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The Approach of Schools to Ethnic Diversity: The Perspective of Majority and Minority Pupils

KARMEN MLINAR^{*1} AND MOJCA PEČEK²

≈ The growing multiculturalism in schools in most European countries, including Slovenia, poses new challenges for both teachers and pupils. Although the Slovenian school system relies on numerous strategies and guidelines for the inclusion of minority pupils, discrimination is still an everyday issue, especially when it comes to pupils from former Yugoslav countries and Roma. The aim of the present study was to investigate how pupils ($N = 897$) from minority groups (Albanians, Bosniaks, Hungarians, Roma, Serbs) perceive the approach of schools to ethnic diversity in comparison to the majority group (Slovenians). Exploratory factor analysis was conducted on a self-developed scale, resulting in a two-factor solution: schools' efforts to embrace distributive equality (F1) and to foster diversity recognition (F2). For each factor, the perceptions of minorities were compared with those of the majority. The results show statistically significant differences in the perceptions of Bosniaks and Slovenians within F1, and of Hungarians and Serbs and Slovenians within F2. Furthermore, an analysis of the differences in the perception of F1 and F2 for each ethnic group show statistically significant differences for all ethnic groups except for Hungarians. The results suggest that the Slovenian school system needs to re-evaluate its practices by making more effort to foster the recognition of diversity. By recognising and valuing diversity alongside equality, schools can better address discriminatory practices and promote inclusion, which leads to the uniqueness of each identity being respected, valued and appreciated. Possible strategies to achieve this goal are discussed.

Keywords: diversity recognition, distributive equality, basic school, pupils, discrimination

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Pristop šol k etnični raznolikosti: pogledi učenk in učencev večinske in manjšinskih etničnih skupin

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~ Naraščajoča večkulturnost šol v večini evropskih držav, vključno s Slovenijo, prinaša nove izzive za učiteljice in učitelje pa tudi za učenke in učence. Čeprav se slovenski šolski sistem opira na številne strategije in smernice za vključevanje učenk in učencev iz manjšinskih etničnih skupin, je diskriminacija še vedno vsakodnevna težava, zlasti ko gre za učenke in učence iz držav nekdanje Jugoslavije in Rome. S to raziskavo smo želeli ugotoviti, kako učenke in učenci ($N = 897$) manjšinskih etnij (albanske, bošnjaške, madžarske, romske, srbske) gledajo na pristop šol k etnični raznolikosti v primerjavi z učenkami in učenci večinske etnije (slovenske). Trditve z lestvice, ki sta jo razvili avtorici prispevka, so bile analizirane z eksploratorno faktorsko analizo, rezultat katere sta bila dva faktorja: prizadevanje šol za doseganje distributivne pravičnosti (F_1) in pripoznanje različnosti (F_2). Za vsak faktor je bila opravljena primerjava pogledov učenk in učencev manjšinskih etnij s pogledi učenk in učencev večinske etnije. Rezultati kažejo statistično pomembne razlike v pogledih Bošnjakinj in Bošnjakov ter Slovenk in Slovencev v okviru F_1 in v pogledih Madžark in Madžarov ter Srbinj in Srbov v primerjavi s pogledi Slovenk in Slovencev v okviru F_2 . Poleg tega analiza razlik v pogledih znotraj F_1 in F_2 za vsako etnijo kaže statistično pomembne razlike za vse etnije, razen za Madžarke in Madžare. Rezultati nakazujejo, da bi moral slovenski šolski sistem ponovno preučiti svoje prakse in več napora vložiti v spodbujanje pripoznanja različnosti. S pripoznanjem in z vrednotenjem različnosti, ne samo enakosti, lahko šole učinkoviteje naslovijo diskriminatorne prakse in spodbujajo inkluzijo, kar vodi do razvoja spoštovanja, vrednotenja in cenjenja edinstvenosti vseh identitet. V prispevku so predstavljene različne strategije za doseg tega cilja.

