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Respect for diversity in schools and positive youth development of migrant students: insights from four upper-secondary schools in Slovenia

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ABSTRACT
The positive youth development (PYD) model emphasizes the importance of identifying and supporting adolescents' strengths rather than preventing or treating their deficits. This has proved to be a more effective approach to fostering positive development and resilience. PYD highlights the positive resources that adolescents possess, optimizing their well-being, personal development and life experiences if they are suitably empowered and supported. Since adolescents spend a great deal of their time in schools, these institutions should be obligated to create an environment which promotes positive development and serves as a protective factor. One of the crucial elements of the school climate with respect to supporting the positive development of migrant students is respect for diversity. In Slovenia, research shows that first-generation migrant students exhibit significantly higher levels of several internal and external PYD assets than other students. By conducting 8 focus groups with a total of 29 participants (principals, social workers, and teachers) at four Slovenian upper-secondary schools, we examined how the school context supports their positive development by focusing on respect for diversity. The results show that although all of the schools included have multicultural settings, the teachers and principals still perceive them as monocultural and monolingual. Different cultures and different languages are mostly seen as an impediment to educational goals or dealt with as a distant topic, which puts the protective function of the school environment for migrant students in Slovenia into question.

Introduction

Lerner et al. (2021, p. 1117) explain that up to now, insufficient attention has been paid to the study of the specific, differentiated developmental pathways of positive youth development (PYD) among youth varying in race, ethnicity, migrant status or culture. In terms of promoting social justice, it is essential that all individuals, no matter their specific characteristics or contextual circumstances, receive equitable treatment and the fair allocation of the resources needed for healthy and positive development. By focusing on the PYD of migrant students in Slovenia, the article helps fill a research gap in the field. It brings attention to the role of respect for diversity in the construction of a supportive school environment, through which students with migrant backgrounds in Slovenian schools can more successfully develop their intrinsic strengths, potentials and cultural and linguistic diversity and thus strengthen their role in the community (e.g. home, school). This study seeks to identify instances of teachers' respect for diversity within Slovenian schools, examining how these identified attitudes and practices influence migrant students' experiences and outcomes.

Students with migrant background and contexts of positive youth development

Since there is a rise in the number of migrant students in schools throughout Europe, it is vital that these students are adequately adapted to the school and society and that the receiving societies ensure their well-being (Masten et al., 2012). Several authors believe that focusing on PYD as a framework to support migrant students' adaptation can lead to increased positive outcomes during this process (Lerner et al., 2021; Motti-Stefanidi et al., 2012; Sam, 2018). The PYD model assumes that all children and adolescents inherently

possess several strengths, called internal assets (commitment to learning, positive values, social competence, positive identity), which can impact their further development throughout their lives when combined with resources, i.e. external assets (support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, constructive use of time). When internal and external assets are aligned, adolescents' positive development can be expected, which is further reflected in the PYD indicators, the so-called 5Cs (*competence*, *confidence*, *caring*, *connection*, and *character*). Consequently, these predispositions ensure that adolescents are less likely to engage in risky behavior, are more prone to prosocial behavior and contribute more to society.

Besides the migrant students' personal resources (e.g. good cognitive capacity, high self-efficacy, cognitive flexibility, etc.) (Masten et al., 2006), various analyses of migrant adaptation that use the PYD perspective emphasize the migrant students' circumstances. It is believed that migrant children living in contexts with multicultural ideologies adapt better than those living in contexts with negative attitudes toward migrants. Moreover, migrant students adapt better in contexts where the issues raised by immigration are discussed and effectively dealt with, and the migrant students' needs are therefore addressed (Berry et al., 2006). Similarly, a literature review of 102 studies conducted in 14 European countries showed that first-generation migrant students show better adaptation when compared to second-generation migrant students or majority students in contexts where (1) close relationships in the families, schools, neighborhoods are promoted and migrant students feel supported by their parents, classmates and the wider community, (2) there are lower levels of discrimination, and intercultural behaviors and positive attitudes toward interculturalism are perceived, and (3) where migrant students have the possibility of maintaining their home culture and adopting the receiving country's culture at the same time, thus a context that supports biculturalism (Dimitrova et al., 2017).

One of the important features of the PYD contexts of migrant youth, which is closely connected to biculturalism, is multilingualism. It is generally defined as the use of two or more languages with several dimensions, including language acquisition and use that includes the individual's entire plurilingual repertoire gained over their entire life and affects not just an individual's cognition but also their personality (Dewaele, 2016), as well as the societal dimension of multi-language practices, which refers to the contexts, circumstances, order, manner and routines of use of languages in different kinds of communities, organizations and groups (Aronin, 2019). The research emphasizes the positive impact of multilingualism on individuals' social activation, emotionality and personal development (Dewaele & Pavlenko, 2001–2003; Panicacci, 2019; Resnik & Dewaele, 2020), as well as the general value of individual multilingual/multicultural identity for the community (Wei et al., 2011).

