

A NEW APPROACH TOWARDS THE ACQUISITION OF DEMOCRATIC SKILLS IN CHILDREN: BUILDING SKILLS THROUGH TRAINING THERAPY ANIMALS

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Abstract

This article offers an analysis of soft skills acquisition in children through animal training programmes within the framework of a two-year Erasmus+ project. The article overviews important aspects of shaping and introducing new approaches towards the acquisition of soft skills in children through animal training programmes. In this context, children participated in research in three countries (Lithuania, Belgium and Bulgaria), in three animal-assisted educational programmes: dolphin-assisted therapy, hippotherapy, and canine therapy. The results of the narrative analysis show a significant improvement in the skills of children, improving the quality of their relationships with themselves, with others, with animals, and with the environment. This reaffirms that exposing students to authentic, hands-on experience can significantly enhance their cognitive, social and emotional development. Moreover, the article shows that the process also increased the soft skills of teachers and of external actors involved in the process, reinforcing the importance of an open schooling approach as a way of improving all society. The article contributes to empirical evidence to support the integration of experiential learning into the pedagogical realm.

KEY WORDS: democratic education, soft skills, children, open schooling, animal therapy programme.

Anotacija

Šiame straipsnyje pateikiama vaikų demokratiųjų įgūdžių ugdymo vykdančių gyvūnų mokymo programų analizė, remiantis dvejų metų trukmės Erasmus+ vykdytu projektu. Apžvelgiami svarbūs aspektai formuojant naują požiūrį į vaikų demokratiųjų įgūdžių ugdymą vykdančių gyvūnų mokymo programas. Aprašoma vaikų iš trijų šalių (Lietuvos, Belgijos ir Bulgarijos) dalyvavimo gyvūnų asistuojamosios terapijos edukacinėse programose su delfinais, žirgais ir šunimis patirtis. Naratyvinės analizės rezultatai atskleidė, kad reikšmingai pagerėjo tiek tipinės raidos, tiek integruotų vaikų socialiniai įgūdžiai formuojant teigiamą santykį su savimi, kitais žmonėmis, terapiniais gyvūnais. Taigi mokinių autentiška praktinė patirtis gali gerokai pagerinti jų pažintinį, socialinį ir emocinį vystymąsi. Tyrimo duomenys patvirtino, kad vykdančių projektą ugdyti šiame procese dalyvavusių mokytojų demokratiniai įgūdžiai, tai paskatino atvirojo ugdymo metodo platesnį pritaikymą. Šis straipsnis yra svarbus, siekiant patirtimi grįstą mokymąsi perkelti ir į pedagogikos sritį.

PAGRINDINIAI ŽODŽIAI: demokratiniai gebėjimai, mokyklinio amžiaus vaikai, atviroji mokykla, gyvūnų terapijos programa.

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Introduction

‘The animal is a conduit for learning to be human: some propose that it is only through the animal that we recognise our humanity’ (Jane Bone, 2013).

Traditional models of education have often been characterised by the segregation of the classroom environment from the real world. However, there is a growing body of research indicating that a more immersive approach, one that brings students closer to real-life experiences, yields substantial benefits for students. Similarly, the European Union, in its most recent reports, pointed out the need for children to acquire personal and social competencies, and for the need to find an alternative educational proposition, to be able to offer schools a method to present these competences to children, calling for ‘innovative pedagogical experiences with transversal and subject-based approaches to be envisaged, so that we understand better how to teach LifeComp competences’ (JRC, 2020). Democratic societies need state schools to prepare children and young people for democratic citizenship (Wahlström, 2022), and to develop their democratic attitudes and competencies, often described as ‘soft’ skills. Despite these calls for renewal in schools, traditional educational systems seem reluctant to change. Therefore, the view is constructed in the article that allowing schoolchildren to have real-life experiences would have a direct impact on their democratic or ‘soft’ skills acquisition, and would be an indirect benefit for teachers and the external environment which the students relate to.