Ključne besede: pripoznanje različnosti, distributivna pravičnost, osnovna šola, učenci, diskriminacija

Introduction

The increasing multiculturalism in schools across Europe, including Slovenia, has brought a variety of challenges for teachers and pupils. Many policies and strategies at the national and international level focus on equality in the education system and the promotion of inclusion and respect for all people regardless of their origin, yet cases of discrimination persist (Allan, 2010; Medarić et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2020; Žakelj & Kralj, 2012). The latter mainly affects members of marginalised ethnic groups who have less power and a lower status in the broader society (Kteily & Richeson, 2016). In Slovenia, this applies in particular to the Roma community and ethnic groups from the former Yugoslavia (Medvešek & Vrečer, 2005; UMAR, 2021; Zavrtnik, 2012). Members of these ethnic groups are also frequently confronted with overt and passive forms of discrimination in the school system, both on a formal and informal level (Klun, 2021; Macura-Milovanović et al., 2013; Medarić et al., 2021; Peček & Lesar, 2006; Peček & Macura-Milovanović, 2012; Razpotnik, 2014; Sedmak et al., 2020; Žakelj & Kralj, 2012).

Slovenia has implemented various strategies and guidelines for the inclusion of Roma and immigrant children in the education system based on the principle of equality for all (Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Slovenia, 2023; National Education Institute Slovenia, 2012; Republic of Slovenia Gov. si, 2024). However, these documents lack comprehensive support for schools, mainly due to their frequent ambiguity and lack of specificity and the resulting different (even controversial) interpretations (Milharčič Hladnik, 2012; Mlinar, 2021; Solano & Huddleston, 2020). Furthermore, critical analysis shows that, despite the stated intention to promote respect for ethnic diversity, there is an underlying expectation of assimilation, i.e., the abandonment of the original culture and the adoption of the cultural norms of the ethnic majority group (Klun, 2021; Medarić et al., 2021; Mlinar, 2021).

Against this background, the central concern when implementing the inclusion of ethnic minorities in the education system appears to be ensuring equality in the distribution of opportunities and resources, which is also a common strategy in other European countries (Allan, 2010; Geppert et al., 2012; Lesar, 2018; Lynch & Lodge, 2002; Pešikan & Ivić, 2016). In this case, however, differences are veiled rather than recognised, which is the generative cause of inequalities between ethnic groups (Lynch & Lodge, 2002). The lack of recognition of differences can be found at the micro and macro levels of the education system, as shown by studies on teachers' attitudes towards different ethnic groups (Medarić et al., 2021; Milharčič Hladnik, 2012; Peček & Lesar, 2006;

Sedmak et al., 2020). Yet, little is known about how pupils perceive the approach of schools to diversity considering their ethnic background. Understanding the perceptions of pupils is crucial for developing effective strategies to combat discrimination, promote inclusion and ensure that every pupil feels valued and respected in the education system. The present study therefore aims to explore the perceptions of minority pupils in relation to whether schools are more inclined to develop an ethos centred on equality in a distributive sense and/or on the recognition of diversity compared to their Slovenian counterparts.

Building an inclusive school through embracing equality and diversity

Most European countries and education systems are committed to inclusive education that is open to all pupils regardless of their background or characteristics and promotes the participation of all pupils without exclusion or discrimination of any kind (Booth & Ainscow, 2016; Medarić et al., 2021; Sedmak et al., 2020). However, deeper analysis shows that inclusion, both on a declarative and practical level, is far too often understood primarily as the pursuit of equality in terms of the distribution of resources and opportunities (Lynch & Lodge, 2002; Lesar, 2018). More specifically, equality is assumed to be achieved when there is an increase in the enrolment rates of marginalised groups in educational institutions and when resources are distributed according to the principle of need, meaning that instruction is adapted so that every pupil can learn and participate in the learning process and activities.

However, for many groups, including ethnic groups, inequality cannot be solved through (re)distribution alone. Ethnic groups in particular are subject to inequality because they are not recognised in their diversity (Galeotti, 2002; Lynch & Lodge, 2002). Even when policy seems to acknowledge the importance of diversity recognition, it implicitly or explicitly talks about the importance of accepting others *despite* their diversity. This means that diversity is defined as a deviation from the standards set by the majority, i.e., *normality*, and is therefore not recognised as a valuable quality (Galeotti, 2002; Lægaard, 2008). Furthermore, inequalities in recognition result from differences in social status and are primarily an expression of socio-cultural and symbolic injustices. These are based on established patterns of representation, interpretation and communication that manifest themselves as cultural hegemony, symbolic misrepresentation or lack of recognition (Lynch & Lodge, 2002). Additionally, far too often it seems that in society, and even more so in schools, ensuring equality through distribution is understood as difference-blindness, a concept in which differences are ignored and therefore minorities are not recognised in the name of sameness (Galeotti, 2002; Schofield, 2010). Furthermore, teachers often believe that talking about