The significance of the (multi)language context within the PYD perspective is partially recognized in studies of thriving among migrant youth, where the use of two or more languages is seen as part of a trans/-bicultural and integrated identity (Lerner et al., 2012). Within an environment that recognizes bilingualism as an asset, migrant students can more successfully develop their self-image and become aware of the benefits of cultural and linguistic diversity, thus strengthening their role in the community (e.g., home, school). Their language competence plays an important part in this process. It is understood as the composite language multi-competence of an individual's knowledge of and experience with different languages and cultures (Cook, 1992) and a universal means of meaning making and establishing relationships with others (Coste et al., 2009).

We can conclude that the developmental contexts are significant in the positive youth development of migrant children. Since children spend a lot of their time at school, this is one of the most essential contexts (Pittman et al., 2003). If the educational environment in which these students are situated prioritizes multiculturalism and multilingualism, alongside nondiscrimination and strong relationships among all individuals, irrespective of their backgrounds, it is likely that these students will demonstrate enhanced adaptability and the ability to thrive compared to those in educational settings lacking such characteristics. Moreover, the school context serves as the main acculturative framework, meaning that it introduces migrant students to the receiving society's culture (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001).

Positive youth development, school climate and respect for diversity

The school climate has been at the forefront of academic research, educational policies and practices in recent decades (e.g. Thapa et al., 2013). It is most commonly and broadly defined as the quality and

character of school life, which refers to individual perceptions of the moral, relational and institutional aspects of school life (Grazia & Molinari, 2020) and is based on patterns of people's experiences of school life (Cohen et al., 2009). Student perceptions of school climate have been linked to several outcome variables, such as students' psychological (e.g. Aldridge & McChesney, 2018), social (e.g. Reaves et al., 2018) and academic outcomes (e.g. Berkowitz et al., 2017). From the PYD perspective, understanding the school climate helps us understand student experiences in schools and ways to maximize their opportunities for PYD. The National School Climate Center (NSCC, 2020) recognizes 14 dimensions of school climate, classified into six domains.[1] For the purposes of our research, we focus on the respect for diversity dimension, which is a part of interpersonal relations domain. This involves examining perceptions of how individual differences, such as race or gender identity, are welcomed and valued within the school community.

There is a general scholarly consensus that in modern intercultural society, respect for diversity is an indisputable and vital dimension of the school climate (Cohen et al., 2009; Thapa et al., 2013). Baysu et al. (2021) identified three main approaches to diversity in schools in Europe: equality, multiculturalism, and assimilationism. The equality approach refers to student perceptions of the general school climate regarding whether schools treat everyone equally and fairly, and conveys the message that minority identity is equally valued in the school context. The perception of school fairness not only improves minority school outcomes but also buffers disengagement in the face of discrimination (Baysu et al., 2016). A multiculturalist approach further elaborates the equality approach with respect to equal treatment and valuing the diversity of students of minority races, ethnicities or religious backgrounds. Assimilationism requires minorities to prioritize the mainstream culture over their heritage cultures. This may cause feelings of alienation and less belonging, as well as harm minority outcomes when minorities feel that their cultural identity is disregarded (Baysu et al., 2021).

Teacher-student relationship and respect for diversity

A positive school climate depends greatly on the quality of relationships in schools and how well schools manage diversity. From an ecological systems theory approach (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), teacher-student relationships as proximal processes are the primary mechanisms that explain developmental outcomes. In this regard, teachers are treated as important adults who should recognize and respond to adolescents' need for ongoing support in their development and their need for connectedness to others (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). As indicated by Vollmer (2000), teachers' perceptions and attitudes have a substantial impact on the classroom's educational and social climate. In this regard, Dubbeld et al. (2019) emphasize that teaching and learning in multicultural classrooms require specific competencies in order to create positive teacher-student relations and achieve student engagement, and the need to adopt teaching styles tailored to the migrant students' needs. They explain that while modern didactic approaches stress the importance of social interactions and verbal reasoning in the classroom, a portion of migrant students score low on language proficiency and need special attention to benefit from such an approach. In addition, this requires teachers to invest more time into regulating students' social interactions and creating conditions that optimize the quality of their verbalizations (Dubbeld et al., 2019).

However, a wide range of empirical research demonstrates that relationships between teachers and minority students can be challenging. McGrath and Van Bergen (2015) report that minority students may experience less teacher support or more discrimination than majority peers. Bosman et al. (2018) revealed that teachers report less closeness and more conflict with minority students. There is also evidence that migrant and minority students suffer from teacher bias and low expectations regarding their school success (Haenni Hoti et al., 2019). Dubbeld et al. (2019) report that ideological assumptions among teachers who work with migrant students often expose societal beliefs regarding their acculturation and the role of the school in this process. A study by Horenczyk and Tatar (in Dubbeld et al., 2019) showed that teacher attitudes were highly assimilationist in the school context, whereas attitudes dealing with migrants in the wider society were predominantly pluralistic.

