technology, Engineering & Mathematics - as a coherent entity- are integrated within an interdisciplinary field that creates complex learning environments in the educational process and engages students in authentic learning experiences (English, 2016; Hatisaru, Beswick & Fraser, 2019; Honey et al., 2014; Johnson, et al., 2015; Kelley & Knowles, 2016; Li, Froyd, & Wang 2019; Sanders, 2009; Vasquez et al., 2013). The collaboration and synergies between STEM disciplines and the Arts, within STEAM education create an interdisciplinary approach which aims to foster inquiry, creativity, innovation, dialogue, design thinking and critical thinking in students.

On the other hand, the interdisciplinary nature of STEAM education makes it an ideal environment for multimodal learning, allowing students to engage with content through different sensory modalities and modes and to better understanding of complex scientific, digital, engineering, artistic and mathematical concepts. STEAM education values the diversity of students' abilities, interests and learning styles providing them with opportunities to showcase their strengths and talents, promoting inclusion and equity in education (Hsiao & Su, 2021). Integrated interdisciplinary STEAM learning environments create dynamic and effective learning experiences, which motivate students to approach interdisciplinary concepts and problem-based challenges, using different perspectives and solving them creatively in a collaborative manner using critical thinking (Gess, 2017; Jang, 2016; Liao, 2016). Through experiential learning, they can develop a deeper understanding (Kolb & Kolb, 2005) and become active subjects in the educational process by constructing new knowledge (Perignat & Katz-Buonincontro, 2018).

Furthermore, in our global society intercultural education is increasingly discussed as essential for all students, regardless of their identity, to prepare them for the future challenges. Intercultural education as a learning framework that supports acceptance and respect for diversity is a necessary practice in every context (Magos, 2022). Intercultural STEAM Education has also a positive impact especially on students from vulnerable social groups by enabling

them to participate and be able to see themselves as future researchers or problem solvers (Thevenot, 2022). Intercultural STEAM Education underlines the view and perspective of creating an educational system that promotes acceptance for all in a pluralistic and just society and also engages students in a path towards social transformation through research and learning (Casto, 2022).

### 3.2 Human rights and Children's rights as a means of Social Change

The term "Intercultural Policy", which is found in all UNESCO axes of action, demonstrates that states should help by all possible means to respect the cultural tradition of everyone, to respect human rights, to promote equality of opportunities, to the best possible integration of the individual/group of individuals into society and to combat all forms of discrimination in a state, but also between states in a peaceful globalized environment. The intercultural approach is based on the vision of a world community that respects human rights (Coulby, 2006).

The Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development, the global action plan focused on the 17 SDGs to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure prosperity by 2030, at the target 4.7 states that by 2030 all countries should ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development, human rights, gender equality, the promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and the contribution of culture to sustainable development (UNESCO, Global Education Monitoring Report, 2016:287).

Within the framework of inclusive pedagogy, it is also important to adhere to principles that shape a human-centered and inclusive framework of individuals, collective expression and positive social interaction. It is important to shape an inclusive culture in each school unit and classroom that lays the foundations for fundamental values that promote human rights, social justice, individual and collective responsibility (Palaiologou & Gorski, 2017).

Casto (2022) argues that to fulfill the intercultural goals of social transformation and justice, students should participate in authentic learning content based on real issues such as poverty, water conservation, civil rights, the climate crisis and human rights.

The discussion of how children's rights and social change are interrelated is relevant to the public debate and the recognition of children's rights has become a major driver of social change worldwide (Leote de Carvalho & George, 2023). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) has a significant impact on the emergence of a specific status of children as a social group and on their rights as a means of social change. They are seen as social actors and not just passive subjects of social structures and processes. This view highlights the need to take their voices into account. Listening to children is an important aspect of making sure of children's agency within our societies (Leote de Carvalho & George, 2023). The right to be heard is underlined in Article 12(2) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, where it states that the child *"shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law"* (UNCRC, 1989, Art. 12(2)).

Nevertheless, the current situation of children around the world shows how the goal of hearing and listening to children's voices and promoting their rights is far from being achieved, making intensive relative research and initiative perspectives necessary.

### 3.3 The common ground of academic community, early childhood education, STEAM education and child rights education

Academia through promoting child rights, generating knowledge on children, teaching and integrating child rights into university curricula, could create the 'whole-of-society approach in

promoting and protecting child rights' (Khalil & Fasoulis, 2025).

Furthermore, early childhood education, as in all levels of education, must be able to respond to the 21st century challenges (Draper & Wood, 2017) and among these challenges assist in the promotion of children rights.

On the other hand, STEAM approach is connected to almost everything in our society and it is useful for children to realize this connection from an early age (Johnson, et al., 2021). Students should be able to develop a wide variety of skills so that they can cope with the changes around them (Wahyuningsih et al., 2020). Literature review shows that compared to other age groups, much less attention has been paid to STE(A)M education for children aged 3 to 8 years (Su & Yang, 2023).

Moreover, child rights education is a dynamic process that permeates all aspects of school life rather than being confined to a single subject or classroom lesson (Fasoulis, 2021). It spreads the school's mission, the rules of conduct, and school policies and practices aiming to empower children to take positive action to protect their rights and the rights of others. (Covell, Howe & McNeil, 2010). Nevertheless, a research gap is noticed concerning children of early childhood age.

Consequently, based on the common ground of academic community, early childhood education, STEAM education and child rights education, in the present paper we argue that STEAM education is a pathway for the promotion of child rights in early childhood.

## 4. Method

The aforementioned dissertation research aimed to investigate in which way early childhood students develop intercultural sensitivity during their engagement in learning environments that emphasize in concepts of Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics (Tsoukala, 2024).

Fifteen (15) early childhood children (4-6 y.o) participated in the research. Among them four (4) children had a migrant background. Additionally, the parents of two (2) children had another nationality.

Regarding ethical issues, the Code of Ethics of the University of Thessaly (UT, 2009) was adhered. Specifically, the informed consent and assent of the participants was ensured by the parents/guardians of the students. In the case of migrant children parents were informed by the teacher/researcher in collaboration with the managers of the institution responsible for their settlement and residence in the city.

All participants were protected in the research from exposure to possible physical or psychological danger or suffering or other adverse effects for themselves in the context of their participation in the research process. The research respected individual and all constitutional rights, cultural and individual differences and role differences, including those due to age, gender, race, minority, national origin, religion, disability, language and socio-economic level of the students and their parents/guardians.

The educator/researcher, advocating the belief that students, in spite of their young age, are active subjects and have the ability to express their opinion and point of view regarding their participation in the research, informed them about it and obtained their own consent. In order to ensure the "fully informed consent" of a child, in accordance with applicable legislation (EU, Guidelines on Consent under Regulation 2016/679 (wp259rev.01)), the purpose and context of the research, the way in which data would be collected and the possible ways of utilizing the results of the research, were explained using clear and simple language, suitable for children.

The research plan of the dissertation focused on conducting intercultural action-research (Magos, 2022) with the participation of children at an early childhood setting (kindergarten class)

in three successive research cycles. The annual coherent educational project “STEAMMissions for ALL children: STEAMMakers”, with intercultural child-based perspective and interdisciplinary STEAM approach was designed, implemented, observed, evaluated and reflected, in an early childhood educational context within eight (8) Thematic Modules and 64 STEAM Missions - Activities.

Research instruments included: a. Official school data; b1. Student’s Questionnaire on Interpersonal Intercultural Relationships, b2. Researcher’s journal; and c. Audio-visual data. We analyzed data with a combination of IBM SPSS Statistics 28 statistical analysis program, sociograms, content analysis and grounded theory analysis.

### 5. Promotion of children’s rights within STEAM learning environments

In the present paper we will describe indicative Thematic Modules (ThM) and Activities from the annual project, coherent to the promotion of Children’s rights and the way children were engaged in these learning environments.

During the Action-Research (AR) Cycle 1, two Thematic Modules were implemented, Thematic Module 1: ME & YOU and Thematic Module 2: ME, YOU & NATURAL ENVIROMENT. These two modules focused in developing understanding on differences, similarities among people and in nature, with respect. In AR Cycle 2, one of the four thematic modules was “WE & COMMUNITY”, which is strongly correlated with Children rights. During AR Cycle2, the war in Ukraine started and children raised their need to talk about peace and war. The Thematic Module 6: WE IN THE SOCIAL ENVIROMENT/WAR & PEACE was implemented. Children wanted to send adults the message that ‘Children have the Right to Peace’. AR Cycle 3 raised up an ecosystemic perspective of Living Together on Earth.

#### Thematic Module 1: ME & YOU

**Course Objectives for the students after participating in ThM3:** Understand the uniqueness of every human being.

- Knowledge:** Understand themselves as a distinct entity.
- Skills:** Describe their individual characteristics and discuss their achievements and progress.
- Attitudes:** Appreciate what makes them unique and respect the uniqueness of others.

#### STEAM Objectives

- Science:** Understand the diversity of people in their external and internal characteristics. Become familiar with the internal structure of the human body. Be introduced to the scientific way of thinking and acting.
- Technology:** Understand the possibilities offered by technology. Come into contact with educational robotics.
- Engineering:** Create two-dimensional abstract human models
- Arts:** Express themselves physically with their bodies and literarily in poetry.
- Mathematics:** Count, enumerate, group, categorize. Collect and process data. Understand the concept of abundance and proximity relationships.
- Communication:** Understand the communication frameworks and the conventions that govern them, exchange opinions, communicate and collaborate.

**Introduction ThM1:** Every child should paint a human figure for his/herself with the colours that represented him/her and on a post-it they dictated something in which each child feels unique. After that, every child presented their colored figure in the class and the topic where they feel special.



Children mentioned: “I am very good at football” (THAPN5), “I know how to draw colorful rainbows” (DKN4), “I make very nice houses with bricks” (XAN11), “I am very good at gymnastics and dancing” (MKN12\*).

#### ThM1- 1st Activity: “How am I? How are you? Are we different or the same?”:

Every child should complete the individual Form “MYSELF” with personal characteristics (Name - Initial letter of my name - My hair color is - My eye color is – Gender - Height- Weight – Palm - City and Country I was born and where I live). They should also fulfill the Brochure “My name is.... My story”, about the story of their name.



STEAMMakers made a comparative study of the Forms, recording the data on the classroom board, so that to become familiar with mathematical qualitative and quantitative relationships, and to identify similarities and differences in their individual and social characteristics. They made collective records, double-entry tables with individual characteristics, enumerations, counts, comparisons and recognized different numerical quantities (such as: “4 children have black eyes”, “9 children with brown hair”).

STEAMMakers became familiar with neighborhood relationships on a two-dimensional map and on the globe between the city they live in and the different cities or countries they were born

in. When they saw the different cities or countries where they were born on the two-dimensional map and on the globe, they made comments about neighborhood relationships, such as: “These cities are close”, “My grandfather lives in Albania too”, “The cities are not visible on the globe... and Greece looks small here”, “Congo is far away though”.



While retelling the story of each child’s name, the students showed the plenary a relevant drawing and talked about their family and its history.



These activities motivated discussions in the plenary class regarding the different ‘starting points’ and the ‘parallel’ or ‘common’ paths of people.

**Thematic Module 2: ME, YOU & NATURAL ENVIRONMENT**

**Inclusive Education Objectives for children after participating in ThM2:** Understand the existence of “stereotypical lenses” and prejudices. Relate the uniqueness of genders to the uniqueness

of people, and their common needs in order to survive.

**ThM2 – 2bActivity: “Coloured Lenses”. (Art. 2/CRC)**

The teacher/researcher narrated the story “The Leaf and the Bee” (Tsoukala, n.d.). Students were given specific materials to think about and build “something” that would allow them to see the white Leaf of the story as having colour. STEAMMakers created an improvised pair of glasses with different coloured lenses. They viewed the white leaf as red, yellow, or blue, and with the combinations of lenses it became green, orange or purple. Then every child saw each other through the coloured ‘lenses’. A discussion followed in the plenary session regarding the ‘lenses’ and stereotypical perceptions that people often use in their social relationships, when they see or interact with other people, and especially someone they do not know or who seems different.



**Thematic Module 3: WE AND THE COMMUNITY**

Duration: 15 days

**Course Objectives for the students after participating in ThM3**

**-Knowledge:** Learn about UNICEF and its mission. Distinguish their rights and obligations as members of various social groups. Identify the rights of children. Identify who is responsible for making decisions on issues that concern them. Recognize that all people need shelter, food, water, clothing and security. Understand the importance of meals and proper nutrition. Perceive the difficulties in ensuring clean water. Understand the global problem of pollution. Understand the concept of Community.

**-Skills:** Describe the groups to which they belong and identify their characteristics and actions. Manage information about their needs and desires. Distinguish needs that are met individually from those that are best met through collaboration. Act as members of a community.