differences reinforces prejudice, stereotypes and conflict, and they consequently tend not to include diversity in their curricula (Derman-Sparks et al., 2020a). This is particularly true in systems such as the Slovenian one, which is characterised by conflictual ethnic relations (Medvešek & Vrečer, 2005).

Schools must therefore not only focus on issues of distribution, but also actively address diversity and ensure the representation, recognition and participation of pupils from different ethnic groups. In this way, the school conveys an important message about the visibility and recognition of all cultures in the school context that goes beyond a sole focus on the majority (McIlwaine, 2014). This is of particular importance for pupils from marginalised ethnic groups, as it means that they can and should embrace their unique identity without having to conform to the majority culture. On the other hand, pupils from the majority population can also benefit from this, as they can avoid internalising messages of division and superiority, and thus refrain from developing prejudices and discriminatory tendencies towards minorities. The latter usually happens precisely when minority cultures do not receive the same visibility – or even a certain level of visibility – compared to the majority culture (Derman-Sparks et al., 2020b; Zick et al., 2001). This also applies to learning about the historical, cultural and natural heritage of one's own ethnic group. In this way, the school promotes the development and strengthening of pupils' ethnic identity, pride and awareness. Cultivating a positive sense of self, belonging, ethnic pride and a corresponding social or group identity is important for pupils' social, emotional and cognitive development, while also promoting understanding and respect for the differences and identities of others (Derman-Sparks et al., 2020a; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). Giving pupils the opportunity to learn their mother tongue is another very important element, not only because it can increase pupils' academic performance, but also because of the positive impact on their self-esteem and their construction of a positive identity while preserving their culture and roots (Budinoska, 2017; Saeed, 2021). Moreover, the incorporation of languages from different ethnic groups in the curriculum can benefit all pupils: as well as acquiring a new language, they can also develop respect for other languages and cultures (Budinoska, 2017). Finally, in a school committed to the recognition of diversity, the curricula and teaching materials, including textbooks, should accurately reflect the diversity of the school/community's population. Indeed, this is a crucial indicator of the school's commitment to recognising diversity. Acquiring knowledge about different cultures can have a positive impact on reducing prejudice among pupils (Vervae et al., 2018). In other words, the necessary changes are about "the silences that need to be broken about demonised and marginalised differences" (Lynch & Lodge, 2002, p. 182).

The context of the study: The Slovenian school system

Slovenia is a multicultural country with three constitutionally recognised ethnic groups (Italians, Hungarians and Roma) as well as a large number of other ethnic groups, mainly from former Yugoslav countries (SURS, 2020, 2023). Unfortunately, the last census was carried out more than two decades ago, in 2002. According to this census, Slovenians make up 83.06% of the total population, while the remaining 16.94% are mainly members of former Yugoslav countries (Croats, Serbs, Bosniaks, Albanians, Macedonians, Montenegrins) and members of the three constitutionally recognised ethnic groups (Italians, Hungarians and Roma) (SURS, 2002). However, as immigration to Slovenia is increasing year on year (SURS, 2020), it can be assumed that the number of non-Slovenians is higher than stated in the census.

The ethnic groups in Slovenia are granted different rights, including in the education system. For example, Italians and Hungarians have the right (with some organisational differences) to education in their mother tongue and to the preservation and development of their cultural identity (Regulating Special Rights of Members of the Italian and Hungarian Ethnic Communities in the Field of Education Act, 2001). Various strategies and measures are taken for the Roma community to facilitate their inclusion in the school system (e.g., employment of a “Roma assistant”, additional financial support for schools); at the legislative level, however, they are not granted the same rights as the other two constitutionally recognised ethnic groups (Republic of Slovenia Gov.si, 2024). Despite outnumbering the three aforementioned groups, ethnic groups from the former Yugoslavia have no special rights in terms of preserving or developing their culture and ethnic identity, including learning their mother tongue. In addition, Roma pupils and pupils from the former Yugoslavia often face stigmatisation, marginalisation and discrimination from their teachers and classmates. The main reasons for this are teachers’ lack of knowledge or unwillingness to adapt their teaching to the pupils’ language and cultures, as well as a lack of valorisation and respect for cultural differences (Klun, 2021; Macura-Milovanović et al., 2013; Medarić et al., 2021; Peček & Lesar, 2006; Sedmak et al., 2020; Žakelj & Kralj, 2012).