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[1] 1) Safety, related to clear rules and norms, sense of physical security and sense of social-emotional security; 2) Teaching and learning, involving support for learning and social and civic learning; 3) Interpersonal relations, dealing with respect for diversity, social support of adults and social support of students; 4) Institutional environment, consisting of school connectedness and engagement, physical surroundings and social inclusion; 5) Social media and 6) Staff, involving leadership and professional relationships.

Multilingualism and respect for diversity

In the context of the supportive school environment, the need for respect for linguistic and cultural diversity has gained increased importance in education in the last twenty years (Hélot, 2012). Several strategic national and international language policy documents at the EU and national levels emphasize the need for educational systems to comprehensively address societal changes that result in highly diverse, multicultural and multilingual communities (see Dockrell et al., 2022). They are encouraged to develop programmes and whole-school approaches with teaching models that transcend the traditional monolingual (and monocultural) orientations in education, forwarding the language of instruction and the dominant languages (Kosonen & Benson, 2013) as the only means of communication and knowledge acquisition, and incorporating plurilingual approaches that favor the use of all languages present in the school/classroom not only as additional languages taught but also as mediums of instruction and assessment. This paradigm shift is crucial for students with migrant background whose first/home language[2] is different from the language of instruction and who face the risk of underperforming when learning and being assessed in the official languages (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice [EACEA], 2019). Numerous studies have shown the positive effects of the use of first/home languages in different educational contexts (Dockrell et al., 2022) as well as the benefits of linguistic diversity in the classroom for social and emotional support for multilingual students (Rosiers et al., 2018; Strobbe et al., 2017). In terms of contributing to a positive classroom climate, societal relationships and the quality of interactions between teachers and students are crucial for creating an environment that is supportive and responsive to diversity. Thus, research on teachers' views of multilingualism is also important since it can reveal their knowledge and awareness of the multilingual dimension in education and how they meet the needs of diverse students in the school and classroom and ensure the aims and goals of inclusive education. Studies show that teachers have a generally positive attitude toward multilingual education and its promotion, but also reveal their beliefs about multilingual education being harmful to further (language) learning and academic achievements (Ağırdağ et al., 2014; Dooly, 2005; Duarte, 2016) and not something they would foster in their classrooms (Haukås, 2016). The results of these studies are highly dependent on the characteristics of the national education system (school settings, teacher preservice and in-service education, history of national language and migrant educational policies) as well as the general national socio-cultural context (e.g., attitude toward and experience with migrations) of a specific EU country. In a comparative study of teachers' views of multilingual education in eleven EU countries (Dockrell et al., 2022), the findings indicate some points of commonality among teachers' attitudes toward the incorporation of plurilingual practices, which inter alia refer to the problem of the curricular and academic demands of secondary education, and the limitations of teachers' multilingual abilities and monolingual beliefs, all of which serve as barriers to the inclusion of students' first/home languages in the instruction process.

It is evident that respect for diversity plays a crucial role in enhancing positive youth development among migrant students (Caravita et al., 2021), as it fosters academic performance, builds self-confidence, and strengthens relationships within the school community. For instance, culturally responsive teaching and constructive teacher-student interactions contribute to an inclusive environment that promotes ethical values and appreciation for diverse cultures (Ialuna et al., 2024; Martinez & Wighting, 2023). Additionally, research indicates that multilingual practices in educational settings not only facilitate academic success but also bolster students' social and emotional well-being (Chaika, 2023). However, Flores and Rosa (2015) contend that traditional monolingual and appropriateness-based ideologies continue to render non-dominant language practices as deficient, consequently fostering negative perceptions of students who utilize their home languages. Therefore, addressing these biases and fostering respect for diversity represent critical steps toward establishing an equitable and supportive educational environment for migrant students that supports their positive development.

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[2]For the distinction between the language of instruction (i.e. Slovenian) and other languages in the diverse language situation of students with migrant background, we use two terminologies in conjunction: "first language" refers to the language a student was exposed to in their early years and is also known as L1, mother tongue or native language, and "home language" refers to the language that student currently speaks at home and is not necessarily L1 or the language of instruction.

The positive youth development perspective and students with migrant background in Slovenian schools

The majority of students with a migrant background who attend Slovenian schools come from the countries of former Yugoslavia, which historically have large diasporas in Slovenia (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Serbia and North Macedonia) (Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia, 2020; Ribičič, 2004; Vižintin, 2014). These students often face various forms of discrimination within the educational environment. For example, the Slovenian principals included in the PISA 2018 sample reported a lower prevalence of positive multicultural beliefs among Slovenian teachers compared to the OECD average. Similarly, the students included in PISA 2018 also reported higher levels of perceived discrimination at school compared to the OECD average (OECD, 2020). On the other hand, the TALIS 2018 survey has shown that the majority of Slovenian teachers (60% or more) feel pretty confident in reducing stereotyping in the classroom, ensuring cooperation between students with and without migrant backgrounds and raising awareness of cultural differences among students. However, only half of the teachers successfully cope with the challenges posed by multicultural classrooms, and only a third successfully adapt their teaching to the cultural diversity of their students (Japelj Pavešić et al., 2019).