**-Attitudes:** Become aware of and develop responsible attitudes and actions to support the rights of children and people. Apply democratic processes in decision-making. Take initiatives and responsibilities. Recognize that each child’s contribution to the group is unique and equally important. Show interest and seek positive ways to change the negative emotional mood of others. Think about ways to save water. Become aware of the necessity of a healthy environment. Act as a community.

**Indicative STEAM Objectives**

**-Science:** Observe the external characteristics of apples (color, shape, size) and the internal parts of the apple (peel, pulp, core, seeds). Indicate the similarities between apples regardless their variety



and external color.

**-Technology:** Become familiar with educational robotics and the BeeBot floor-standing robot, develop algorithmic thinking and create simple codes to move the robot. Search for information by browsing the internet safely and evaluate them.

**-Engineering:** Model apples with plasticine, respecting the proportion of their internal parts. Relate the towing of an object to its weight. Create a pulley to draw water from a model well.

**-Arts:** Get to know different types of music and poetry. Create posters with multimodal elements. Learn about foot painting and song interpretation through sign language.

**-Mathematics:** Make mathematical reasoning through measurements, enumerations, matching, bar graphs, comparisons, double-entry tables. Create and reproduce mathematical patterns.

**ThM3- Introduction**

Regarding the image with the UNICEF logo on the November calendar for World Children’s Day, the students asked what it meant. The teacher/researcher asked for their own interpretations and then she suggested class to search the Internet with safe browsing for what the image and logo mean.

Children found out the logo concerned the UNICEF organization, and they watched an informative video by UNICEF about its mission.

In the discussion that followed in the plenary of class, the STEAMMakers mentioned the basic needs that people have, especially children, creating a conceptual collaboratively. Peace, School, Love, Food and water, Parents and Home, Hugs and Friends, Smiles and Play is what children said.

The STEAMMakers agreed to deal with this issue, undertaking the mission to inform students in other classes about the children rights and to make their voices heard loudly!



**ThM3 – 4<sup>th</sup> Activity: Right to Decent living, clean & free water (Art. 24/CRC)**

Children concerning the right to clean water were informed through appropriate digital visual material about the difficulties in providing water in various regions of the world.

STEAMMakers managed to make a simple pulley and in small groups to draw water from the

‘well’. Through their experiential engagement in the model ‘well’, they understood how difficult it is now in some countries or in the past in Greece for some people to achieve what children today take for granted (access to clean water). STEAMMakers suggested ways that they could save water in their everyday lives.



**ThM3 – 6<sup>th</sup> Activity: Right to no Discrimination (Art.2/CRC) - Right to Education (Art. 28/CRC)**

On the International Day of Persons with Disabilities – 3 December- children watched videos about the difficulties that face children with disabilities in their everyday life. STEAMMakers faced situations when they had to draw with their feet, walk without seeing -as blind people, sign in the Greek Sign Language that use the visual-manual modality to convey meaning, instead of spoken words.



STEAMMakers discussed for the right of every child no matter its disabilities to be educated, and participate in an inclusive education system.

They decided to build collaboratively a school for the puppets of the class and named it “The Multi-coloured School”, where all puppets and dolls, despite any differences, would be welcomed and



educated. During the AR Cycle3, STEAMMakers welcomed migrant dolls from Ukraine and Africa in this 'school'.



**ThM3 - 7<sup>th</sup> Activity: World Human Rights Day**

On World Human Rights Day, December 10th, STEAMMakers made a poster, and presented what they had learned to the students at the other departments of the school unit.

They referred to human and children rights, shared their knowledge and thoughts. They showed the conceptual map, the 'well', the 'multi-coloured school' and all the other artifacts they had created. They said: "Children have all rights" (NKN8), "Adults should take care of children" (AKN1), "They should have food and clean water" (GAN3), "They should go to school and have friends" (MKN12\*), "They should not have to work" (MAN7), "They should be loved by their family" (SKN10), "They should grow up safely" (NKN8), "They should be able to dance and laugh" (BKN13\*), "They should have bread" (SKPN9), "The air around them should be clean" (MAN7), "They should have peace" (BKN2) "They should have love from everyone" (DKN4), "They should be taken to the doctor when they get sick" (THAPN5), "They should be able to play" (XAN11).

Students of the other classes were surprised of the active participation of the STEAMMakers and were motivated to learn more about children rights.



**Thematic Module 6: WE IN THE SOCIAL ENVIROMENT/WAR & PEACE**

Duration: 6 days

**Intercultural Objectives for the students after participating in ThM3:** Develop intercultural empathy and social citizenship.

Express thoughts, questions, fears and anxieties about war. Reflect on the causes, effects and consequences of a war. Express opinions and feelings about the concepts of "refugee", "immigrant", "migration".

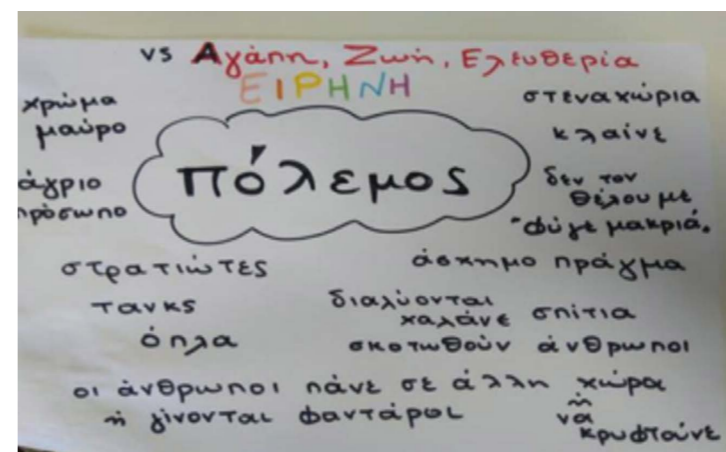
**Indicative STEAM Objectives**

- Science:** Understand that some animals, birds and humans migrate to survive. Understand the power of movement & air in order to 'fly' an object.
- Technology:** Understand Technology as a means of information that they must treat critically.
- Engineering:** Build a kite.
- Arts:** Know the symbols of Peace. Express emotions through theatrical play.
- Mathematics:** Measure and compare distances on the map.

**Indicative Activities**

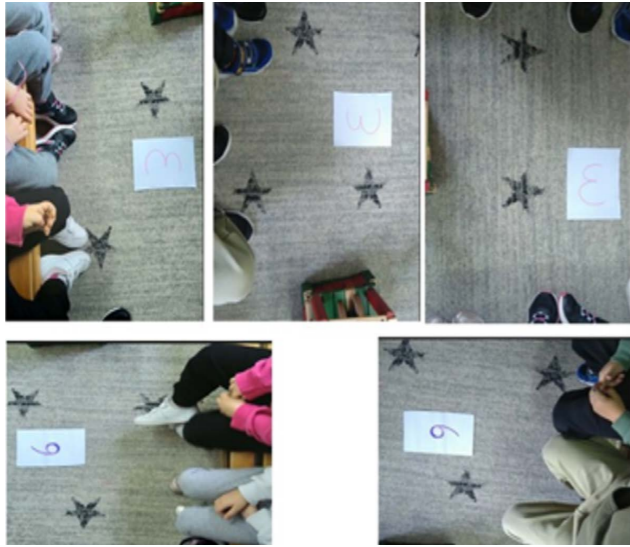
Children brought up for discussion in the plenary session of the class the sudden and tragic event of the start of a war with a global impact. They asked to see on the World map and on the map of Europe where the country of Ukraine is located in relation to Greece. The distance between Ukraine and Greece was measured with a rope and compared to the distance between Greece and Africa, Greece and the North Pole, Greece and the South Pole.

Causes, results and impacts of the war on people's lives were discussed and a relevant conceptual map was created.



Through experiential situations, they recognized that there are different perspectives on the same issue among people. The teacher/researcher showed the students sitting in a Π-shape in class, a card with a specific shape [ω], asked what they saw and others said they saw "the number 3", others "the letter ε" and some "the letter ω", a tension and disagreement was created between them. She asked children to change positions on the benches and they said: "Ah! Now I see another letter!!!", "and now I see what the children saw before...", "and from here now we see a number!!" Everyone saw the card from all three different perspectives they said afterwards: "Finally, we didn't need to disagree...", "we all saw the same thing but from a different perspective!!" and the student NKN8 came to the conclusion "we should remember this every time we disagree about something" and the student GAN3 added "I wish the adults knew this too!"





STEAMMakers concluded that the children do not want war to happen, but want all people to be 'friends', to live in peace, "with love and joy", and to resolve their disagreements peacefully.

The next day there was a discussion about people and children, such as the students in our class, who are characterized as "refugees" because they fled their homeland due to war. The concepts of "refugee" and "immigrant" were discussed. Opinions and feelings were expressed. Children developed their empathy 'putting themselves in the shoes' of people who had to leave their homes, migrate, what they would do, how they would feel, how they would want people to treat them in the new place they arrive, but also how people in the host country feel. The students created caravans of animals and people in small groups and entered the process of "experiencing" similar situations through theatrical play (drama).

STEAMMakers decided to make kites with the peace symbol and drawings on them sending their message to adults to stop the war.



STEAMMakers went into the yard holding their kites, running and trying to make them fly high, calling out rhythmically the word "PEACE".



### 6. The theoretical Model 'Global Intercultural Inclusive Integrated STEAM Education'

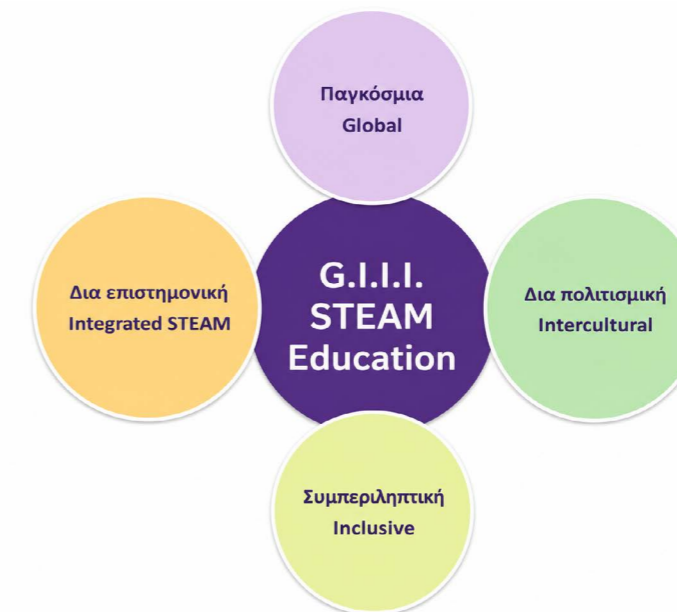
In the 21st century, societies are now interdependent on a global level and education must help students develop knowledge, attitudes, and skills in order to interact with other cultures, but also to learn about global problems that are interdependent.

Due to the theoretical framework and the results of the research, the interdisciplinary connection between STEAM subjects is demonstrated, goes further to the connection of the sciences with the humanities and the arts through an holistic integrated STEAM education.

At the same time, the intercultural dimension and the inclusive view of the world are found fundamental for the research.

Based on the above, we propose a flexible STEM educational theoretical model that combines what has been mentioned, involves teachers and students as co-researchers and co-formers of the learning process, utilizing open and student-centered pedagogical methods, applying active teaching techniques looking towards the challenges of the 21st century.

The proposed model could be called 'Global Intercultural Inclusive Integrated STEAM Education (G.I.I.I.STEAM Education)'.



## 7. Conclusions and new issues about STEAM Education and Children Rights education for the future

The research that has been conducted, clarified that the child-based, intercultural and inclusive STEAM educational program that was implemented changed the interpersonal relationships of the students, strengthening their intercultural awareness and sensitivity, developed their inclusive perspective and enhanced their understanding about children rights.

Children acted as active subjects and participants during the research, in spite of their young age, as they gave their own fully informed consent regarding their participation in the research, expressing their opinion and point of view. Furthermore, they became active agents of their learning, especially during AR Cycles 2 and 3, leading the learning activities and shaping the learning environments. This aligns with Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) about respecting children's view and voices and the perspective that listening to children is an important aspect of making sure of children's agency within our societies (Leote de Carvalho & George, 2023).

While children were engaged in the intercultural STEAM learning environments implemented, they understood the uniqueness of every human being, the beauty of their differences, and also the existence of "stereotypical lenses", prejudices and perceptions that people often use in their social relationships. These attitudes are consistent with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Articles 1 & 2) about equity and discrimination and also the foundational principle of non-discrimination through Article 2 at the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). This finding of the research is further in accordance with Magos (2022) concerning intercultural education as a learning framework that supports acceptance and respect for diversity in every context. Moreover the integrated interdisciplinary STEAM learning environments created dynamic and effective learning experiences. They motivated students to approach interdisciplinary concepts and problem-based challenges, using different perspectives, solving them creatively in a collaborative manner using critical thinking, developing deeper understanding and participating actively in the educational process by constructing new knowledge, affirming the existing research (Gess, 2017; Jang, 2016; Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Liao, 2016; Perignat & Katz-Buonincontro, 2018). Especially, these findings are in line with the established theory of Casto (2022) that intercultural STEAM Education engages students in a path towards social transformation through research and learning.