It is therefore not surprising that the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) 2020 (Solano & Huddleston, 2020) describes Slovenian policy on the integration of immigrants into the education system as slightly unfavourable, defining it as “equality on paper”. As in society, immigrants are not seen as equals, but rather as strangers in the education system, and little more is done than guaranteeing them equal basic rights and support in accessing compulsory education.

In the light of the foregoing discussion, it can be stated that the Slovenian education system is declaratively committed to an ethos based on equality, but it appears that little is being done when it comes to recognising diversity through the dimensions outlined in the previous sections.

Research problem and aims of the study

As mentioned above, research shows that, in most European countries, the predominant approach to inclusion seems to be the pursuit of equality in a distributive sense, but (too) little is done for the recognition of diversity. However, there is a research gap in terms of understanding pupils' perceptions of these two dimensions. The aim of the present study is therefore to fill this research gap by investigating minority pupils' perceptions of schools' efforts to guarantee an equal distribution of opportunities and resources, on the one hand, and the recognition of diversity in schools, on the other, in comparison to the perceptions of the majority group. Furthermore, we seek to determine whether the perceptions of majority and minority pupils regarding the dimension of equality differ significantly from the perception of the dimension of diversity.

The investigation of these perceptions is of great importance for the development of pedagogical strategies and measures aimed at improving the inclusiveness of schools. Furthermore, shedding light on pupils' perceptions can help to identify potential gaps or problematic aspects between policy and pupils' experiences, allowing for more effective implementation of inclusive practices. This in turn supports the overarching goal of creating an educational environment that not only recognises diversity, but actively promotes an understanding and appreciation of it, thus supporting the development of a more inclusive society for future generations.

Method

Participants

The study included 897 pupils (54.6% female; 45.2% male; 2 did not respond) from 59 basic³ school classes in Slovenia. The average age of the pupils was 11.7 years ($SD = 1.19$) and they were attending grades 5–8.

The majority of the pupils declared their ethnicity to be Slovenian (87.0%), followed by pupils belonging to an ethnic minority: Bosniaks (4.0%), Hungarians (2.7%), Albanians (2.3%), Serbs (2.1%) and Roma (1.9%). Some

3 Primary and lower secondary education in Slovenia is organised as a single-structure nine-year basic school, which is compulsory for pupils from 6 to 15 years of age (European Commission, 2023).

pupils stated that they belonged to one or more other ethnic groups, but these were not included in the study due to their small numbers.

Instrument

In accordance with the purpose of the study, the authors developed a scale with 16 items, taking into account the relevant theoretical framework and previous studies in this field (e.g., Booth & Ainscow, 2016; Derman-Sparks et al., 2020a; Gay, 2010; Peček & Lesar, 2006). The items were formulated to assess pupils' perceptions of various aspects of implementing an inclusive school ethos based on a commitment to equality of opportunities and resources, and recognition of diversity. Specifically, the items included aspects related to school and curricular policies, academic and social support for pupils, pupils' participation in the learning process, and measures aimed at recognising different aspects of pupils' identity.

Each item was rated using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The higher the value, the stronger the agreement with the item.

Research design

The questionnaires were distributed to the pupils under the direct supervision of teachers, ensuring compliance with established ethical standards for research with minors (Graham et al., 2013). The standards and instructions were communicated in detail to the teachers by the authors of the study in written documentation. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary and no incentives were offered or provided.

Results

Initial factor analysis

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) with varimax rotation was performed on the 16 items in SPSS 28.0.0 to examine the factor structure of the scale. According to the purpose of the study, the factor analysis was performed with the data of the Slovenian pupils. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure was .92, indicating a "superb" sampling adequacy for the analysis (Field, 2018).