Nevertheless, despite the slightly unfavorable educational environment, the findings of two recent positive youth development studies show that first-generation migrant students in Slovenia express a higher level of various PYD indicators than both majority students and second-generation migrant students. The first survey included almost 2000 Slovenian students in the final year of elementary school and the first three years of secondary school (Mlekuž & Pivec, 2021). The sample included 7% first-generation migrant students and 3% second-generation migrant students. The results showed that the difference in developmental assets was especially evident in the area of internal developmental assets, since the first-generation migrant students expressed significantly higher levels of internal assets in all four sub-dimensions (commitment to learning, positive values, social competence, positive identity) than majority students and second-generation students. Additionally, first-generation students also expressed higher levels of boundaries and expectations and constructive use of time scales. Similarly, the 5Cs analysis of the data of the representative sample of Slovenian 15-year-olds included in PISA 2018 also showed that first-generation migrant students expressed higher levels of *confidence* (cognitive flexibility/adaptability), *connection* (in the field of teacher support) and *character* (in terms of attitudes toward migrants and respect for people from other cultures) than either second-generation migrant students or majority students (and at times higher than both), but expressed lower levels of *connection* (in terms of school belonging) than either of the other two groups (Mlekuž, 2021).

Aims of the study

The dichotomy between the unfavorable educational environment in Slovenia and migrant students' strengths and potential in terms of positive youth development was the starting point for our research. Therefore, this paper's central focus is to examine the Slovenian school context with respect to positive youth development for migrant children on the basis of four schools. The paper discusses the school climate with a focus on respect for diversity, namely attitudes toward multiculturalism and multilingualism, and teacher-student relationships, with a particular focus on migrant students at four Slovenian upper-secondary schools. More specifically, we were interested in how teachers' respect for diversity supports positive youth development (defined as 5Cs) of migrant students in Slovenia. This study seeks to identify perceptions of teachers' respect for diversity within Slovenian schools, examining how their identified attitudes and practices align with the principles of the PYD model in supporting migrant students' positive development.

Methodology

Participants and sampling

The sample included 21 teachers of various subject (see Appendix 1), 4 school counselors and 4 principals from four Slovenian upper-secondary schools, each with a different programme (general, technical,

vocational, short-term vocational). All four schools participated in the project *Positive Youth Development in Slovenia: Developmental Pathways in the Context of Migration*, and were randomly selected to be part of the focus groups sample. The schools were sampled based on two key indicators: the proportion of migrant students (determined by the Ministry of Education, Science, and Sport through the extent of Slovenian as a Second Language instruction) and the socio-economic status (SES) of students (assessed through school programme categorization, as per PISA research). In Slovenia, secondary education includes general, vocational, and professional programmes, with socio-economic status typically higher in gymnasiums and lower in (short-term) vocational schools (Štraus & Markelj, 2011). The four selected schools represent institutions with a high proportion of migrant students and varying levels of SES.

Instruments and procedure

The research was approved by the Committee of Ethical Research at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Maribor under approval number 038–26–82/2020/12/FFUM. Data collection took place after obtaining informed consent from all participants. Due to school closures during the coronavirus pandemic (hereafter COVID-19), all focus group meetings were conducted online using Zoom software. Each focus group lasted approximately 45 minutes. The focus groups were held in December 2020 by three interviewers who used pre-prepared protocols for the focus groups. Two different focus group protocols were used, one for teachers and one for the school leadership team (principal and school counselors). A total of eight focus groups were conducted: four with teachers and four with principals and school counselors. The focus groups were organized by school, meaning that the teachers from one school participated in a focus group together, and the principals and school counselors from the same school formed another focus group (see Appendix 1). The focus group protocols included questions for teachers about students' positive youth development, specifically the 5Cs indicators, as well as aspects of the school context, such as school climate (e.g., general well-being at school, relationships at school, etc.) and their attitudes toward multiculturalism and multilingualism. Additionally, school principals and counselors were asked about teachers' attitudes toward multiculturalism and multilingualism, as well as how teachers and school environment in general support students' development in relation to the 5Cs. Although certain contextual data on migrant student demographics and the language environment in schools were collected through a questionnaire administered to participants, ethical guidelines prevented these details from being linked to the data gathered in the focus groups.