Significant important is also the fact that children developed their knowledge about human and Child rights. They learned about UNICEF and its mission. They identified the rights of children through the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and distinguished their rights and obligations as members of various social groups. They described the groups to which they belong and identified their characteristics. Among others, they managed information about their common needs and distinguished needs that are met individually from those that are best met through collaboration. Students understood the concept of community and acted as members of the children community. They took initiatives and responsibilities and applied democratic processes in decision-making, recognizing that each child's contribution to the community is unique and equally important. These results are totally in agreement with the view that rights that are not known cannot be claimed and rights that are not understood cannot be respected through the Article 42 in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) that requires inclusion of children's rights in school curricula, so that every child learns about them as part of their education. Our findings are in congruence with Casto (2022) arguing that students should participate in authentic learning content based on real issues such as human rights, to be fulfilled the intercultural goals of social transformation and justice.

Moreover, through the research, students became aware of and develop responsible attitudes and actions to support the rights of children and people. They shared their knowledge and motivated other children to learn more about children rights. Besides, children developed their social citizenship, concerning the issue 'war/peace' and decided to rise up their voices and inform adults -in every way they could- about the children rights and their aspiration of world peace. These outcomes are in

consonance with prior research on child rights education that empowers children to take positive action to protect their rights and the rights of others (Covell, Howe & McNeil, 2010) through a dynamic process that permeates all aspects of school life (Fasoulis, 2021). Children's voices have been taking in account and children have been seen as a social group and as active social actors, in congruence with Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which emphasizes that every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously by adults.

Concluding, the theoretical model 'Global Intercultural Inclusive Integrated STEAM Education' emerged from the research, in line with Casto (2022), aims to create an educational system that promotes acceptance for all in a pluralistic society, toward social transformation. It supports the global action plan of Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development to promote among others, education for human rights, the empowerment of a culture of peace and non-violence, appreciation of cultural diversity and elaboration of global citizenship. The model envisions curricula that encourage all students to construct meaning, develop scientific and social skills, to claim their rights, to engage in social action and active citizenship. Cultivating these skills and attitudes children could address global issues, especially in this enhancing era of crisis (UNICEF, 2025).

Additionally, within our research, we propose that pre-service teachers, in-service teachers and other professionals could learn the 'Global Intercultural Inclusive Integrated STEAM Education' model, through professional training in universities and academic curricula of Pedagogical departments, or through academic seminars and workshops at the Child Rights Centers. This knowledge could make them culturally sensitive, informed of inclusive and interdisciplinary STEAM Education, scientifically and socially literature. Regarding the theoretical model with child rights education they could be guided on how to approach children's rights, to support children's voices, to produce child-friendly materials, learning scenarios and lesson plans so that children could understand their rights in accessible ways, how to build capacity within civil society and how to raise awareness among policymakers about children's rights. In this way fundamental concepts of child rights could be benefited from this approach and STEAM education could be the pathway for educators to approach children's rights from various scientific fields, leading to a social transformation.

The authors concur with UNICEF's consideration that universities are among the key agents that socialize individuals and help to shape their perceptions, that these institutions can actively promote democracy, human rights, and active citizenship (Laker, Naval & Mrnjaus, 2014), and also that the knowledge hubs of Child Rights Centers can promote and mainstream child rights in society (Khalil, 2025). Therefore, we propose the utilization of the theoretical model in schools classrooms, child rights centers and academic curricula, from early childhood students to adult students.

Being in the circle of Academia – School classrooms- Students, as members of the academic community and as educators, and reflecting on the research and its relationship with children's rights education, we argue that the 'Global Intercultural Inclusive Integrated STEAM Education' theoretical model that emerged, based on the activities implemented, creates the appropriate learning environments to promote children's rights.

The circular process from Academia to School classrooms must be constantly active and filled with points tightly united, placing children, students and education at the center of the circle. This process describes the dynamic exchange where each influences the other and the continuous feedback loop where university research informs teaching methods, and classroom experiences provide data for university study, creating a dynamic flow of knowledge and practice, providing the best for students.

Global challenges and future worldwide issues regarding child rights demand from Academia to take action. We believe that all of us appreciate the consideration of UNICEF that Child rights are more than words, they are a promise that must be upheld through action, commitment, and sustained investment. It considers undoubtable that when we invest in children today, we build a stronger, safer, and more equitable future for everyone. The famous quote of Nelson Mandela (1918-2013) that "History

will judge us by the difference we make in the everyday lives of children” should be a reminder for us to act positively and decisively. Children’s future cannot wait.

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## XX. National Action Against Childhood Obesity: School and Community Interventions in Western Greece

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### Abstract

The National Action Against Childhood Obesity is the first comprehensive initiative in Greece aimed at preventing and addressing childhood obesity as a critical public health and social equity issue. Implemented by the Hellenic Ministry of Health in collaboration with UNICEF within the framework of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan “Greece 2.0” and funded by the European Union – NextGenerationEU, the program frames obesity not solely as a medical or dietary concern, but as a multidimensional social inequality that compromises children’s rights to health, information, equal opportunities, and well-being. The program adopts a holistic, child-centered approach, encompassing health education in schools, training for parents and educators, community-based interventions, while promoting environments that encourage healthy choices. A central component is the “Food for Action” Toolboxes, which provide teachers, students, and parents with practical, evidence-based resources to foster healthy behaviors and embed them in everyday life. Methodologically, the program supports the development of evidence-based policy by using tools for mapping local needs, gathering data, and evaluating impact. Schools are identified as a vital setting for intervention, emphasizing the importance of educating teachers, healthcare professionals, and social workers to encourage balanced diets and physical activity. National Action strengthens the connection between research and policy by demonstrating a cooperative strategy among the academia, international organizations, and the state. Early results underscore the importance of establishing public health policies that empower children as active citizens and rights holders, emphasize the role of schools in safeguarding student well-being, while addressing the underlying causes of childhood obesity.

**KEYWORDS:** Childhood obesity prevention; Western Greece; Community based interventions; Food for Action toolboxes; Parent engagement

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Childhood Obesity and Children's Rights

Childhood and adolescent obesity represent one of the most pressing public health challenges of the 21st century (Tragomalou et al., 2020). This phenomenon is not limited to developed Western countries but is also rapidly emerging in Asian and African nations as well. Children who are obese are highly likely to remain obese throughout childhood and adolescence, placing them at elevated risk for chronic diseases and complications later in life (Thomas-Eapen, 2021).

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), an estimated 41 million children under the age of five and over 340 million children and adolescents aged 5–19 are overweight or obese globally (WHO, 2020). This alarming trend highlights the urgency of coordinated prevention and intervention strategies. In Greece, the prevalence of overweight and obesity among children and adolescents exceeds 30–35%, which is one of the highest rates in Europe (Tragomalou et al., 2020). According to recent UNICEF data, the risk is not evenly distributed: rates of overweight and obesity are twice as high among children from low-socioeconomic-status households. Furthermore, obesity disproportionately affects culturally and linguistically diverse communities and vulnerable groups, while there remains a scarcity of evidence on lifestyle behaviors, their determinants, and effective prevention practices tailored to these populations (Balafouti et al, 2025). Over the past four decades, the number of children and adolescents living with obesity has increased more than tenfold, with millions now exposed to its health consequences throughout their lives (Caprio et al., 2020). This growing burden is linked to the early onset of serious chronic conditions, including type 2 diabetes, non-alcoholic fatty liver disease, and cardiovascular complications. Evidence shows that children who are overweight in kindergarten are four times more likely than their healthy-weight peers to be obese at age fourteen (Williams et al., 2018).

Obesity is recognized as a multigenerational condition shaped by prenatal influences (such as parental obesity, maternal health status, genetics, and environmental exposures), early-life factors (birth outcomes, feeding practices, rapid weight gain, and early diet), and childhood/adolescent determinants (social environment, family history, inadequate physical activity, poor diet, insufficient sleep, and screen time). These interconnected influences highlight the urgent need for early and multilevel prevention strategies (Deal et al., 2020).

The current high prevalence of obesity among children serves as a warning signal of broader systemic problems in the environment. Too few children have access to affordable, nutritious food or opportunities for regular physical activity. Instead, they are surrounded by obesogenic influences: shops and public spaces dominated by heavily marketed, less-healthy foods; advertising and sponsorship that normalize unhealthy choices in young minds; and urban environments where traffic reduces safe opportunities for active commuting, cycling, playing, and exploration. These challenges affect all children, but those growing up in socioeconomically deprived neighborhoods are disproportionately at risk.

Historically, legislation has been introduced to protect children's needs and interests. Today, however, government action is required not only out of obligation to protect vulnerable groups but also to uphold children's rights. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the most widely ratified international human rights treaty, explicitly safeguards children's rights to protection, education, health, nutrition, shelter, and healthcare (Mytton et al., 2019). In this context, addressing childhood obesity requires coordinated, equity-driven, and rights-based strategies that go beyond

individual behavior to transform environments, empower families, and strengthen school and community systems. The National Action Against Childhood Obesity, implemented by the Hellenic Ministry of Health in collaboration with the UNICEF Office in Greece, directly responds to these urgent needs. By combining health promotion, education, social policy, and community engagement, it aims to reduce inequalities, protect children's rights, and create supportive conditions for healthy growth and development.

### 1.2 The National Action Against Childhood Obesity and the Toolboxes

This is Greece's first nationwide initiative addressing childhood obesity through a comprehensive, rights-based approach combining education, health promotion, and community involvement (see: <https://paxisarkiakaipaidi.gov.gr>). Targeting children and youth (0–18) and their families, it covers all prevention levels. The academic community plays a central role in documentation, training, and ensuring interventions align with children's rights. The University of Patras coordinates implementation, training, and evaluation in Western Greece (Aetolia-Acarnania, Achaia, Iliia; population 648,220). A key component is the "Food for Action" toolboxes (see: <https://paxisarkiakaipaidi.gov.gr/ergaleiothikes>), developed by Academia based on international best practices, providing ready-to-use materials and structured activities for schools and families.

The main objectives of the toolboxes are:

- Establish supportive environments at school and at home that promote a healthy lifestyle.
- Engaging students in active learning about physical activity and healthy nutrition.
- Assisting educators and parents by offering advice, ready-to-use exercises and activities, and resources that can be used both at home and in the classroom.
- Encouraging cooperation between community stakeholders, families, and schools to guarantee uniformity in health messaging and reinforce constructive conduct.

Based on the Behavior Change Wheel framework (Michie, Atkins, & West, 2014), the toolboxes target four behavioral goals:

- Adequate water consumption and reduced intake of sugary drinks.
- Consumption of breakfast and healthy snacks.
- Increasing physical activity.
- Reducing sedentary time.

The toolboxes were developed following international best practices for childhood obesity prevention and management, under the scientific guidance of Harokopio University and in collaboration with civil society organizations. They include interactive exercises, nutrition games, practical tips, audiovisual materials, and strategies to create environments that support healthier choices. By providing structured and accessible resources, they bridge the gap between research and practice, translating scientific evidence into practical interventions and empowering children as active participants and beneficiaries of their own health.

This manuscript presents the theoretical foundation, methodological framework, and initial implementation experiences of the National Action Against Childhood Obesity in Western Greece, highlighting the academic community's role as a bridge between research, policy, and children's lived experiences.

## 2. Methodology

The National Action Against Childhood Obesity has designed an action plan that follows a multi-level, cross-sectoral methodology, combining scientific rigor with active community involvement.

### 2.1 Needs Assessment

Initially, a preliminary needs assessment in the Western Greece region was conducted. Through research, the team compiled lists of existing resources and identified gaps that may hinder the adoption of healthier habits.

The assessment included:

- Mapping of public green spaces and recreational facilities (parks, squares, forests, etc.), to assess the access that children and families have to safe spaces for physical activity.

- Mapping of public sports infrastructure and community activity spaces, to assess their availability, accessibility and adequacy.
- Identification of local stakeholders, organizations and individuals related to the initiative and who could contribute to the Action, with the aim of strengthening multisectoral cooperation and building local alliances for health promotion.

This approach ensured that subsequent interventions were tailored to local needs, maximizing their impact on the community, by identifying both the gaps in the existing infrastructure in Western Greece and the opportunities for new collaborations. It also provided a clear picture of the existing challenges and a roadmap for sustainable partnerships to enhance the long-term effectiveness of the National Action in the region.

## 2.2 Regional Task Force

With the aim of ensuring sustainability, a multidimensional Regional Task Force (RTF) was created, consisting of a multitude of professionals: academic experts, members of the school community, representatives of local authorities and civil society organizations.