The EFA yielded two factors (F1 and F2) with eigenvalues exceeding 1, explaining 49.71% of the total variance. The internal consistency for the two subscales for the Slovenian pupils was high (F1: $\alpha = .87$; F2: $\alpha = .80$). However, further analysis of the subscales of the Albanian and Hungarian pupils showed that their internal consistency would be improved by the deletion of items.

Specifically, the results suggested the deletion of one item in the F1 subscale for the Albanian pupils and one item in the F2 subscale for the Hungarian pupils.

In line with established practices and recommendations (Field, 2018), both items were deleted and the EFA was repeated to ensure that the deletion of the items had no impact on the factor structure.

Revised factor analysis

After deleting the two items, a revised EFA was conducted with varimax rotation on 14 items in SPSS 28.0.0 to re-evaluate the factor structure. The EFA was conducted for the Slovenian pupils' data for the reasons specified above. The KMO measure was superb ($= .92$).

Two factors had eigenvalues over Kaiser's criterion of 1 and explained 52.34% of the total variance. The items clustering on the same factor indicated that F1 represents the schools' efforts to embrace distributive equality (sample item: *At my school, all people are respected, regardless of their ethnicity*), while F2 represents schools' efforts to foster diversity recognition (sample item: *In the classroom, we learn about the characteristics of different ethnic groups*). The items in both factors had loadings over 0.50, with nine items clustering on the first factor and five items clustering on the second factor.

The "Embracing distributive equality" and "Fostering diversity recognition" subscales for the Slovenian pupils both had high internal consistency (Table 1). In the next step, internal consistency tests were conducted for both subscales for the other ethnic groups. Table 1 shows the results, which demonstrate adequate internal consistency for both subscales for each ethnic group.

Table 1

Internal consistencies for the subscales "Embracing distributive equality" and "Fostering diversity recognition" for each ethnic group

Pupils' ethnic group	Embracing distributive equality		Fostering diversity recognition	
	α	N of items	α	N of Items
Slovenians	.86	5	.77	9
Bosniaks	.90	5	.81	9
Hungarians	.94	5	.62	9
Albanians	.68	5	.78	9
Serbs	.83	5	.78	9
Roma	.95	5	.76	9

Majority and minority pupils' perception of schools' efforts to embrace distributive equality and to foster diversity recognition

In order to assess how minority pupils perceive the efforts of schools to embrace distributive equality (EDE) and to foster diversity recognition (FDR) compared to the majority group, a One-sample *t*-Test in SPSS 28.0.0 was conducted for each subscale.

Descriptive statistics and results for pupils' perception of schools' efforts to EDE and FDR for different ethnic groups are presented in Table 2.

Majority and minority pupils' perception of schools' efforts to embrace distributive equality

The results regarding the pupils' perception of schools' efforts to EDE (Table 2) were statistically significant only for the Bosniak pupils ($t = -2.67$; $p = .01$), which means that the Bosniak pupils perceive the schools' efforts to EDE less favourably than Slovenian pupils do. However, it must be said that all ethnic groups perceive school's efforts to EDE as very strong (above $M = 4.00$).

In order to assess the practical significance of the differences in the perception among ethnic minority pupils compared to majority pupils, effect sizes were calculated for each ethnic group, namely Cohen's *d*. Medium effect sizes ($d \geq 0.5$) were found for Bosniaks, Hungarians, Serbs and Roma, while small effect sizes ($d \geq 0.2$) were found for Albanian pupils.

Majority and minority pupils' perception of schools' efforts to foster diversity recognition

The results regarding the pupils' perception of schools' efforts to FDR (Table 2) were statistically significant for the Hungarian ($t = 3.40$; $p = .00$) and Serbian ($t = -2.45$; $p = .02$) pupils. These results indicate that the Hungarian pupils perceive the schools' efforts to FDR more positively compared to the Slovenian pupils. Conversely, the Serbian pupils perceive these efforts less favourably than the Slovenian pupils do.

The effect sizes, which assess the magnitude of difference in the perception of schools' efforts to FDR among ethnic minority pupils compared to majority pupils, show large effect sizes ($d \geq 0.8$) for Serbs, Bosniaks and Albanians, and medium effect sizes ($d \geq 0.5$) for Hungarians and Roma.