Data analysis

This study employed directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) to examine teachers' respect for diversity in four Slovenian schools. The analysis was guided by the PYD framework, specifically the 5Cs model (Lerner et al., 2012). The coding process followed a structured approach:

- Deductive coding: Initial coding categories (*competence*, *confidence*, *connection*, *character*, and *caring*)[3] were predefined based on the PYD framework.
- Inductive refinement: New themes that emerged from the data were incorporated into the coding scheme.
- Validation: Three researchers independently analyzed and coded the text, then met to discuss discrepancies, refine category definitions, and align their coding decisions. This process strengthened the consistency and validity of the analysis by integrating multiple perspectives and reducing individual bias.

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[3]*Competence* refers to a positive perception of one's abilities across different domains, including social, academic, cognitive, and vocational areas. *Confidence* is an internalized sense of self-worth and self-efficacy, encompassing a strong personal identity and overall positive self-regard, rather than being limited to specific areas. *Connection* signifies meaningful and reciprocal relationships between individuals and their peers, family, school, and community, where both sides actively contribute to the bond. *Character* involves adhering to societal and cultural norms, understanding and internalizing ethical standards, and demonstrating integrity and moral awareness. *Caring* reflects the ability to empathize with others, show compassion, and extend concern beyond one's own needs.

- Thematic analysis: The results were analyzed to identify patterns of teachers' respect of diversity supporting or hindering the development of migrant students' 5Cs.

Results

The analysis reveals that while Slovenian secondary schools function in multicultural environments, teachers' perspectives on diversity, multiculturalism, and multilingualism vary, influencing the school climate and migrant students' positive development.

Competence undermined by negative perceptions of multilingualism

The majority of teachers (16 out of 21) emphasize Slovenian as the primary language of instruction, often restricting students' use of their home languages. Many educators (12 out of 21) perceive multilingualism as a challenge rather than an asset, with some (8 out of 21) viewing non-Slovenian language use as disruptive to the school environment.

> We allow it. For example, Albanian students, they can talk in their language in the corridor. No one will stop them. If they talk in Albanian during class, we don't allow it, it's not hygienic, to communicate like that. No one understands them, no one knows what they're talking about, and that's annoying. (P, DV01)[4]

While 5 out of 21 teachers permit home language use in specific activities, such as home town presentations, poetry writing or independent reading, the dominant view is that Slovenian should be exclusively spoken in class.

> When they were writing short poems, I allowed them to write in Romani and read them to us, but these are more rare, occasional moments if the topic is related. (T4, DV01)

Such restrictions limit migrant students' ability to utilize their linguistic resources, potentially hindering academic success and social integration (Chaika, 2023).

Among 21 teachers 4 acknowledge the role of language in professional fields but often limit discussions on multilingual advantages to specific occupations rather than recognizing broader cognitive and social benefits.

> Maybe builders have an advantage because on construction sites there is an advantage, especially a foreman has an advantage if he knows languages or Croatian, Bosnian, Albanian ... and even Slovenian. Here in the woodwork field, maybe somewhere. The companies employ Slovenians, maybe some from Serbia, Bosnia ... but these are languages that are significantly easier to understand than Albanian or Kosovar. I don't talk about it much in class. (T2, DV01)

The insistence on monolingualism can create additional barriers for students who are still acquiring proficiency in Slovenian, as it assumes they can fully engage in classroom discussions regardless of their language development stage. In contrast, schools that adopt flexible language policies (e.g. use of intercultural mediator, cooperative learning in mixed-language groups or pairs, use of bilingual texts and games etc.) can support these learners more effectively by encouraging them to draw on their entire linguistic repertoire, thereby enhancing their competence as they develop new skills (De Jong, 2013). However, in two of the schools, such flexible language practices were introduced mainly as pragmatic strategies to prevent misunderstandings, rather than as a deliberate effort to value multilingualism. This suggests a school climate that leans more toward functional assimilation, where language flexibility is tolerated for practical reasons but not celebrated as part of students' identities.

Confidence shaped by perceptions of cultural expression and respect for diversity

Focus groups participants (17 out of 29) generally claim to support multiculturalism; however, cultural expression is often viewed with suspicion. While 4 out of 21 teachers encourage discussions on cultural

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[4]The coding system used in this study consists of two parts. The first letter represents the role of the participant: "P" for principal, "T" for teacher, and "SC" for school counselor. The second part of the code indicates the school to which the participant belongs.

diversity, five believe migrant students should minimize the visibility of their backgrounds and fully assimilate into Slovenian norms.

> Even our migrants who are coming [to Slovenia] should know the basic things we are talking about in the social sciences about our country. No matter where they come from, what religion . . . . You came to Slovenia, get socialized according to our culture and continue here. (T5, DV01)

Such attitudes may lead migrant students to feel that their cultural heritage is undervalued, impacting their confidence in their identity and self-expression (Hölscher et al., 2024).