The RTF aims to promote the adoption of healthy behaviors through:

- Awareness of the school community: Educational information and awareness-raising actions for the “Food for Action” toolboxes.
- Community Actions: Organizing and participating in actions that promote healthy behaviors, such as creating health hub schools, conducting summer camps, organizing health festivals, and other collaborations with civil society organizations.
- Advocacy: The task force will propose local and regional policies that create environments conducive to healthier lifestyles.
- Monitoring and Evaluation: The RTF will support data and information capture.

## 2.3 Capacity building and training

Based on the findings, a series of awareness-raising and training workshops targeting multiple stakeholders were organized, focusing on the “Food for Action” toolboxes. Participants were informed and trained in how to use and apply them in everyday life, thus strengthening the continuity between the school and family environments.

So far, the following have been completed:

- Four awareness-raising workshops targeting educational consultants, primary and secondary teachers, focusing on introducing the “Food for Action” toolboxes to the educational community and integrating them into daily educational practices.
- Two training workshops: one for parents, caregivers, and one for teachers and the rest of the school staff, aimed at training stakeholders in the use of the toolboxes and transferring practical skills for use at home and school.

In addition, large-scale actions and events have been carried out, such as the Health Festival and the Health and Wellness Summer Camp, described below.

## 3. Results/ Description of Actions

The implemented activities aimed to promote the use of the “Food for Action” Toolboxes and to foster the four target behaviors (increased water consumption, healthy breakfast, regular physical activity, and reduced sedentary time). The intervention design was guided by the Behaviour Change Wheel (BCW) framework and its COM-B model, aiming to enhance capability through the acquisition of knowledge and practical skills, to strengthen opportunity by creating supportive school and community environments, and to foster motivation through experiential, enjoyable, and emotionally engaging learning experiences. The Regional Task Force (RTF) collected participation and satisfaction data and maintained qualitative records of good practices, noting challenges, successes, implementation processes, and team observations, supporting continuous improvement and future scaling of interventions.

### 3.1 Mapping of Resources and Stakeholders

The first step was to survey and systematically map the available infrastructure, stakeholders and potential partners.

A total of 181 stakeholders were recorded, including:

- 72 representatives from the school community,
- 66 representatives from local authorities,
- 18 representatives from civil society (association, organization, NGO),
- 10 active representatives of the Ministry of Health (e.g., from primary or secondary healthcare, patient associations and NGOs) and
- 15 individuals.

Also, sports structures and green spaces related to health promotion in Western Greece were recorded:

- 369 local sports and recreational facilities (e.g. municipal stadiums, sports centers, swimming pools),
- 15 sports facilities at national level and
- 65 green spaces (parks, squares, etc.).

The mapping provided an information base for identifying infrastructure gaps and opportunities for potential collaborations. It also lays the foundation for strengthening local networks, ensuring that subsequent interventions are targeted and sustainable. Additionally, it documented the resources that could support the initiative and the gaps that require improvement to promote the adoption of healthier habits.

### 3.2 Workshops and Training Sessions

Also, a series of workshops and training sessions were conducted to familiarize teachers, school staff, parents, and community stakeholders with the “Food for Action” Toolboxes.

These included:

- One awareness workshop for school counselors (17 participants).
- Three awareness sessions for teachers focusing on asynchronous/video-based learning (186 participants).
- One practical workshop on the application of the Toolboxes, including Skills Workshops and coaching pathways, aimed at teachers and the whole school community (189 participants).
- One workshop for parents and caregivers that presented the Toolboxes and strategies for using them at home (31 participants).

According to 2022 data from the Hellenic Statistical Authority, Western Greece includes 391 kindergartens, 351 primary schools, 143 lower secondary, and 102 upper secondary schools, employing 1,148 kindergarten, 4,293 primary, and 719 secondary school teachers (ELSTAT, 2022). Our team trained 423 individuals: 17 school counsellors, 31 parents, 340 educators, and 35 auxiliary staff (school nurses, psychologists). Among educators, 264 (77.6%) were primary and 76 (22.4%) secondary. Geographically, 68.8% were from Achaia, 10.9% from Aetolia-Acarnania, and 19.7% from Ilia. This corresponds to approximately 10.6% of secondary and 4.85% of primary school teachers in the region — a meaningful initial step toward building regional capacity.

The sessions combined theoretical information and practical guidance, as well as interactive exercises and examples of how to apply the toolboxes in real-life situations within the family and school environments. While the educators’ workshop received a positive response, marked by active participation and constructive feedback, the parents’ workshop presented significant challenges. Despite the team’s extensive outreach efforts - including distributing invitations through the regional education quality supervisor to school principals, directly contacting parent and guardian associations, and promoting the event via posters and social media - the final number of participants fell short of expectations. This underscores the persistent difficulty in reaching and engaging parents, especially those balancing work and family responsibilities.

### 3.3 The Health Festival

The Health Festival event took place over the course of six days and was organized in two distinct phases. The aim of the event was threefold: to provide nutritional education, to raise awareness among the public and to celebrate a healthy lifestyle. The event was a great success, with children, parents, teachers and the wider community all taking part.

### Phase One – Collaboration with Academia

The first five days, the Festival took place at the University of Patras in collaboration with the annual Children’s Festival of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Education (DESECE), an established event that attracts children, families and educators from all over the region (see more: <https://childrenfestival.gr/en/timeline>). In this context, a series of educational activities focusing on nutrition were organized and implemented. Specifically, the team delivered a nutrition workshop suitable for preschool- and school-aged children, designed as a playful and experiential introduction to healthy eating.

Figure 1. Movement Game-Find the Hidden Foods



- The workshops included: Movement game-Find the hidden foods: Children race to find hidden food models and collect them (Figure 1).
- Food categorization game: Children learned to categorize foods correctly into groups such as proteins, carbohydrates, fruits, vegetables and dairy, and learnt about the role of each group in a balanced diet.
- Food categorization games into Healthy vs. Less Healthy Choices. Discussion about the nutritional value of foods and comparison of food choices (e.g. fresh fruit vs. packaged snacks).
- Creating balanced meals using the “My Plate” method: Using real plates and food stickers, children learned to make complete meals by combining foods appropriately.
- Plate decoration, allowing children to draw, color or make their own “healthy plate” collages.

In addition, an information stand was set up to inform adults. Visitors received printed material on the “Food for Action” toolboxes, along with instructions on how to register and examples of their application both at home and in school.

The collaboration with the Children’s Festival enhanced the visibility of the Action in the local community and highlighted the value of interdisciplinary collaboration between different university departments in promoting children’s rights to health, information and experiential learning. Integrating our nutrition workshops into an educational and cultural event such as the children’s festival ensured that the prevention messages reached a diverse audience, from preschoolers to parents, in a lively, supportive and festive environment. The participation of children and adults exceeded expectations as: 348 children participated in the workshops, while 167 adults received detailed information and printed material.

### Phase Two – Collaboration with community

The festival concluded with a large-scale event in a public park in the largest city of Western Greece, Patras, which was open to the public and offered a lively space for education, play and

celebration of healthy living. Families, educators and local community members attended, creating an atmosphere that combined learning with joy.

Specifically, the festival included:

- Talks on healthy eating and physical activity for children, as well as a presentation of the “Food for Action” toolboxes and their practical applications in school and family settings.
- A live cooking demonstration by a professional chef, showcasing quick and nutritious snack recipes for children.
- A catering station offering healthy meals and snacks.
- An information stand offering printed material and gifts to the participants from the national action against childhood obesity.
- In parallel, activities for children concerning healthy eating and physical exercise were held.
- Nutrition games:
  - A mock supermarket and activity of organizing food in a refrigerator- children took on the role of consumers, and they practiced making conscious food choices and learned how to properly arrange products in the fridge-strengthening consumer awareness, balanced choices and food safety.
  - Creating a nutritional hat: Using the “My Plate” method, the children created complete meals in food hats.
  - Musical-motor game: Using the logic of musical chairs, children ran around a circle with various plastic foods. When the music stopped, they had to pick up a food item and place it in the correct category (proteins, carbohydrates, etc.).
  - Circus and psychomotor games organized by volunteer students of DESECE promoted fun and movement (Figure 2).
  - Physical activities coordinated by the 6th Sea Scouts of Rio focused on teamwork and exercise (handkerchief games, relay races, etc.).
  - “Paint and Plant” workshop that involved decorating pots and planting vegetable seeds, linking nutrition with sustainability. This workshop was led by a group of medical students.
  - Traditional dance classes were held by the Dance Department of the Municipality of Patras, highlighting culture as a form of physical activity.

Figure 2. Example of movement game in the Health Festival



The feedback was extremely positive. A total of 155 adults completed the registration form and were accompanied by 115 children. It is worth noting that the actual attendance was higher as the event was open to the public and it was difficult to quantify accurately as many did not complete the registration form. The festival was a great success and participants, both adults and children, reported that they enjoyed the activities and gained valuable knowledge and practical skills. The success of

the event demonstrated how organizing community-based festivals that combine education and recreation can attract people more easily than traditional seminars.

### 3.4 The Health and Wellbeing Summer Camp in collaboration with Academia

Another key initiative of the program was the organization of a Health and Well-being Summer Camp. The camp was implemented in collaboration with the University Gym of Patras and operated with high daily participation, with an average of 120 to 160 children aged 6-16 years. The Gym's sports program was closely aligned with the objectives of the Action, fostering a dynamic and energetic environment that promoted healthy behaviors through a balanced mix of structured play, educational sessions and recreational activities within the summer camp.

#### 3.4.1 Staff Training

The first step was the organization of a training session for the summer camp's staff (teachers, volunteers, coordinators and the canteen manager). A total of 13 staff members attended the training, which focused on familiarizing participants with the objectives of the National Action, the use of the "Food for Action" Toolboxes and setting common ground for promoting healthy eating and physical activity in the camp environment. Feedback was extremely positive, indicating both the clarity of the sessions and how practical they were in terms of the camp's daily routines. Staff demonstrated strong commitment to applying the principles of the toolboxes into the daily program of the camp.

#### 3.4.2 Parent and Caregiver trainings

During the summer camp, six two-hour training seminars were organized for parents and caregivers of the children at the camp.

These sessions covered:

- Ways and strategies to reduce sugar intake.
- Practical and easy tips for promoting healthy habits at home.
- Ways for the parents to act as positive role models for adopting healthy behaviors.
- Instructions for registering for the toolboxes and implementing them at home.

One of the ongoing challenges was encouraging parents and caregivers to actively participate in these training seminars. Initially, structured educational sessions for parents and caregivers were organized and took place indoors. Despite careful organization and promotion of the seminars via emails and personal invitations to parents, the attendance rate was very low.

This may be due to:

- Work-related commitments.
- Tendency to prioritize leisure or vacation activities during the summer.
- The perception of some parents that the issue of nutrition and physical activity may not be directly relevant to them or their children at this stage.

Recognizing that the initial approach was not well suited to the target audience, the team adopted a more flexible and informal strategy. Instead of stand-alone workshops, team members were present at the summer camp site for three hours on a designated day each week. This arrangement enabled parents to participate without pressure or obligation, encouraging more relaxed and spontaneous engagement. It also facilitated individual and small group discussions, allowing for direct interaction and the opportunity to address specific questions and concerns in a supportive environment. Attendance varied across sessions, with a total of 119 parents and caregivers participating and providing structured feedback.

#### 3.4.3 Nutrition Workshops for Children

In parallel, nutrition workshops for children were organized once a week, carefully adapted to the developmental level of each age group. Each 45-minute workshop was conducted with a group of 20-25 children, reaching 60-75 children each week. A total of eight workshops were held over the four-week summer camp program, with 248 unique children participating.

The workshops included:

For younger children:

- Food categorization games to distinguish between healthy and less healthy food choices.
- Basic introduction to food groups: recognizing the role of fruits, vegetables, proteins, grains

and dairy.

- Construction of balanced "My Plate" meal models with crafts (Figure 3).
- A hands-on apple oxidation experiment from the "Food for Action" toolkits, used to demonstrate how exposure to oxygen affects food freshness and introduce basic food science concepts.
- A nutrition board game ("Healthy Eating Snakes and Ladders") designed to reinforce healthy eating habits in a playful and engaging way.
- A hands-on demonstration of sugar content in commonly consumed beverages (soft drinks, canned juices). Using real sugar, children could clearly see how much sugar is hidden in each drink.
- Healthy Cooking Workshop - Preparing Energy Balls: Children prepared nutritious energy balls using healthy ingredients such as oats, peanut butter, honey and cinnamon. Each ingredient was presented and discussed for its nutritional value, and children were guided in mixing and shaping their own energy bites. The activity aimed to promote the idea that healthy snacks can be fun, tasty and easy to make at home.