Difference in pupils' perception of schools' efforts to embrace distributive equality and to foster diversity recognition

In order to determine whether there are differences between perceptions of schools' efforts to EDE and FDR for each ethnic group, we conducted

a Paired-samples *t*-Test in SPSS 28.0.0. As shown in Table 2, all of the ethnic groups, with the exception of Hungarians, perceive the schools' efforts to FDR less favourably than the efforts to EDE.

The practical significance of the differences, computed with Cohen's *d*, shows large effect sizes ($d \geq 0.8$) between the perception of schools' efforts to EDE and FDR for Serbian and Albanian pupils, medium effect sizes ($d \geq 0.5$) for Slovenian, Hungarian and Bosniak pupils, and small effect sizes ($d \geq 0.2$) for Roma pupils.

Table 2

Descriptives and results of One-sample t-Test and Cohen's d for the subscales "Embracing distributive equality" and "Fostering diversity recognition" for each ethnic group, and of Paired-samples t-Test comparing the subscales "Embracing distributive equality" and "Fostering diversity recognition" for each ethnic group

Pupils' ethnic group	Embracing distributive equality					Fostering diversity recognition					Embracing distributive equality VS Fostering diversity recognition			
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
Slovenians	4.43 (0.57)					3.78 (0.79)					25.87	779	<.001	0.70
Hungarians	4.41 (0.67)	-0.17	23	.86	0.67	4.20 (0.60)	3.40	23	.00	0.60	1.76	23	.09	0.57
Roma	4.53 (0.77)	0.54	16	.60	0.77	4.05 (0.76)	1.45	16	.17	0.76	5.14	16	<.001	0.39
Albanians	4.38 (0.44)	-0.51	20	.62	0.44	3.50 (0.82)	-1.56	20	.14	0.82	4.28	20	<.001	0.94
Bosniaks	4.09 (0.77)	-2.67	35	.01	0.77	3.52 (0.89)	-1.74	35	.09	0.89	4.86	35	<.001	0.70
Serbs	4.39 (0.60)	-0.28	18	.78	0.60	3.21 (1.02)	-2.45	18	.02	1.02	5.67	18	<.001	0.91
Total	4.41 (0.59)					3.77 (0.80)								

Note. Statistically significant differences are reported in bold.

Discussion

The results of the present study show that minority pupils perceive schools' efforts to embrace equality and to foster diversity recognition differently from majority pupils.

Regarding the perception of schools' efforts to EDE, the results show significant differences between Slovenian and Bosniak pupils, with the latter rating the situation worse than the former. However, the practical significance resulting from the effect sizes shows that the difference between the perceptions of all minority pupils, except for Albanians (the difference is small), and Slovenian pupils is medium. Apart from that, all of the surveyed pupils perceive the schools' efforts to EDE very positively, which means that, from their point of

view, schools are quite successful in their efforts to ensure equal opportunities and resources for all ethnic groups.

The results regarding the perception of the schools' efforts to FDR show significant differences between Hungarians and Slovenians, as well as between Serbs and Slovenians. It is interesting to note that Hungarian pupils perceive the schools' efforts to FDR more positively and Serbian pupils less positively than Slovenian pupils. Furthermore, Serbian pupils seem to be more likely to think that schools are not doing enough to foster diversity recognition. Even more revealing are the results of the effect sizes, which show large differences between Slovenians and pupils from former Yugoslav countries (Serbs, Bosniaks, Albanians), and medium differences between Slovenians and the two constitutionally recognised ethnic groups (Hungarians, Roma). Unfortunately, these results are not surprising. As already mentioned, despite the different rights of Hungarians and Roma, both ethnic groups are granted special (and thus more) rights in education compared to the ethnic groups from the former Yugoslavia. Since Roma pupils in Slovenian schools are often victims of stigmatisation and discrimination, even when it comes to their formal integration into the school system (Klun, 2021; Milharčič Hladnik, 2012; Peček & Macura-Milovanović, 2012; UMR, 2021), different results would have been expected. However, it must be added that the majority of Roma pupils in the present study come from the same region as the Hungarian pupils (Prekmurje), which is characterised by an inclusive and bilingual social, political and education system (Šuklje & Banutai, 2012), and the results probably reflect this.