Many teachers (17 out of 21) emphasize adaptation to Slovenian cultural norms as a necessity for social integration. Expressions of migrant students' heritage, such as using their home language during breaks or engaging in cultural traditions, are sometimes seen as disruptive.

> I don't care what they do in their private lives, but at school, some rules are the same for everyone and the right thing to do is to adapt no matter where we come from./ . . . /I don't find it appropriate to express [migrant culture] in school. (T5, DV01)

This tension can lead to an internal conflict for students, who may feel torn between maintaining cultural pride and adapting to the norms of the school environment (Motti-Stefanidi, 2018). To alleviate this conflict, schools that validate students' cultural identities and promote integration can play a crucial role in helping migrant students develop confidence in themselves and thrive academically (Makarova & Kassis, 2022).

Connection shaped by teacher-student relationships and school climate

Teachers highlight the importance of integration but often combine it with assimilation, expecting students to prioritize Slovenian culture over their own. Some educators (5 out of 21) perceive language and cultural expression as secondary to adapting to school norms, which can create a disconnect between migrant students and the broader school community.

> I personally would not let the expression of certain other cultures be shown too much at school. This can cause some discomfort. Migrants must also show respect for the environment and culture to which they immigrate in such a way that they try to accept and live in this culture. But nobody has anything against them preserving elements of their culture. But emphasising their former culture, this is better to be expressed in small groups or at home. I think that it would be easier to be tolerant in this way than to let loose everything. This is exactly where problems arise. (T5, BV03)

Despite these challenges, 8 out of 21 teachers recognize the importance of fostering strong relationships with migrant students. Individual support, such as helping newly arrived students adjust to the academic environment, demonstrates a commitment to inclusivity.

> Definitely, when a student is in Slovenia for the first year, they sometimes come at the end of August and start school on September 1./ . . . /Of course, you "spoil" them at first, but then you slowly place them into this school system so that they are treated the same as the others. (T1, EV01)

However, inconsistencies in teacher attitudes toward diversity create a fragmented school climate, where inclusivity is promoted in principle but not always practised.

Additionally, one of the four school principals acknowledged internal conflicts among staff regarding cultural acceptance, indicating a lack of consensus on how to support migrant students effectively.

> / . . . /because I have the whole spectrum [of attitudes towards migrants]. There has been a lot of work and it still remains in this field, but it is the primary human emotions and defence mechanisms that civilization has absolutely failed to regulate at this stage. (P, CV03)

Teachers who foster positive teacher-student relationships and acknowledge students' cultural backgrounds contribute to a more inclusive environment, strengthening students' sense of *connection* and belonging (Ialuna et al., 2024).

Character shaped by respect for diversity in the classroom

Many teachers (11 out of 21) and the majority of principals and school counselors (6 out of 8) express support for multicultural values, but their restrictive views on language use suggest a gap between stated values and actual practice. Some teachers (7 out of 21) allow cultural engagement only within predefined boundaries, such as selecting translated works for assignments, rather than embracing multilingual and multicultural perspectives as a strength.

> Which authors they choose for reading at home; I allow them to choose works by those authors [from their home language] that have been translated into Slovenian. These are primarily lower vocational or vocational schools. Otherwise, yes, in Slovenian. (T4, DV01)

Students are often expected to demonstrate respect for Slovenian culture by prioritizing it over their own heritage. Such expectations reinforce an assimilationist approach rather than fostering a reciprocal learning environment where diverse perspectives are valued. Schools that actively promote cultural exchange (e.g. student exchange projects, presentations of students' cultures, debates on culture and religion, etc.) and multilingual competence help students develop character by encouraging respect for multiple identities (Sam, 2018). Such practices were mentioned in three schools, but primarily as part of subject-based learning activities rather than stand-alone intercultural programs. While these practices do expose students to diverse perspectives, they are often framed as pedagogical tools rather than explicit efforts to promote intercultural dialogue or inclusion.

Caring shaped by teacher support and inconsistencies in multiculturalism

Caring in PYD refers to empathy and emotional support. While many teachers (14 out of 21) describe their relationships with migrant students as supportive and respectful, their attitudes toward linguistic and cultural diversity suggest inconsistencies in how they practice inclusivity.

> If there were something intentionally obstructive, at least consciously, this doesn't happen. (T2, BV03)
> I have no prejudices against this, I treat everyone the same. (T2, CV03)

> They can express their views, their culture, speak their language during breaks/ . . . /at home, anywhere. It's nice that they do that. You can't suppress that./ . . . /I can't do this during class./ . . . /. Otherwise, yes, it enriches us all. (T4, CV03)

Some teachers (7 out of 21) and social counselors from 2 schools claim that teachers provide individual assistance to migrant students, ensuring they adjust to the school system.

> I do not see any inequality, teachers are also trying in every possible way to get their grades by calling on them and helping them. (SC, EV01)

However, others express discomfort or skepticism toward students' work and abilities, sometimes doubting the academic integrity of migrant students compared to their Slovenian peers.