Figure 3. Craft-based construction of "My Plate" balanced meal models



For older children:

- Group discussions and self-assessment focused on key nutritional topics, such as the importance of breakfast, avoiding skipping meals, staying hydrated, and choosing healthier snacks.
- Healthy Breakfast Planning Workshop: Screening of an educational video from the "Food for Action" tools, on the topic of breakfast, followed by an open discussion, where children shared what they usually eat in the morning and explored healthier alternatives. Each child then completed a breakfast diary activity, in which they were asked to "plan" their own ideal breakfast using the "3-ingredient combination" method suggested in the tools. This method involves selecting a protein source, a whole grain or carbohydrate, and a fruit or vegetable, with the aim of creating a complete and energizing start to the day.
- Practical demonstration on sugar content in beverages: This workshop was also held for older children.
- "Weekly Challenge" goal-setting cards were distributed at the end of each session, where the children could set a personal goal related to either nutrition (e.g., eat vegetables every day) or physical activity (e.g., walk or bike instead of using a car). These cards encouraged self-monitoring, motivation, and accountability, and they reviewed during follow-up sessions to celebrate progress and discuss difficulties.

#### 3.4.4 Evaluation of Summer Camp

Evaluation was embedded throughout all stages of the Health and Wellbeing Summer Camp. The children used simple emoji-based sheets to capture satisfaction and learning, while parents and caregivers provided structured feedback through online Google Forms. Overall, the feedback revealed

high engagement, enjoyment of hands-on workshops, and increased awareness among children regarding nutrition and healthy habits.

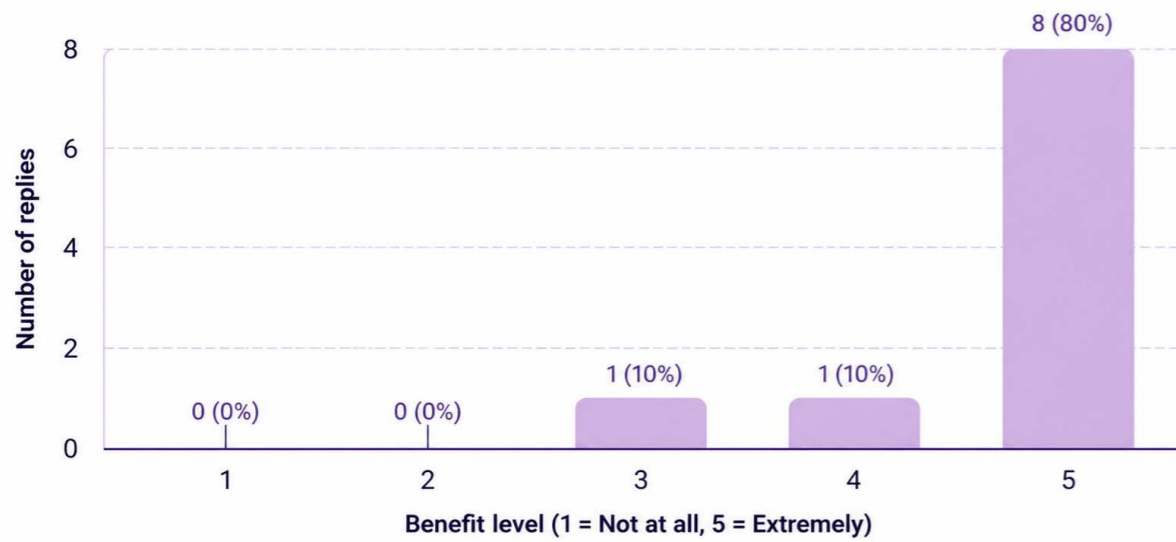
**Evaluation of Staff Training**

The training of camp educators and staff was assessed using a Google Form sent to participants after the completion of the session. Out of 13 staff members who attended the training -including the person responsible for the camp cafeteria - 10 completed the evaluation form. The results provide insights into participants' satisfaction, confidence in implementing activities, and perceived usefulness of the training. The evaluation used a 5-point scale, where 1 = Not at all and 5 = Very much. The evaluation results collected through Google Forms are summarized in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Results from camp staff training evaluation

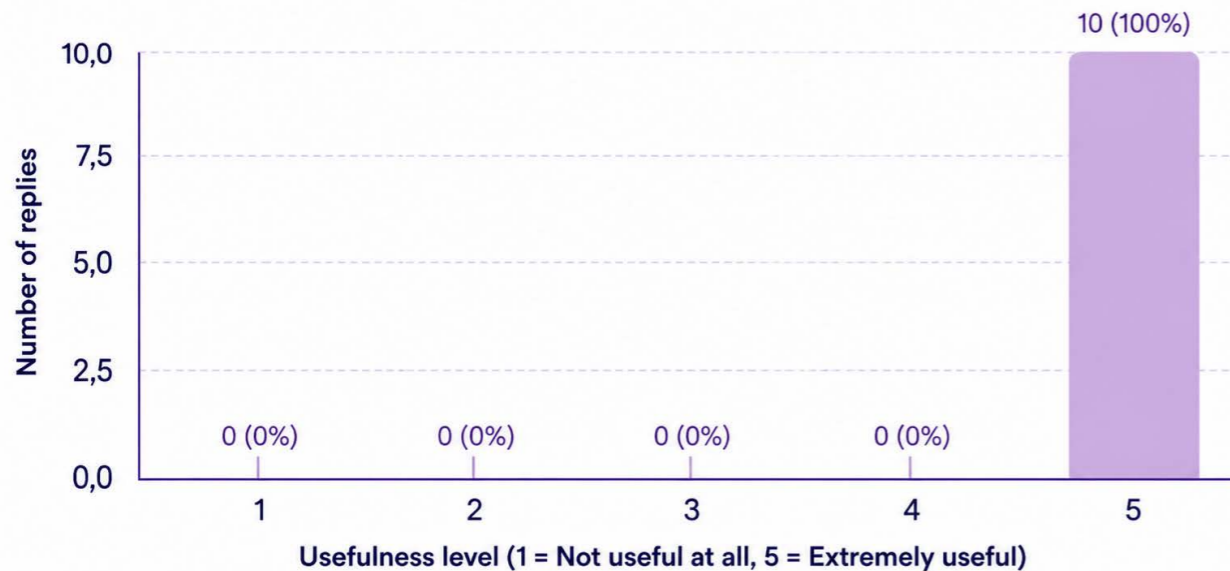
**In your opinion, how much did the children at the camp benefit from participating in the experiential workshops?**

10 replies



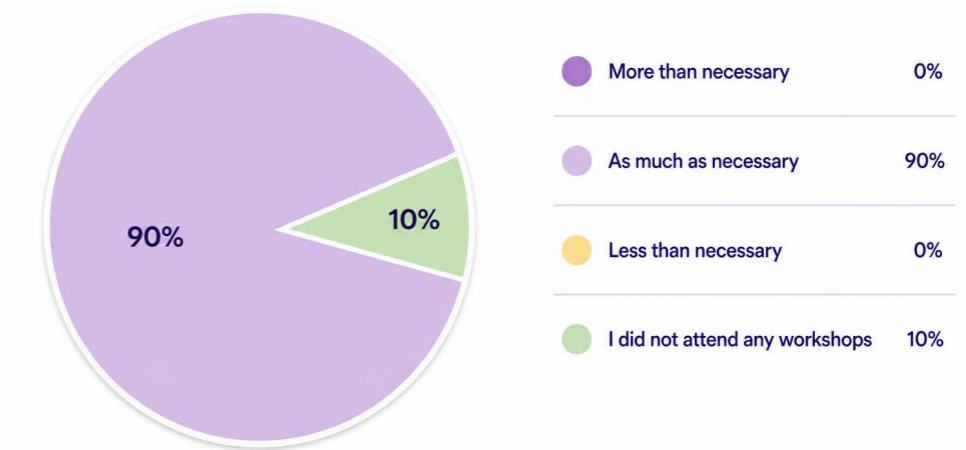
**How useful do you consider the training you received from the university team on the 'Food for Action' toolkits?**

10 replies



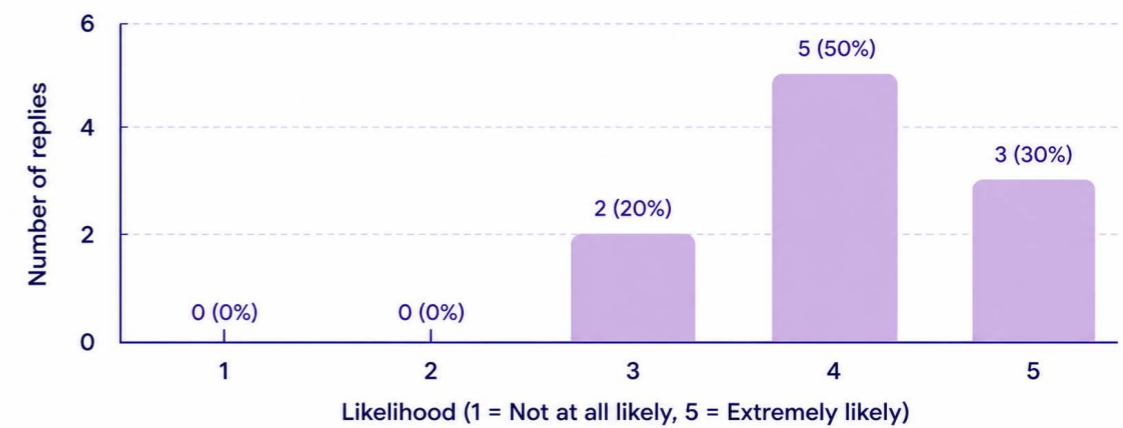
**In your opinion, the duration of the experiential workshops with the children was:**

10 replies



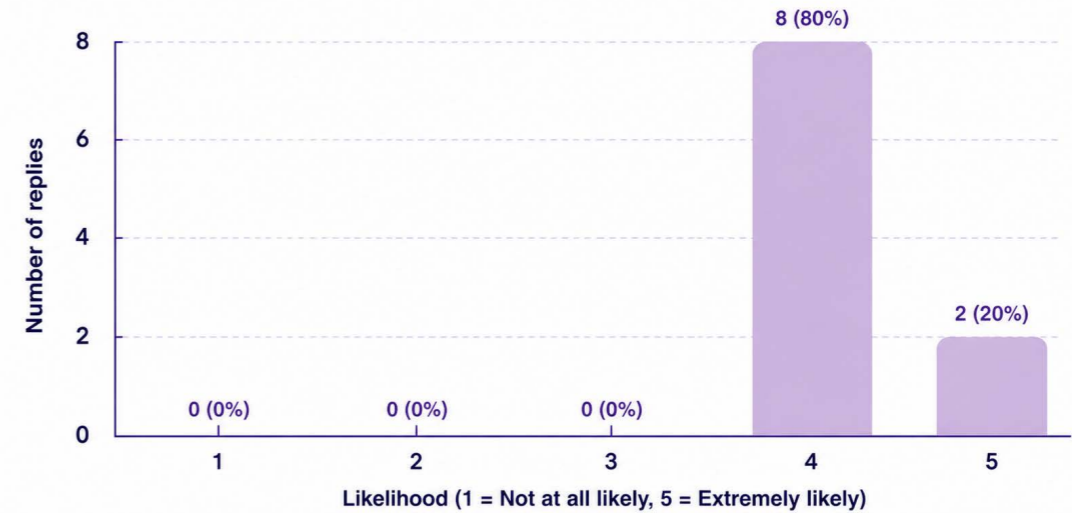
**How likely are you to use your training or toolkit activities during the camp period?**