The findings also show that all of the surveyed pupils, with the exception of the Hungarians, perceive the schools' efforts to EDE more favourably than the schools' efforts to FDR, which again is not surprising given the special rights granted to the Hungarian minority in education. These rights legally oblige schools to guarantee pupils not only equal access to education and resources, but also teaching in their mother tongue (bilingual education) and the right to preserve and develop their ethnic identity (Act Regulating Special Rights of Members of the Italian and Hungarian Ethnic Communities in the Field of Education, 2001). The majority of Roma pupils in our study come from Prekmurje, which means that their schooling is also influenced by a high level of social, political and educational inclusion. This may explain the small difference between the Roma pupils' perception of the schools' efforts to EDE and FDR. The greatest difference between the perception of schools' efforts to EDE and FDR is found among Serbian and Albanian pupils, which perhaps shows their greater sensitivity to issues related to visibility, respect and recognition of diversity, as both ethnic groups face these kinds of problems in society at large

as well as in the school system (Medvešek & Vrečer, 2005; Peček & Lesar, 2006; Slovenian Press Agency, 2024).

While the majority of pupils perceive schools to be focused on distributive equality, their less positive perception of schools' efforts to foster diversity recognition points to underlying issues related to discriminatory societal norms and systemic inequalities. It can be concluded that pupils' perceptions mirror the MIPEX 2020 findings discussed in the introduction (Solano & Huddleston, 2020).

Furthermore, the findings show that pupils are quite aware of the different status and treatment of different ethnic groups when it comes to giving them a voice and recognition. Indeed, for Hungarian pupils, the school system takes into account both equality of distribution and recognition of diversity, thus ensuring the development of their identity. Pupils from former Yugoslavian countries, on the other hand, are more critical when it comes to the recognition of diversity at school. The main tendency in the Slovenian education system when it comes to pupils from unrecognised minorities seems to be assimilation, with their diversity being seen as an obstacle rather than a value (Mlinar, 2021), and the findings show that pupils are well aware of this tendency. One finding that may be surprising at first glance is the perception of Roma in terms of distributive equality and diversity recognition; although they, too, are granted some special rights, assimilationist and discriminatory tendencies are still very present at formal and informal levels (Klun, 2021; Mlinar, 2021; UMAR, 2021). However, the results can be explained by the fact that most of the pupils in our study come from Prekmurje, where the status of the Roma community is much better than in other parts of Slovenia.

Implications for pathways to inclusion: Promoting distributive equality and diversity recognition in schools

In order to effectively address the inequalities identified in the present study, schools should adopt a comprehensive strategy that focuses not only on measures aimed at the distribution of opportunities and resources, but above all on the recognition of diversity at different levels, from the organisational to the pedagogical level (e.g., curricula, syllabuses, assessment systems). Appropriate teaching practices aimed at recognising diversity as a value must be implemented, whereby teachers must not understand equality in a difference-blind way, as such an understanding can have many negative effects on minority pupils' identity and their social and academic success (Derman-Sparks et al., 2020b; Lynch & Lodge, 2002; Schofield, 2010). The school should promote caring interactions between pupils of different ethnic backgrounds so that they feel comfortable and happy in diversity (Derman-Sparks et al., 2020a).

Schools could use various strategies to achieve this goal; for example, they should place more emphasis on different perspectives and narratives in the curriculum to promote an understanding and appreciation of diversity. Ideas related to the development of multicultural curricula are not new (see, for instance, Vižintin, 2014), but the development of such curricula – let alone their implementation – is not yet a reality in Slovenian schools, although teachers do have the autonomy to include teaching about other cultures as part of various subjects and topics in the current curriculum. In doing so, it is crucial that they use an inclusive approach that enables the recognition and appreciation of all ethnicities by pointing out, *inter alia*, the achievements and role of different ethnicities in, for instance, the progress of civilisation (Branch, 2020; Derman-Sparks et al., 2020a, 2020b). Furthermore, a very common but problematic “tourist approach” should be avoided, where teachers only talk about diversity as something exotic and emphasise stereotypical characteristics of different ethnic groups (Derman-Sparks et al., 2020a). The choice of school materials (e.g., textbooks) used by teachers is therefore important. All too often, these materials are monocultural and ethnocentric (Skubic Ermenc, 2007), with content that portrays ethnic minority groups in a stereotypical and/or discriminatory or even racist way (Šabec, 2016). Such materials do not necessarily have to be avoided, but they need to be used with a critical approach aimed at developing critical thinking in pupils and helping them to reflect on representations of diversity (see also Murray, 2017). Furthermore, books (but also cartoons, etc.) that are “mirrors, windows and sliding doors” can greatly contribute to pupils developing their own positive identities, as well as enhancing their understanding of other identities (Sims Bishop, 1990; Style, 1996). However, a school committed to diversity should focus not only on diversifying teaching materials and curricula, but also on opening up critical discourses on privilege, power dynamics, discrimination and social justice issues in order to develop in pupils the need and will to challenge these issues actively and in the spirit of activism (Derman-Sparks et al., 2020a; Mlinar, 2021).