The theoretical basis for this consideration draws on a variety of research that has mobilised evidence of the profound advantages of integrating real-life experiences into the pedagogical framework of school education, but crystallises its attention within the framework of democratic education philosophy, and connects it with the EU recommendation on key competence acquisitions. Democracy is commonly associated with both decision-making and a wider ethical idea about how to live together in society (Wahlström, 2022). This process in state schools requires the agreement of teachers, as well as in terms of how teachers consolidate various modalities of being both teacher and citizen (Motherway, 2022). Therefore, it is important to analyse whether schools assume the general will of the people as a single body for an educational system in which the values of a stable society are reinforced and take precedence over the encouragement of critical thinking (Wahlström, 2022). According to Motherway (2022), the structural life of the school and the desire to be more democratic in their teaching could balance and harmonise, and sometimes compete. However, this is a critical point that crucial attitudes for democratic education in schools are not by nature in society.

It is necessary to analyse the school approach which not only connects students with the external context but also with their learning needs and curiosity through innovative educational approaches. In this way, it was expected in the ongoing project for schools based on democratic education that involving therapy animals could have a profound impact as an innovation, and opening the school to the community can have a possible impact on democratic society in the future.

Therefore, the aim of the article is to explore the development of soft skills in children with the involvement of therapy animals in democratic schools.

The object of the article is the development of soft skills in children with the involvement of therapy animals in democratic schools through practical tasks and teamwork.

1. The importance of the use of therapy animal for soft skills training

The acquisition of soft skills is linked to the advantages of exposing schoolchildren to real-life experiences, focusing on cognitive, social and emotional development, by providing the results of a two-year project that put students in connection with therapy training animals. The Building Skills through Training Therapy Animals project (BUSTA) covered using therapy animals, for animals have always been important in human lives. Even from early childhood, parents and children include the use of stuffed animals for comfort and disruptive behaviour in the household (Golem et al., 2019). Moreover, real animals can be the core elements in different practices of psychotherapy, psychology, social work, etc, especially in fostering resilience in children (Tedeschi, Perry, 2019). In general, it has been widely analysed that animals play an important role in children's socialisation processes, and for getting to know socialisation practices, learning empathy, etc (Cole, Stewart, 2014). There is lots of research (Breitenbach et al., 2009; Griffioen, Enders-Slegers, 2014; O'Haire, 2013; Stumpf, Breitenbach, 2014; Žalienė et al., 2018) discussing the positive therapeutic effect on children with different issues by applying therapeutic activities with different animals: dolphins, dogs and horses.

The BUSTA project aimed at empowering teachers to promote students' talents through innovative pedagogy and students' active real-world participation and inclusiveness through awareness-building and psycho-affective connection. The BUSTA project children had the opportunity to have a real-life impact beyond the boundaries of the school, on the lives of persons with individual needs integrated into their classes: they developed cooperative actions to integrate service animal training. In so doing, children were put in contact with the individual needs of people, with the animal therapy world, and they learnt how to train such animals, passing from the position of passive learner to the position of active helper, as it is

a helpful soft skill development practice to develop common cooperative practices via animal involvement (Chandler, 2017; Handbook on Animal-Assisted Therapy, 2015). Despite other positive documented practices which could offer animal involvement, the project was oriented towards existing solid evidence of animal contact having significant health benefits and positively influencing transient physiological states, morale, and feelings of self-worth under the influence of animal contact (Rowan, Beck, 1994; Odendaal, 2000).

2. Theories of experiential learning

John Dewey championed experiential learning, arguing that students learn best through engagement with real-life experiences (Dewey, 1986). Similarly, the socio-cultural theory of Lev Vygotsky pointed to the role of social interaction in cognitive development. Vygotsky posited that children learn best when engaged in collaborative interaction with more knowledgeable peers and adults (Vygotsky, 1978). Building on the works of Vygotsky and of Piaget, constructivist pedagogists like Brooks and Brooks (1993) emphasise that children actively construct their knowledge through interaction with their environment. This constructivist approach underlines the significance of real-life experiences as the foundation for learning. In other words, the more children are exposed to a rich and differentiated environment, the more they will be able to construct a stronger and variegated knowledge base. This philosophy aligns with the idea of immersing schoolchildren in practical situations where they can interact with society and various socio-cultural contexts (Kolb, 1984).