10 replies



**How likely are you to use the educational tools outside of camp?**

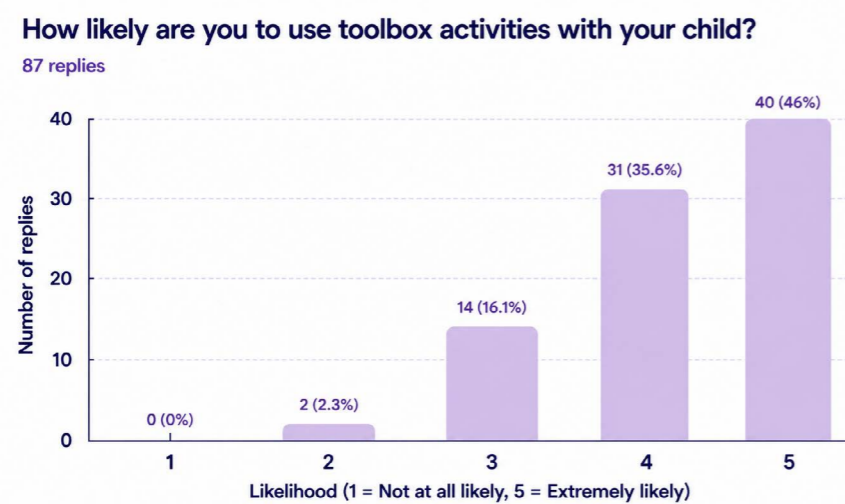
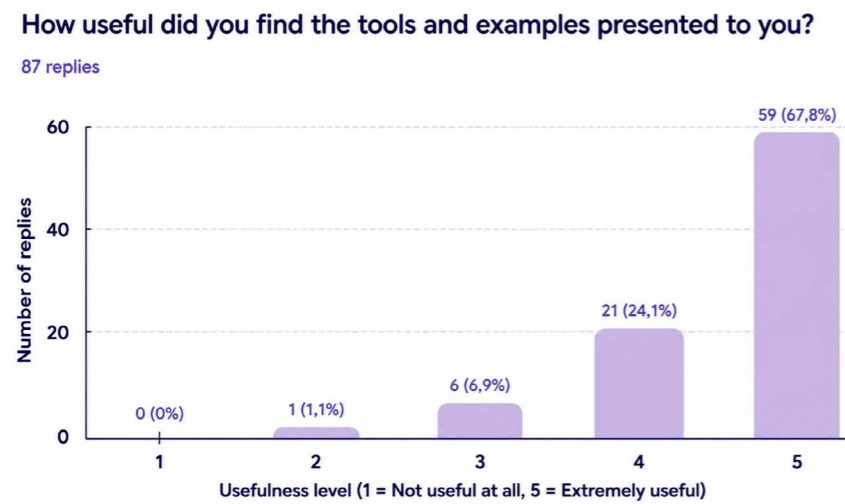
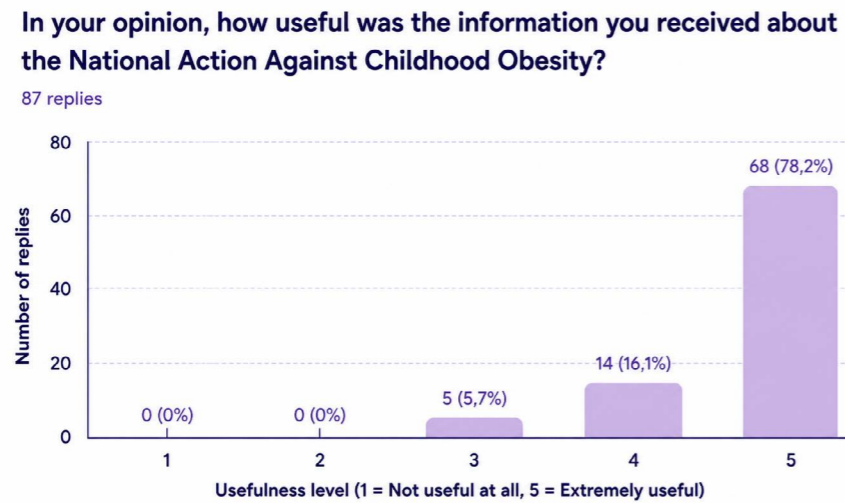
10 replies



### Evaluation of Parent and Caregiver Training

A total of 119 parents and caregivers attended the summer camp training sessions. Of these, 87 completed the evaluation form. The results are presented in Figure 5. It should be noted that part of the audience included grandparents or older caregivers who either did not have an email account or were less familiar with digital tools, which may have affected the response rate.

Figure 5. Results of the Evaluation of Parent Training



### Children Evaluation

The children evaluated the workshops themselves in a friendly manner using forms with smile/emoji scales for the younger children and simple thumbs up/down icons for the older ones. This enabled them to express their opinions in a way that was accessible, playful and age appropriate. No formal evaluation was conducted for the first two activities because the method for assessment had not yet been finalized. Overall, children’s feedback was consistently positive, with no single activity emerging as a clear favorite based on the evaluation sheets (Table 1).

Figure 6. Example of children workshop and evaluation sheets



However, observational notes from the implementation team indicated that certain activities elicited particularly high levels of engagement from the children.

These included:

- The “energy balls” cooking workshop, where the children read and analyzed the ingredients, followed a step-by-step recipe and enjoyed tasting what they had made at the end.
- The “Sugar in Soft Drinks” workshop, which surprised the children and sparked discussion and curiosity about the hidden sugar content in drinks.
- The “Apple Oxidation Experiment” from the toolboxes, which combined science, practical training and artistic creation (Figure 6).

These activities were particularly popular as they were easy to understand and related to everyday topics that children could easily recognize and connect to their own experiences. They also gave children the opportunity to actively participate in each stage of the process rather than passively observing. Another key factor in their success was the multisensory approach they took. Children had the opportunity to see, touch, taste, and smell, which transformed the workshops into a comprehensive, holistic learning experience. The combination of active participation, sensory stimulation, and practical relevance contributed to the fact that these workshops not only imparted knowledge but also created enjoyable moments of discovery for the children.

Table 1. Evaluation of Children Activities within the framework of Summer Camp

ACTIVITIES WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE SUMMER CAMP OF THE UNIVERSITY OF PATRAS							
Action Title	Number of Children	Girls	Boys	Age Range	Positive Evaluation 😊	Neutral/ Moderate 😐	Negative Evaluation 😞
Nutrition Discussion: Self-Assessment of Eating Habits: What I Eat Every Day	67	29	38	10-16	No evaluation was conducted	No evaluation was conducted	No evaluation was conducted
Creating "My Plate": Creating a Balanced Meal	61	29	32	5-7	No evaluation was conducted	No evaluation was conducted	No evaluation was conducted
Board Game "Healthy Eating - Snake"	53	25	28	7-12	50	3	0
Food Classification Game: Healthy vs. Less Healthy Choices	25	10	15	7-9	25	0	0
Demonstration of Sugar Content in Beverages	70	33	37	8-16	63	7	0
Healthy Cooking Workshop: Making Energy Balls	64	29	35	8-12	62	2	0
Healthy Breakfast Planning Workshop: Video, Discussion & Creation of a Balanced Breakfast	48	23	25	11-16	43	4	1
Apple Oxidation Experiment: Freshness/Food Storage	42	19	23	11-13	42	0	0

### 3.4.5 Outcomes

The results obtained from the summer camp proved that structured interventions can be effectively integrated into recreational environments. This action strengthened cooperation between families, schools, and universities, developed children's knowledge of nutrition, and created opportunities for parents and caregivers to come into direct contact with specialist scientists and discuss any questions or concerns they may have about children's nutrition or exercise.

## 4. Discussion

The implementation of the National Action Plan Against Childhood Obesity in Western Greece has yielded positive results. Interventions promoting healthy eating and physical activity were more effective when holistic, community-based approaches involved schools and families. Activities—from workshops to summer camps—highlighted the value of experiential and playful learning. The variety of activities carried out under the program — ranging from organized information workshops and educational sessions for teachers and parents, to open events and summer camps — underlined the importance of adopting a multidimensional approach, combining education, experiential learning and recreational activities for children.

A key advantage that contributed to the success of the actions was the broad mobilization of

stakeholders and the creation of a multidimensional regional action group with individuals who are active in the fields of education, health, and the community. Systematic mapping provided a valuable evidence base to inform the future design of more targeted actions and promote cross-sectoral cooperation. Equally significant was the insight gained from the summer camp workshops and activities, which confirmed that children are more responsive to learning experiences that integrate play and engage multiple senses - such as touch, taste, and movement.

At the same time, challenges were also encountered. Attracting parents and caregivers to participate in information sessions and educational workshops was a significant challenge. Despite the team's targeted outreach strategies, the participation of parents and caregivers remained relatively limited, reflecting broader difficulties such as balancing family, work, and leisure responsibilities. This underlines the need for more flexible, informal, discussion-based, and sensitive approaches to parental involvement, as well as long-term strategies that foster a sense of ownership and responsibility.

Furthermore, it was frequently observed that, despite the sessions being conducted by qualified professionals (nutritionists, psychologists, educators) and offering free guidance on fostering healthier lifestyles at home, many parents were not interested in participating because they felt that this information was not relevant to their own families, as their children were not overweight or obese. This highlights a critical misconception: that obesity prevention programs concern only children with excess weight. Consequently, there is an urgent need to educate parents that the adoption of healthy dietary habits and regular physical activity during early childhood is fundamental for all children, regardless of their body weight. It is not merely about preventing obesity but about building lifelong foundations for children's health and wellbeing. Having identified this misconception, our team plans to actively address it in upcoming parent training workshops. Additionally, by promoting and familiarizing parents with the "Food for Action" Toolboxes, we indirectly reinforce the message that healthy nutrition and regular physical activity are important for all children and adolescents, not only those with overweight or obesity.

Overall, the initiative demonstrated the potential impact and sustainability of interventions of this kind when integrated into existing community structures, adapted to local needs and supported by evidence-based tools, such as the "Food for Action" toolboxes.

Based on the results of the first implementation phase, several key actions are planned for the 2025–2026 school year and beyond. Two Hub Schools will be established in Western Greece as model institutions, integrating the "Food for Action" toolboxes into daily educational practice and promoting good practice within their communities. The Hub Schools will also operate as open community centers on selected afternoons, hosting free workshops, physical activities, and creative events to ensure inclusive participation regardless of socio-economic background. Moreover, since training activities to date have reached approximately 10.6% of secondary and 4.85% of primary school educators in Western Greece, further efforts will focus on scaling up capacity-building initiatives. Additional training sessions will be organized to strengthen educators' and auxiliary school staff's practical skills in applying the "Food for Action" Toolboxes in classroom settings—both within the framework of the Hub Schools and more broadly across the region—targeting members of the school community across both educational levels.

New workshops will also be designed specifically for parents and caregivers to better accommodate their schedules and increase participation. Also, Moreover, a detailed action plan will be developed based on the mapping of green spaces to prioritize the renovation and enhancement of public spaces in need of intervention. This will help to create safe, attractive, and easy to access environments for children and families, encouraging outdoor activity. Finally, to ensure knowledge transfer, there will be developed best practice guides of implementing the "Food for Action" toolboxes. These guides will provide practical, evidence-based recommendations for replication and scaling up, and will be widely distributed to schools, parent associations, local authorities, and civil society organizations.



## 5. Limitations

A limitation of this study worth mentioning is the lack of a control group, which limits the ability to know whether any future changes in behavior or health are solely due to the intervention. Future interventions could incorporate comparative designs to improve the rigor of the evaluation.

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## XXI. Children's Rights and Criminal Justice: The Child-friendly Justice Model – Conceptual Framework and Teaching

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### Abstract

Child-friendly justice, both as a conceptual framework and an operational approach, embodies the rights-based model for children in conflict with the law which continues to evolve within criminal justice, fostering knowledge, methodologies, and standardised solutions to complex challenges. This paradigm is embraced by scholars, researchers, and professionals engaged in academic inquiry, legal theory, policy making process, and the implementation of law in this domain. Within this framework, a structured system is developed to address the theoretical and practical aspects of justice administration, viewed through the lens of children's rights. This paper covers: (1) The child-friendly justice model – A holistic framework that integrates core principles, rules, and specialised justice components, tailored to uphold children's rights. (2) University-level teaching on child-friendly justice – A pioneering seminar offered within the undergraduate curriculum of the Department of Sociology at Panteion University. This course, designed by the presenter, emphasises interdisciplinary and experiential learning.

**KEYWORDS:** Child-friendly justice; Children's rights; juvenile delinquency

## 1. The Rights of the Child and Child-friendly Justice

Twenty years after the establishment of the paradigm of children's rights into a legally binding international instrument, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe adopted the Guidelines on child-friendly justice (hereinafter "the Guidelines")<sup>9</sup>. These were intended "to serve as a practical tool for member states in adapting their judicial and non-judicial systems to the specific rights, interests and needs of children and invites member states to ensure that they are widely disseminated among all authorities responsible for or otherwise involved with children's rights in justice" (Council of Europe, 2010, p.16). With the adoption of the Guidelines, the concept of child-friendly justice was placed at the heart of the development of child-focused and rights-based criminal, civil, and administrative justice system. This concept emerged from the European human rights framework and is grounded on the combination and careful balancing of the child's rights to protection and participation (Council of Europe, 2010, pp. 8-9)<sup>10</sup>. Particular emphasis is placed on the child's right to be heard and to have their views duly considered in both formal and informal proceedings that concern them, as enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and reflected in the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights (hereinafter "the European Court")<sup>11</sup>.

Focusing on criminal justice for children and its practical applications, several critical questions arise, among them the following:

(1) How does the conception and definition of child-friendly justice advance the discourse on the administration of justice for children in conflict with the law?

(2) In what ways does the concept of child-friendly justice integrate the broader framework of children's rights, and how does it guide a systemic approach to criminal justice for children in conflict with the law?