> Sometimes someone doubts what their [students with a migrant background] work is. With the Slovenian child, however, there was no doubt whether this was their work or not. There [referring to the work of students with a migrant background] we had to prove what the student did. (T4, EV01)

Educators' views on language use and cultural expression influence how caring and inclusive the school environment feels for migrant students. A more consistent approach to multilingual support and cultural inclusion, where all students feel their identities are valued, would strengthen the *caring* dimension of the school climate (Ialuna et al., 2024; Sam, 2018).

Discussion

Students tend to thrive academically and psychologically in environments where they feel that they are treated fairly and respected by peers and adults (La Salle et al., 2015). In line with Coll et al. (1996), different forms of discrimination put students at risk of poorer developmental outcomes by affecting their relationships and engagement with learning. A growing body of research has confirmed the importance of studying

school climate for positive youth development. Respect for diversity, teaching and learning practices, and teacher-student relationships have been identified as essential dimensions in this regard (Thapa et al., 2013).

The present article focuses on how the school context at four Slovenian schools supports the positive youth development of migrant children, with a focus on teachers' respect for diversity. The article confirms the findings of the existing studies and, at the same time, demonstrates the importance of studying the sub-dimensions of school climate (e.g. Grazia & Molinari, 2020). Although the teachers participating in our study assessed the overall school climate at their school very positively, a thorough analysis of their views demonstrates several weak points regarding respect for diversity. The findings align with the 5Cs of PYD, particularly in how *competence*, *confidence*, and *connection* are shaped by attitudes toward multilingualism, multiculturalism, and teacher-student relationships (Chaika, 2023; Ialuna et al., 2024; Makarova & Kassis, 2022).

Even though the teachers stated that they provide help and support for students with a migrant background and that they value and support multiculturalism in their schools, it can be seen that the general approach to diversity (Baysu et al., 2021) at the four Slovenian schools is closer to assimilation than inclusion. From the teachers' and, in some cases, also the school leadership's administrators' answers, we can see that students' free expression of their migrant cultures is seen as problematic and thus allowed only when connected to the educational curriculum or in the context of special cultural events. *Confidence* and *connection*, as dimensions of PYD, are weakened by this restrictive approach, as migrant students may feel discouraged from openly expressing their identities. Additionally, students' use of their first/home language was expected during classes solely for explicatory purposes or during recess as a part of peer communication. Yet, even in such limited situations, this caused distress for some of the teachers. This reflects the limited support for multilingualism, which directly affects migrant students' *competence* by restricting their ability to use their full linguistic repertoire in academic settings. The school context in these settings does not support migrant students maintaining their home culture, which is one of the characteristics of empowering and supportive environments for positive youth development for migrant students, as described by Dimitrova et al. (2017). At the same time, they are forced to prioritize the receiving country's culture over their own. If we assume that the majority of Slovenian schools share these characteristics, the low level of school belonging among first-generation migrant students, as shown in the PISA 2018 results, could be explained by this claim (Mlekuž, 2021).

Also in line with the assimilation approach to diversity is the notion of the Slovenian school environment as primarily monolingual, as seen from the perspectives of teachers and school leadership. This notion is consistent with the monolingual perception of the role of languages in education, which is still deeply rooted in Slovenia and is based on a monoglossic conception of languages as limited autonomous systems that do not consider the complexity of the actual language practices of speakers (García, 2009). Moreover, teachers do not recognize bi-/multilingualism as an asset, especially for students of Balkan ethnic background. This influences *competence* and *connection*, as students who could benefit from multilingual learning strategies instead face limitations that hinder their academic and social integration. A more flexible approach would enable students to develop *competence* while maintaining confidence in their linguistic identity.

Another characteristic of a supportive and positive environment for migrant students is nondiscrimination (Dimitrova et al., 2017). The results of our study correspond to some existing findings in this field (Japelj Pavešić et al., 2019; OECD, 2020), which conclude that Slovenian teachers hold less favorable attitudes toward migrants. We could conclude that the environment at the four schools does not fully support positive attitudes toward multiculturalism and equality among students with non-Slovenian backgrounds. Even though the school leadership and teachers at the participating schools state that students with different cultural backgrounds are treated equally, examples of unequal treatment of migrant students was observed, either as doubt in their academic achievements or perceptions of privilege due to additional support received. These findings highlight weaknesses in *caring* and *character* development, as migrant students may feel that their efforts and abilities are undervalued. Furthermore, conflicts among teachers regarding attitudes toward migrant students reinforce inconsistencies in how inclusivity is practised, impacting the overall school climate and sense of *connection*.