Building on this, cultural-historical activity theorists, based on the works of Vygotsky and Leont'ev, focus on the role of socio-cultural tools in learning (Wertsch, 1998), underlining the importance of exposing children to various socio-cultural environments to enrich their understanding of different contexts. Scholars like Engeström (2001) have further developed this perspective, advocating for expansive learning environments that encourage students to explore and appreciate differences in culture, background and abilities. This idea is also discussed by Barab (2002), that it is not simply concerned with 'doing' as a disembodied action, but refers to 'doing in order to transform something', with the focus on the contextualised perception of the interconnected system as a whole (Engeström, 1987; 1993; Kuutti, 1996). These and other authors emphasise, therefore, the importance of students' interaction with diverse individuals as a valuable pedagogical approach for fostering empathy, enhancing communication skills, promoting adaptability, and deepening the appreciation of diversity.

3. Open schooling as a prerequisite for democratic competencies

In the last couple of years, experiential learning has been raised to a *modus operandi* of schools, not only as a tool for school activities but as a model where the school itself becomes an open system in contact with other learning realities of society. The educational ideology of open schooling draws on progressivism and child-centred approaches to education, with their tenets of readiness, choice, needs, play, and discovery (Burman, 2016). This input has been supported by international organisations that promoted a new educational approach more in line with what experiential learning theorists have been promoting in recent centuries.

Starting from the awareness that current educational methods, and the traditional school model, do not meet the needs of a fast-changing world, nor bring the skills needed to face 21st-century challenges, the Open School concept tries to envisage the school as an open space, connected to the local community and to real-life contexts. Open schooling means transforming the school from a closed environment to an ‘innovative ecosystem’, where students, teachers, education policy makers, parents, and other interested members of society cooperate, in order to expand the learning environment beyond the school walls (EU Commission, 2015; Gawlicz, 2023).

In an open school, the classroom walls drop away, and the entire community becomes an annex of the school, in which students have access to rich content, outside experts, additional resources, an authentic place and context for learning, and work-based experiences.

Schools, in cooperation with external stakeholders, are encouraged to become agents of community well-being. Families are encouraged to become real partners in school life and activities. Professionals from business and civil and wider society are actively involved in bringing real-life projects into the classroom (EU Commission, 2015; Gawlicz, 2023; Wahlström, 2022).

In 2004, the OECD’s ‘re-schooling’ scenario, Horizon 2020, paved the way for the concept of open schooling, envisaging schools as ‘Core Social Centres’, in recognition of the collective and community tasks of schools. The OECD pointed out the importance of increasing the socialisation goals and schools in communities, improving the shared responsibilities between schools and other community bodies, sources of expertise, and institutions of further and continuing education, by shaping and not conflicting with teachers’ professionalism. In 2015, the EU Educational Policy document ‘Science Education for Responsible Citizenship’ followed the same path, introducing the concept of open schooling as a promising approach to transforming schools into innovation hubs in their local communities. Similarly, the Unesco report *Rethinking Education: Towards a Global Common*

Good (2015) moved in the same direction, highlighting the importance of connecting schools with local communities and real life.

Following this understanding, an Open School is defined as an ‘open, curious, welcoming, democratic environment’ which supports the development of innovative and creative projects and educational activities. It is an environment which will facilitate the process for envisioning, managing and monitoring change in school settings, by providing a simple and flexible structure to follow, so that school leaders and teachers can innovate in a way that is appropriate for a school’s local needs. It will provide innovative ways to explore the world: not simply to automate processes, but to inspire, to engage, and to connect (Sotiriou, Cherouvis, 2021).

Believing in open schooling therefore means transforming the school from a closed environment to an innovative ecosystem interlinked with the development of the community around the school and the territorial actors. Schools, in cooperation with other stakeholders, are encouraged to become agents of community well-being. Families are encouraged to become real partners in school life and activities. Professionals from business and civil and wider society are actively involved in bringing real-life projects into the classroom (EU Commission, 2015; Gawlicz, 2023; Wahlström, 2022). This was the exact methodology of the BUSTA project. The open schooling idea is undoubtedly in debt to Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory, which conceptualises the child/learner within a system of concentric and permeable environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), as well as with the experiential learning theorists that were previously enumerated.