At the outset, the Guidelines emerge as a *modus operandi*: they aspire to offer not merely general guidance but also concrete proposals to ensure that legislation on child criminal justice, grounded in children's rights, is effectively implemented. Through the distillation of the concept of child-friendly justice into a legal instrument – namely, the Guidelines (2010) – a unified discourse of welfare and rights is restructured, both in theory and in practice. At every legal text and procedural moment, the welfare dimension of justice for children cannot be disentangled from the rights-based perspective, and vice versa. The implementation of participatory justice further enriches this integrated approach.

Conversely, through the Guidelines – which standardise procedures before, during, and after criminal proceedings – child-friendly justice emerges as a theoretical frame for the administration of justice. Concurrently, it evolves into a symbolic concept and serves as a unifying objective across the subsystems of the justice system.

Specifically, child-friendly justice adheres to a systemic model of children's rights which, like any coherent system, is structured around three core principles: wholeness, organised interconnection, and common purpose. Accordingly, child-friendly justice:

(1) Engages holistically with the judicial system for children [*wholeness*].

(2) Interweaves core principles, substantive and procedural norms governing prevention, age-specific interventions, guarantees of fair trial at every procedural stage, educational measures, deprivation of liberty, and the specialised administration of justice (including services, tools, and multidisciplinary, cross-sectoral approaches), as well as all elements that collectively constitute the child justice system [*organised interconnection*].

(3) Articulates a unified methodological purpose across all subsystems of criminal justice, ensuring "justice that is accessible, age appropriate, speedy, diligent, adapted to and focused on the

<sup>9</sup> Council of Europe, Committee of Ministers, Guidelines of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on child-friendly justice (adopted 17 November 2010).

<sup>10</sup> According to the Guidelines: "As children and youth themselves declare, child-friendly justice is not about being overfriendly or overprotective. Nor is it about leaving children alone with the burden of making decisions in lieu of adults. A child-friendly system protects the young from hardship, makes sure that they have a place and say, gives due consideration and interpretation to their words without endangering the reliability of justice or the best interests of the child" (Council of Europe, 2010, pp. 8-9).

<sup>11</sup> See also Liefwaard, T., "Child-friendly justice: protection and participation of children in the justice system", *Temple Law Review*, 88(4), 2016, pp. 905-927.

needs and rights of the child, respecting the rights of the child including the rights to due process, to participate in and to understand the proceedings, to respect for private and family life and to integrity and dignity" (Council of Europe, 2010, p.17) [*common purpose*].

Furthermore, in the terms of Paradigm Theory, child-friendly justice, both as a conceptual formulation and as a *modus operandi*, expresses the "paradigm shift" (Liefwaard, 2016, p. 906), introduced by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) within the specific domain of justice administration for children, and negotiates the approach to the child on the basis of their rights within the criminal justice system. From this standpoint, the Guidelines may be viewed as a specialised "post-revolutionary" work of the normal science of the children's rights Paradigm<sup>12</sup>, with the aim of: (a) providing interpretations/clarifications to intensify its application in a field of particular interest, (b) further structuring it and enhancing coherence among its various applications, (c) disseminating it within the scientific community and integrating it into every engagement with justice, and (d) guiding the study<sup>13</sup> and education<sup>14</sup> of the new generation of scientists/researchers/professionals within the Paradigm, so that they think and create within its framework<sup>15</sup>.

Expressing the "paradigm shift" in juvenile justice, child-friendly justice constitutes a robust and, over time, well-established frame of reference for every proposal and every implementation of measures, actions, and policies concerning criminal justice, in absolute accordance with the rights of the child<sup>16</sup>.

As has been demonstrated, education on child-friendly justice constitutes a specialised education in children's rights, and indeed an absolutely necessary one, as the field of justice remains a domain of enduring abuses and violations of children's rights<sup>17</sup>. Responding to the need to enhance awareness of these issues within both the scientific community and civil society, an educational seminar has been established as part of the undergraduate curriculum of the Department of Sociology at Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences. It is a semester-long theoretical and experiential seminar, entitled "Child-friendly justice" and focused on "the study of the criminal justice system for children in

<sup>12</sup> In his seminal work *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), Thomas Kuhn illuminated how, as a new paradigm develops, the number of scientists devoted to the emerging normal scientific tradition increases. Consequently, the scientific community delves deeper into specialised aspects of the paradigm, thereby enhancing its specific efficiency: "[...] if the paradigm is one destined to win its fight, the number and strength of the persuasive arguments in its favor will increase. More scientists will then be converted, and the exploration of the new paradigm will go on. Gradually the number of experiments, instruments, articles, and books based upon the paradigm will multiply. Still more men, convinced of the new view's fruitfulness, will adopt the new mode of practicing normal science [...]" (p. 159). Kuhn further notes: "[...] once the reception of a common paradigm has freed the scientific community from the need constantly to re-examine its first principles, the members of that community can concentrate exclusively upon the subtlest and most esoteric of the phenomena that concern it. Inevitably, that does increase both the effectiveness and the efficiency with which the group as a whole solves new problems" (pp. 163–164). In this process, the role of post-revolutionary texts becomes crucial: "[...] after the new paradigm has been developed, accepted, and exploited that apparently decisive arguments [...] are developed. Producing them is part of normal science, and their role is not in paradigm debate but in postrevolutionary texts" (p. 156).

<sup>13</sup> According to Kuhn: "The study of paradigms, [...], is what mainly prepares the student for membership in the particular scientific community with which he will later practice. Because he there joins men who learned the bases of their field from the same concrete models, his subsequent practice will seldom evoke overt disagreement over fundamentals" (Kuhn, 1962, pp. 10–11).

<sup>14</sup> Kuhn tells us that normal science deals, among other things, with questions such as: "What questions may legitimately be asked [...] and what techniques employed in seeking solutions?" He goes on to explain, "[...] answers (or full substitutes for answers) to questions like these are firmly embedded in the educational initiation that prepares and licenses the student for professional practice. Because that education is both rigorous and rigid, these answers come to exert a deep hold on the scientific mind. That they can do so does much to account both for the peculiar efficiency of the normal research activity and for the direction in which it proceeds at any given time" (Kuhn, 1962, p. 5).

<sup>15</sup> According to Kuhn: "[...] paradigms provide scientists not only with a map but also with some of the directions essential for map-making. In learning a paradigm, the scientist acquires theory, methods, and standards together, usually in an inextricable mixture" (Kuhn, 1962, p.109).

<sup>16</sup> As Kuhn notably observes, also referring to Herbert Butterfield (1947): "One perceptive historian, viewing a classic case of a science's reorientation by paradigm change, recently described it as 'picking up the other end of the stick,' a process that involves 'handling the same bundle of data as before, but placing them in a new system of relations with one another by giving them a different framework'" (Kuhn, 1962, p. 85).

<sup>17</sup> In the documentation of the Guidelines, emphasis is placed on the following:

- i. "the gap between these provisions and children's actual rights is striking" (Explanatory Memorandum, Introduction, para. 26), and "gaps remain both in law and in practice" (Explanatory Memorandum, General comments, para. 2);
- ii. "reality at national, regional and international levels demonstrates too often that children's rights are still violated" (Explanatory Memorandum, Introduction, para. 19);
- iii. there are "obstacles for children within the justice system such as [...] the diversity in and complexity of procedures, possible discrimination on various grounds" (Preamble, p. 8), since "in direct response to a broad consultation instigated by the Council of Europe, children and youth reported a general mistrust of the system, and pointed out many shortcomings such as intimidating settings, lack of age-appropriate information and explanations, a weak approach to the family as well as proceedings that are either too long or, on the contrary, too expeditious" (Foreword, p. 7);
- iv. "for children, there are many legal, social, cultural and economic obstacles to their access to court, the lack of legal capacity probably being the most important one. Very often, parents or guardians legally represent them" (Explanatory Memorandum, Introduction, para. 21), which reveals "the non-existing, partial or conditional legal right to access to Justice" (Preamble, p. 8); as well as
- v. according to the European Court, national courts have "to take considerable steps to ensure direct contact with the child and that, by this means only, can the best interests of the child be ascertained" (Explanatory Memorandum, General comments, para. 2).

conflict with the law through the lens of children's rights.”

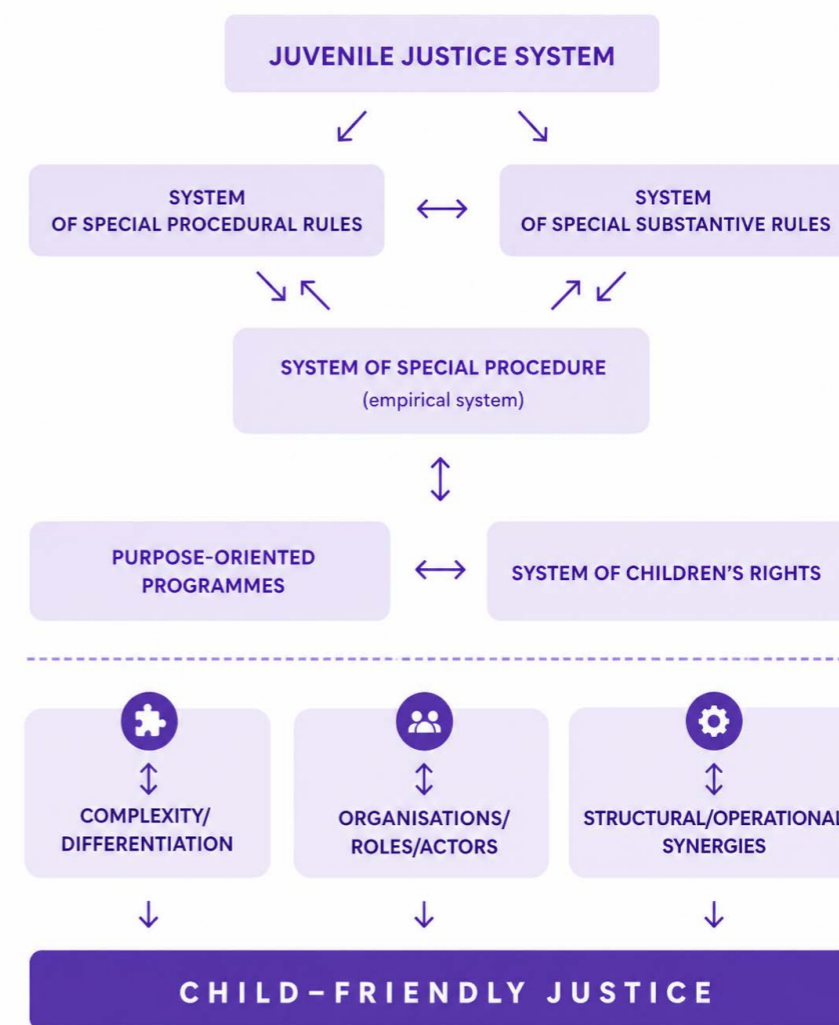
## 2. Designing and Implementing a University Seminar on Child-friendly Justice

Education in child-friendly justice is usually pursued within the context of legal studies and the training of legal professionals. Child-friendly justice courses are available from international organisations such as the Council of Europe and UNICEF, offering various textbooks and online, self-paced, and practical training for legal and child-focused professionals. Such training is often provided within specialised European programmes.<sup>18</sup> Academic entities and other organisations have shown interest in this field.<sup>19</sup>

At Panteion University, a specialised seminar for sociology students has been designed and implemented. It is addressed to students that have chosen the criminology pathway and are interested in subjects such as the sociology of childhood, human rights, juvenile justice, and multidisciplinary approaches and education. The ways in which the law, the justice system, and other social systems view children are discussed (King & Piper, 1995). The seminar is particularly chosen by students who wish to work as specialised professionals in the criminal justice system or in related organisations (juvenile probation officers, social reintegration staff, etc.), within which interdisciplinary training and inter-agency collaboration are pursued.

On the basis of the above, students' further acquaintance with the juvenile justice system follows the conceptual framework outlined and analysed below (Zagoura, 2022).

Figure 1. Delivering Child-friendly Justice



Within the framework of the seminar, students become familiar with the systemic approach to child-friendly justice by attending theoretical lectures and observing juvenile trials.<sup>20</sup> In doing so, they are introduced to the following more specific thematic areas:

### (1) How the system of special procedural rules operates?

The procedure, as an organised system of action, is governed by procedural rules (procedural law, other special legislative instruments, e.g. legislation concerning public administration) and by their usual uses over time. Thus, the economy of procedures is governed by the general rules of criminal procedure, yet in juvenile justice they appear relatively differentiated: the flagrante delicto procedure is not permitted, recourse to pre-trial detention is limited, an individual assessment by the juvenile probation officer is submitted, special judicial officers are provided for, etc. Moreover, the use of the rules, inspired by the special function of the system, may have shaped a different formal practice: in the hearing process, the juvenile probation officer takes the floor, the parents of the minor are addressed, a moral dialogue is exchanged with the minor throughout the procedure, etc. Therefore, it is a system of de jure and de facto special procedural rules and practices.