To foster a more inclusive school climate that supports positive youth development, educators should adopt teaching strategies that value multilingualism and cultural diversity (Ialuna et al., 2024). Schools should implement plurilingual approaches, allowing students to draw on their linguistic resources in

learning, which enhances *competence* and *confidence*. Teacher training programs should incorporate culturally responsive pedagogy, helping educators develop awareness of implicit biases and the benefits of diverse classroom interactions. Furthermore, school leadership should actively promote a whole-school approach to inclusivity, ensuring that all staff members adopt consistent policies supporting migrant students' *connection* and belonging. Encouraging positive teacher-student relationships, recognizing students' backgrounds as strengths rather than deficits, and fostering an equitable school environment will contribute to migrant students' success and well-being (Sam, 2018).

To conclude, the school climate at the four included schools does not fully support migrant students' positive youth development. The approach to diversity is assimilationist (Baysu et al., 2021), rather than inclusive, limiting the development of *competence*, *confidence*, *connection*, *character*, and *caring* among migrant students. None of the three characteristics of a supportive environment as set out in Dimitrova et al. (2017) is fully met, and multilingualism is not supported. To create a school environment that truly supports migrant students' positive development, it is essential to move beyond an assimilationist approach and embrace meaningful inclusivity. This requires a shift in attitudes and the overall school culture that actively value cultural and linguistic diversity as assets rather than challenges.

Limitations and further research

We should, however, keep in mind that when conducting focus groups, the personal insights and subjective reports of the participants (teachers, social workers and school leaders) are analyzed. The results of this analysis should be understood as such. It is therefore reasonable to compare the findings through triangulation with findings obtained through other research methods. However, in this case the migrant student sample was too small to conduct a reliable and valid statistical analysis of the data gathered within the project *Positive Youth Development in Slovenia: Developmental Pathways in the Context of Migration*. Furthermore, one of the study's limitations was the number of schools included in the focus group analysis, since it is difficult to generalize the findings to the broader school context based on the results from only four schools. Therefore, for further research, it would be advisable to expand the school sample, include a larger sample of students with a migrant background and add qualitative analysis.

Additionally, considering the Cultural-Ecological Model of School Climate (La Salle et al., 2015), individual characteristics (including culture, race, and language) can be an important factor in the perception of school climate and respecting different dimensions of school climate. Further research could, therefore, focus on understanding students' perception of the teacher attitudes and teaching practices studied in this article. This would align with the assertion of Lerner et al. (2021) that students' voices should be heard in promoting social justice in education.

Conclusion

The focus of this paper was teachers' respect for diversity, and its role in supporting the positive youth development of migrant students at four Slovenian schools. The study explored whether the school environment at these schools fosters migrant students' *competence*, *confidence*, *connection*, *character*, and *caring*, as several studies employing the PYD perspective emphasize the importance of the school context in migrant students' positive development (Berry et al., 2006; Dimitrova et al., 2017; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). The findings indicate that while teachers and school leaders perceive their schools as multicultural and inclusive, their practices tend to align more with assimilation rather than full inclusion. Multilingualism is not fully supported, as teachers often restrict the use of students' first/home languages, limiting their ability to develop *competence* in a way that leverages their linguistic strengths. Additionally, cultural expression is often viewed as secondary to adopting Slovenian norms, impacting migrant students' *confidence* in their identities. Furthermore, *connection* within the school community is weakened when students feel that their backgrounds are not equally valued. Despite claims of equal treatment, instances of implicit bias and lower expectations toward migrant students were observed, raising concerns about *caring* and *character* development within the school climate. Therefore, it is vital to research this field further and thus bring to light the contexts in which migrant students try to develop and advance and, by doing so,

provide guidelines for transformation. Hence, the school climate emerges as a helpful access route for promoting students' and teachers' self-reflection, eventually fostering school change and improvement (Grazia & Molinari, 2020).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, AM, upon reasonable request.

Additional note

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Appendix

Appendix 1. List of implemented focus groups with data on participants

School	Participants' codes	Role	Date
BV03	T1	Homeroom teacher	4. 12. 2020
	T2	Physics teacher	
	T3	Chemistry teacher	
	T4	Mathematics teacher	
	T5	History teacher	
	T6	English language teacher	
	P	Principal	4. 12. 2020
	SC	School counsellor	
CV03	T1	English language teacher	9. 12. 2020
	T2	Environmental Studies Teacher	
	T3	Physics and Mathematics teacher	
	T4	Homeroom teacher, Slovene language teacher	
	T5	Social Studies Teacher	
	P	Principal	10. 12. 2020
	SC	School counsellor	
DV01	T1	Science teacher	21. 1. 2020
	T2	Homeroom teacher	
	T3	English language teacher	
	T4	Slovene language teacher	
	T5	Social Studies teacher	
	P	Principal	26. 1. 2020
	SC	School counsellor	
EV01	T1	English language teacher	1. 12. 2020
	T2	Mathematics teacher	
	T3	Slovene language teacher	
	T4	Homeroom teacher	
	T5	Science teacher	
	P	Principal	1. 12. 2020
	SC	School counsellor	