There is also a similarity between the Open School idea and the philosophy of democratic education, which is based on self-directed discovery, where learning can happen inside or outside the classroom, but real-life experiences are most often encouraged following the students’ intrinsic motivations and pursuing their interests. This ‘most appropriately meets the needs of the learner, the community and society. It does this through developing reflective individuals who are collaborative problem-solvers and creative flexible thinkers’ (EUDEC). In the following paragraphs we will see how experiential learning and open schooling can be part of the democratic education approach, and finally we will see how this is inscribed in EU recommendations on key competences.

4. The democratic education approach in experiential learning

The democratic education approach enters into this context by promoting experiential learning and open schooling in a wider set of pedagogical tools that rein-

force the acquisition of soft skills. Democratic education is a pedagogical philosophy underpinned by two basic principles, the self-determination of the learner, and democratic community processes (Paone, 2023). The first principle refers to the freedom of the learner to choose their own learning path, based on *intrinsic motivation* and *inner curiosity*. The second principle is related to social and interpersonal life in the school: in democratic education, every person has a voice and a vote in every matter that affects community processes, therefore giving children the possibility to have a say in decisions about the school. When experiential learning is conducted in the context of democratic education, it has a particular power, as it is supported by a context where students have chosen their learning process and are promoting it through collaboration and cooperation.

In an ever-changing world that demands not only hard and cognitive skills, but mostly the ability to adapt, communicate and collaborate effectively, democratic education is emerging as a powerful pedagogical approach that goes beyond traditional methods to cultivate soft skills in classes (Weimann, 2023; Paone, 2023).

The theoretical reference of this article is therefore the specific democratic education approach to the acquisition of soft skills in students by an open schooling method that allows students to connect with real life actors. A century of democratic school experience has shown that this approach is extremely effective in fostering communication, as it values student voice and expression, learning to articulate thoughts, listen actively to peers, and engage in meaningful dialogue (see the comprehensive literature review on these most recent debates on democratic education compiled by Sant, 2019). It is also extremely effective in fostering critical thinking, encouraging students to question, explore and analyse various topics, assess situations, solve problems, and think independently. Experiential learning, a hallmark of democratic education, places students in situations that require practical solutions, as students are encouraged to work collaboratively to find answers to their own needs, and hardly ever to abstract topics. This not only sharpens their problem-solving abilities, but also instils confidence in their capacity to tackle complex issues. Finally, as has been shown by Dewey (1916), democratic education emphasises cooperation and teamwork, and promotes a sense of collective responsibility. Students learn how to live and collaborate harmoniously with others, how to value diverse perspectives, and how to negotiate differences. These skills are indispensable in the professional world, where collaboration is often a key to success. Last but not least, students learn respect and inclusivity: they learn how to include the input of others, how to be empathic, and how to interact with different people. This not only enhances their ability to convey their ideas effectively, but also fosters empathy and the respectful exchange of perspectives.

5. Methodology

The qualitative participatory research was conducted from May 2022 to August 2023. The research was part of the European BUSTA project, with participating partners from six organisations in three different countries, Lithuania, Bulgaria and Belgium. Three schools with integrated classrooms and three associations created alternative Open School programmes and educational approaches involving therapy animals from animal-assisted therapy centres. The project was flexible according to the setting and conditions of every school. This allowed teachers and therapists in each country to develop the individual programme and to conduct activities that were appropriate for the children they worked with. In each of the countries, the students had the opportunity to get to know different therapy animals, and, as a subsequent step, to share their experiences. The project highlighted the acquisition of 21st-century lifelong learning skills, when children participate in the training process of therapy animals.