<sup>18</sup> e.g., Bureau International des Droits des Enfants (IBCR): Core Child-Rights Competencies for Judges and Prosecutors; Child Friendly Justice European Network's (CFJ-EN): Child-Friendly Justice In Action (2020); CHILDFront: Child-friendly justice in the Greek and Cypriot courts (2022); Child Rights International Network (CRIN): Child-Friendly Justice and Children's Rights, Child-friendly justice toolkit (2012); CLEAR Rights Project, Terre des hommes Hungary et al.: Training for lawyers who work with children suspected or accused of an offence (2022); Quality Standards For Legal Assistance For Children Suspected And/Or Accused (2022); Council of Europe: online Human Rights Education for Legal Professionals (HELP) course on Child-friendly Justice (updated in 2023); European Judicial Training Network (EJTN): The rights of the child in practice: exploring a multidisciplinary approach to child-friendly justice in European law – Paris (2016); Procedural Safeguards in criminal proceedings in the EU in practice (2019); International Commission of Jurists (ICJ): Practical Handbook for Lawyers When Representing a Child (2018); Access to Fair Procedures Including the Right to be Heard (2018); International Juvenile Justice Observatory's (OIJJ): Improving juvenile justice systems in Europe [Liefwaard, T.; Rap, S.E.; Bolscher, K.G.A. (2016) "Can anyone hear me?" Participation of children in juvenile justice: A manual on how to make European juvenile justice systems child-friendly]; Larcier-Intersententia: Children's Access to Justice: A Critical Assessment (2022); Penal Reform International (PRI): Protecting children's rights in criminal justice systems (2013); TRACHILD, European Lawyers – Foundation: Training of lawyers representing children in criminal, administrative and civil justice (2016-2018); UNICEF-ECARO: The Training Package on Child-Friendly Legal Services (2025);

<sup>19</sup> e.g., Leiden University, International Children's Rights (Advanced LL.M.); University of Strathclyde, Inspiring Children's Futures Doctoral Research Centre: PhD Law, Child-friendly justice systems; University of Liverpool: Improving legal practice with children and young people, Training Activities for Legal Experts (TALE); Academy of European Law: Various training materials on child's rights in international and European context in justice settings; The Focus Project: Individual assessment – a gateway to a child-centered justice; Leiden Law School's Department of Child Law: "Bridging the Gap: Exploring Academia's Role in Collaborative Advancements of Child-Friendly Justice in Europe" (Academic Seminar).

<sup>20</sup> See also Rap, S. (2013). The participation of juvenile defendants in the youth court. A comparative study of juvenile justice procedures in Europe (Doctoral dissertation, Utrecht University).

*(2) How the system of special substantive rules operates?*

The system of special procedural rules is accompanied by a system of special substantive rules, as the criminal treatment of the juvenile offender is differentiated in an explicit and specific manner, through the educational measures, the particular penalty of confinement in a special youth detention facility, etc. The legitimising basis of the specialisation of both the system of procedural rules and the system of substantive rules is the same: the age category and the developmental particularities inherent to it<sup>21</sup>.

*(3) How the special procedure is constructed for each minor?*

The input data of each case (the minor and his/her act) undergo different processing for the production of new knowledge, a new development for the specific minor, in the direction of fulfilling the purpose, which is the rehabilitation of the minor with respect for his/her rights. In other words, the qualitative characteristics (the content, the tone, etc.) of the actions that constitute the procedure are constructed in such a way as to respond to the expectations invested (e.g. pedagogical as well as participatory dialogue, setting boundaries for the minor regarding behaviours, but also rewarding good conduct after the act, etc.), in accordance with the special social function of the justice system.

The management of the whole procedure concerns the management of its component parts, as well as their interconnections, so that they converge towards a common purpose: the administration of child-friendly justice. The child, as a psychological system, is unique. The system is called upon to work meticulously with the complexity of this uniqueness, as well as with the complexity of the system to which the child belongs (family, community, etc.), in order to answer the fundamental questions (why did the child break or is breaking the law) and to proceed with the design and implementation of a rehabilitative project.

*(4) How the purpose-oriented planning of decisions is shaped in continuous interaction with the system of children's rights?*

The purpose-oriented planning of decisions contains the criterion of the best interest of the children, in relation also to their rehabilitation and social integration. The procedure, therefore, is teleological, that is, such as to promote rehabilitation/social integration, also through the understanding of their individual well-being. The purpose-oriented planning of decisions is in continuous negotiation with the system of children's rights. The system of children's rights defines the framework of intervention for purpose-oriented programmes: the well-being of the child (must) be constructed and given meaning in a way that supports the rights of the child in their entirety.

*(5) How the complexity of delinquency is managed through inter-systemic connections?*

All actions organised within the system aim at understanding and reducing the unique complexity of each individual case, which is necessary for making the best possible decision. To this end, the justice system seeks synergies with other (sub)systems of social functioning and their respective organisations. It draws on assessments from the health system to evaluate each child's psycho-intellectual capacities and to potentially explain its behaviour; it engages in dialogue with the educational system to make use of appropriate learning and socialisation processes, and so on. At the same time, the justice system develops its own interpretations and evaluations regarding the extent to which the above elements will be incorporated into judicial decisions, rehabilitative action plans, etc., (King & Kratz, 1992).

*(6) How roles are formed within the procedure, in the context of interactions that are continuously renewed?*

The concept of role within the procedure refers to expectations of behaviour or action by individuals, related to the task they have undertaken within it, specifically, an educational one. The actors who embody the involved roles – judges, juvenile probation officers, etc. – operate within the

<sup>21</sup> The seminar admits students who have been taught the specific substantive and procedural rules of juvenile justice that apply within the Greek legal system, as part of another course in the Sociology Department's curriculum entitled "*Juvenile Delinquency and Social Control*" (thirteen thematic units).

cultural framework and boundaries of the system and the organisations they serve, while at the same time making use of the freedom afforded to them, undertaking their own strategic choices for making and executing the best possible decision. To this end, starting from their roles, the actors enter into complex negotiations with one another. They may revisit their choices and planning depending on the dynamic co-evolution and co-construction of the issues, the response of the minors themselves, and of the other social systems/institutions with which they engage in dialogue for the solution. Therefore, roles function within organisations and interactions among actors and are continuously renewed.

*(7) How the involved systems are interconnected through operational and structural synergies?*

The social control of juvenile delinquency passes through the control of the conditions (social, psychological, etc.) that produce it—that is, it depends on issues addressed by other systems of social functioning (health, education, etc.). However, there is a noted difficulty among the involved systems in constructing common reference points and priorities for addressing the complexity of juvenile delinquency. The importance of creating communicative zones between (sub)systems is significant. Depending on the needs, this may be served through operational synergies between (sub)systems (e.g. ad hoc referrals from the justice system to the child protection system). However, repeated operational synergies may be required, in which case structural synergies, memoranda of understanding, and partnerships between (sub)systems are organised (e.g. the ongoing operation of educational structures within child detention facilities). The inter-agency methodology serves such synergies, which constitute prerequisites for the fulfilment of the rights of the child within the justice system.

Upon completion of the seminar, students have internalised that all of the above both presuppose and dialectically aim at a child-friendly systemic approach to justice, as this is analysed in its fundamental principles, its general components, and its specific provisions at each procedural stage. They are also trained in the various modules of child-friendly justice (basics of child-friendly justice, the right to effective participation in justice systems, diversion and restorative justice, child-friendly justice before judicial proceedings, child-friendly justice during judicial proceedings, child-friendly justice after judicial proceedings). In addition to theoretical documentation and case study analysis for a better understanding of the Guidelines on child-friendly justice, students are invited to undertake comparative study and review of international and European legal texts on juvenile justice (1985-2019).<sup>22</sup> Emphasis is given to the mandatory right to a lawyer and the right to be tried in specialist courts. Selected case law of the European Court is also included. The above aim to help students understand the evolution of international trends in the field. Moreover, students are afforded the opportunity to participate in educational visits and observational sessions at the Juvenile Court of Athens and the Juvenile Detention Center in Kassavetia, Volos. These experiences are designed to cultivate practical expertise and a nuanced understanding of real-world juvenile justice practices.

Finally, students engage in a simulation of a child-friendly trial, which they conduct at the end of the seminar at the venue of the Juvenile Court of Athens. Initially, the theatrical play *Blästrad*, written by Swedish playwright Mats Kjelbye, is used with the assistance of a director.<sup>23</sup> In this way, students study

<sup>22</sup> The following legal instruments produced within the framework of the UN are studied in detail: "The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice / The Beijing Rules" (1985); "The United Nations Rules for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of their Liberty / The Havana Rules" (1990); "The United Nations Guidelines for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency / The Riyadh Guidelines" (1990); "Guidelines for Action on Children in the Criminal Justice System" (1997); "Guidance Note of the United Nations Secretary-General: United Nations Approach to Justice for Children" (2008); UNODC (2013), Justice in Matters Involving Children in Conflict with the Law – Model Law on Juvenile Justice and Related Commentary; Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 24 (2019); Children's Rights in the Child Justice System. At the level of the Council of Europe, characteristic Recommendations of the Committee of Ministers to member states in the area of children's rights are studied, including Recommendation No. R (87) 20 on Social Reactions to Juvenile Delinquency, Recommendation Rec (2003)20 concerning new ways of dealing with juvenile delinquency and the role of juvenile justice, and Recommendation CM/Rec(2008)11 on the European Rules for juvenile offenders subject to sanctions or measures. The EU Directive 2016/800 on procedural safeguards for children who are suspects or accused persons in criminal proceedings is also presented.

<sup>23</sup> The play was written in 2008 and received an enthusiastic reception at Dramaten – the Royal Dramatic Theatre of Sweden (Stockholm), under the direction of Magnus Ehrner. It has toured extensively, reaching numerous secondary schools in Sweden, Germany, Austria, and even Rwanda and beyond. It tells the story of young Ed, a member of a violent gang, who ends up beaten to the ground by his former comrades: "As Ed struggles on the edge between life and death, the tangled threads of his life unravel, like a film, across time. He travels back to the age of twelve, when violence first entered his everyday world. He speaks of the adrenaline coursing through a fist and the tears streaming down a bruised cheek. He speaks of victims and perpetrators, of intoxicating power and humiliation. At the deepest level, he encounters love and loss" (comment by Stratis Panourios, director of the Greek production and collaborator of the seminar).

the central character of the trial, his social and family environment, his personality, life events, and his path into delinquency. The content of the trial is enriched with elements from real cases in order to increase its complexity. The trial includes multiple juvenile defendants, juvenile victims and witnesses, children in pre-trial detention, while the material used contains anonymised individual assessments, medical reports, etc. Students are trained in the various roles involved in the trial, which operate both on and back stage: judges, prosecutors, defendants, victims, lawyers, police officers, media, mediators, social workers, psychologists, etc. The training is provided by professionals from the juvenile justice system, collaborators of the seminar. A special emphasis is given on how to hold a conversation with children who are accused of a criminal act, how to ensure that children feel comfortable to express their own views, when and how to privilege the restorative approach. During the trial, students act autonomously and interact without a predetermined script (e.g. regarding dialogues, the outcome of the case, etc.). The aim is the ad hoc application of the Guidelines. The trial is attended by experts in juvenile justice and students from other disciplines (law, psychology, social work).

### 3. Conclusions

The dissemination of Child-friendly Justice and the Rights of the Child within criminal proceedings necessitates an organised framework of continuously evolving initiatives across judicial systems (Liefwaard & Kilkely, 2019). Child-friendly justice constitutes a dynamic field in which investments concern not only infrastructure but also the education and awareness of the professionals serving within the interconnected systems and organisations. Particular emphasis is placed on the training of professionals in communication methods and interactive techniques, as well as on the enhancement of their interpersonal and practical skills. For this reason, an in-depth understanding and study of the child justice system includes a multidisciplinary perspective on child-friendly justice, one that is embedded from the stage of undergraduate education for future practitioners.

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This volume brings together the intellectual energy, ethical dedication, and collaborative ethos that were unfolded during the 1st International Conference on “The Role of Academia in Promoting Child Rights” held on 6–7 June 2025 at the University of Patras. Organised through a strong partnership between UNICEF and the University of Patras, the Conference provided a significant platform to reflect on how universities can contribute –intellectually, institutionally, and socially– to the promotion of child rights at various levels, including local, regional, national, and international.

The chapters of this book reflect and contribute to a lively debate on the role of higher education in realising child rights as a social justice imperative. Many papers, in different ways, explore the potential of child rights as a concept, methodology and framework for action. The intention is not to give a comprehensive overview of realising child rights in higher education settings. Rather, it is to illustrate the challenges and obstacles that need to be addressed. We hope that this volume will contribute to future academic research and discussions, encouraging reflection and practice in institutions and agencies that work for children.