As already mentioned, Slovenian legislation seems to be inclusive when it comes to the education of Hungarian and Italian pupils, but assimilationist when it comes to pupils with a migrant background and partly also in the case of Roma pupils (Mlinar, 2021). Consequently, there is a need for policy changes, as they form the structural and legal framework for inclusion. In this context, such changes must explicitly address the importance of measures that aim not only to ensure equality, especially in access to goods, but also to implement the recognition of diversity. The lack of legislative support in this regard, particularly for the social inclusion of migrant pupils, has also been highlighted by

MIPEX in recent years (Huddleston et al., 2015; Solano & Huddleston, 2020). Furthermore, it is crucial that policy reforms are evidence- or research-based (Lindsay, 2007) and include the perspectives of those who are most affected by them, i.e., pupils from different ethnic groups. However, the current debate on the education of immigrant children in Slovenia shows that there is overwhelming resistance at both the state and societal level to regulations that would give immigrant children the opportunity to learn their mother tongue and culture at school (Komisija za slovenski jezik v javnosti pri SAZU, 2024; National Assembly of the Republic of Slovenia, 2024; Slovenian Press Agency, 2024). The presence of such resistance signifies that the road to understanding and implementing the recognition of diversity for the development of all facets of pupils' identity remains arduous and uphill.

All of this shows that teachers in Slovenia do not have adequate legal support to create an inclusive school where respect and recognition of diversity for all is promoted. Yet, many schools and teachers are confronting this obstacle (Jelen Madruša, 2015) by recognising diversity as a strength and actively working against unfair and discriminatory practices. Such schools can serve as catalysts for social change and building a future society in which diversity is seen as a desirable value. That being said, it is important that teachers and schools are not left to fend for themselves in this process. Teacher education programmes as well as continuing professional development programmes should equip teachers with the necessary knowledge, competences and sensitivity to enable them to implement all of the above and contribute to the development of schools as places where the recognition of diversity is an integral part of everyday school life.

Conclusions

The results of the present study show that both factors resulting from our scale exhibit strong internal consistency, indicating robust constructs. Adequate internal consistency was observed across all ethnic groups, suggesting that the measures maintain their reliability across different cultural contexts. In this respect, the scale can be used as a tool for further studies on the implementation of measures to promote equality and diversity in different educational settings.

Apart from this, the study has some limitations. Like other self-report scales, the scale may be subject to socially desirable responses, especially considering the fact that pupils completed the questionnaires in the presence of teachers. Therefore, future studies should consider the inclusion of social desirability scales.

In the present study, pupils had to indicate their belonging to one or more ethnic groups. Additional dimensions could be added for future studies; for example, the ethnic group of parents (and grandparents) could be included in order to differentiate between pupils who are descendants of immigrants and pupils who are immigrants themselves.

Future studies could also include aspects addressing other sources of inequality (Lynch & Lodge, 2002) in order to give a more nuanced perspective on pupils' perceptions of schools' efforts to implement inclusion on different levels.

Despite these limitations, the present study is the first in Slovenia to examine minority and majority pupils' perceptions of schools' efforts to embrace distributive equality and foster diversity recognition. It thus provides a valuable insight into the shortcomings and weaknesses of the Slovenian school system from the perspective of inclusion. The results could therefore serve as important information for political and structural reforms.

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