The conceptual ideas for the research data analysis were derived from Huberman and Miles (1994, 431, cited in D’Cruz, Jones, 2004). Huberman and Miles (cited in Henwood, Pidgeon, 1994, 229), view qualitative data analysis as an integrative and integrated process, with three components: data collection and reduction, data display and drawing, and verifying findings. D’Cruz and Jones (2004) use the broader Huberman and Miles (1994, 431) design for creating structural logic, which was applied in the research.

The first stage was to develop a research strategy and gather raw material. This stage was implemented in all participating partner organisations: the Lithuanian Sea Museum (Lithuania), the Maria Montessori School (Lithuania), the Community for Democratic Education (Bulgaria), the Paint and Quarter Horse Foundation (Bulgaria), Dyadis (Belgium), and Quality Education for Sustainable Social Transformation (Belgium). Among the project partners, it was decided to form a strategy for innovative learning via integrating therapy animal training activities together with a national school with integrated classrooms of children from seven to 16 years of age. The participating children had from seven to ten meetings with therapy animals, and suggested other different educational activities based on the inclusive ideas, open schooling and democratic philosophy. Different material during the research was gathered: videotapes (prepared by participating children), narratives (written by the head teachers of participating schools and therapists organising training and cooperation sessions for school children), and observation (the protocol was prepared by a group of experts from democratic schools). Teachers and professionals from animal-assisted therapy organisations observed the participating groups of children, and wrote free semi-structured narratives based on the

observation. Therefore, the thematic blocks for teachers involved the research themes: how teachers are empowered to promote students' talents through innovative pedagogy; how children are empowered to develop curiosity, welcome challenges, and co-design creative solutions; how teachers are empowered to promote students' active real-world participation and inclusivity through awareness-building and action and psycho-affective connection; how children are empowered to use digital tools and content to exchange practices with partner schools and create valuable online content for the public. Also, a questionnaire with three blocks of questions was prepared for participating children, which they had to answer before taking part in the research and afterwards. There were three thematic blocks of open questions: 1) questions about their democratic skills; 2) questions about their representations towards children with special needs; 3) questions about therapy animals.

All the material was used for overviewing and reading while it was transferred to the written texts and coding the data. The second stage was what Huberman and Miles (1994, cited in D'Cruz and Jones, 2004) called partially processed data. After gathering the raw material, it was all transcribed on to paper, and, in such a way, different conceptual stories were written on paper. These observations, video material, stories and interviews were transcribed. The research participants gathered this research material for two years. The results were analysed in a descriptive narrative analysis. The research narratives were created in an analysis of two themes, which will be discussed further: observations from the field in mapping observations against an EU key competence framework. These narratives were analysed from the children's video reports, teachers' and therapists' notes, insights, and parents' gathered notes.

6. Research results

The research was organised in a valorised way. Children from integrated classrooms took part together in animal-assisted educational programmes: dolphin-assisted therapy, hippotherapy and canine therapy. However, the therapies were not organised for the children; they all participated in educational activities based on democratic philosophy and the open schooling idea (EU Commission, 2015; Gawlicz, 2023; Wahlström, 2022). Democratic education philosophy in an open schooling method that allows students to connect with real-life actors was the theoretical point of departure for this project. Furthermore, in the analysis of the impact of the project on the single activities done, we departed from democratic education and open schooling theory (Wahlström, 2022; Motherway, 2022; Burman, 2016; EU Commission, 2015), and we inscribed this in the key competences reference docu-

ment that the EU provided in 2018, to obtain a clear reference grid to measure the impact of the project. The Council of the European Union adopted a recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning in May 2018, identifying eight key competences essential to citizens for personal fulfilment, a healthy and sustainable lifestyle, employability, active citizenship and social inclusion. This recommendation set up a common understanding of competences needed nowadays and in the future. The competences are the following: literacy competence, multilingual competence, mathematics and science competence, technology, engineering and digital competence, personal, social and learning to learn competence, citizenship competence, entrepreneurship competence, and cultural awareness and expression competence. In our analysis, we considered that the democratic philosophy and open schooling approach presents successful ways to promote the development of these competences through innovative learning approaches, and therefore are well inscribed in the broader EU policy framework. Therefore, the activities suggested for children in schools promoted the development of these competences (see Table 1, the example of activities provided for children).

The suggested activities are supported by narratives of observation from the field, which were divided into three categories: *skills through the democratic approach*, *skills through relations with animals* and *skills through assisting people with individual needs*.

Skills through the democratic approach. The analysis of parents', children's, teachers' and therapists' narratives revealed that, in general, offering new and different alternatives from national curriculum activities in schools enriched students' horizons, not only for students who chose to take part in these activities, but also for students not directly involved in the offered activities, as they had an opportunity to feel and experience new things through their peers. The discovery of previously unknown topics allowed learning and enrichment. In this way, children could participate in activities where learning can happen across multiple settings (Aarsand, 2014; Gawlicz, 2023). The mother of a child who participated in this research said:

Certainly! As a parent, I was touched by my daughter's experience at the Dolphin Assisted Therapy Centre, where she had the opportunity to interact with therapy animals and professionals in the field. Her interview with the trainers gave her a unique perspective on the role that therapy animals can play in helping people with physical or mental disabilities. She gained an insight into how animals can provide comfort and support to those in need.

Table 1. Activities for children provided by schools as open schooling on democratic philosophy

Name of school	Description of activity	Key competence	Methodology
Community for Democratic Education (CDE)	<p>Questionnaire for self-assessment on attitudes and knowledge about people with special needs, animal-assisted therapy and readiness for learning. More in-depth description about the project.</p> <p>Watching short documentaries about people with different kinds of difficulties in various countries and cultures, their jobs and daily life.</p> <p>Presentation of different disabilities. Students, divided into small groups, have the task of researching, collecting information and presenting a PowerPoint presentation on autism, Down's syndrome, intellectual disability and cerebral palsy.</p> <p>The presentations were shown, shared and discussed among peers and with their teacher during a Q&A moment.</p> <p>Participating in socialising activities with horses.</p> <p>Attending a dark restaurant</p>	<p>Personal, social and learning to learn competences, citizenship competence, cultural awareness and expression competence, multilingual competence, digital competence, literacy competence</p>	<p>The objectives of the questionnaire were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *To encourage independence: every student provides a free answer, not influenced by their peers. *To direct the students' attention to the project's topics through the questions posed. *Opening a discussion. Q&A. <p>Short visual content is easily understandable for adolescents and catches their attention. In one hour, they can watch some stories (testimonies) and discuss them with their teacher.</p> <p>Children can autonomously search and decide together in the group what stories to watch. Video content is usually in English. Tasks like this allow for a self-organised and self-regulated type of learning. The students had a deadline and complete freedom on the resources they could use.</p> <p>Presenting in small groups, where they feel safe and friendly, develops their communication skills.</p> <p>Students also had the chance to familiarise themselves with new words and their meanings, both in English and in their native language.</p> <p>Children participated in organised educational activities with horses.</p> <p>Meeting and talking with blind people in their workplaces shows students the job opportunities people with special needs have.</p> <p>Spending an hour in complete darkness and trusting waitresses gave the students a notion of how it is living without some of your senses.</p>

Name of school	Description of activity	Key competence	Methodology
<p>Klaipėda Montessori School and Kindergarten</p>	<p>Watching the educational theatre performance <i>Dantenija</i> performed by professional actors, together with actors with special needs.</p> <p>Participating in dolphin training and team-building activities in the dolphin-assisted therapy centre.</p> <p>Watching the film <i>The Butterfly Circus</i> by Joshua Weigel.</p> <p>The fourth-graders participated in a theoretical-practical session where they learned what Down's syndrome is.</p>	<p>Personal, social and learning to learn competence, citizenship competence, cultural awareness and expression competence, multilingual competence</p>	<p>Before the drama performance, spectators are taught about the necessary integration of people with special needs.</p> <p>Activities were based on a better understanding of other children with individual needs, cooperation and creating friendship relationships with children who need support and individual approach.</p> <p>After watching the film, students discuss and express their opinions of people with disabilities. Students discuss the bullying and exclusion experienced by people with disabilities.</p> <p>Students tried various activities to experience how people with Down's syndrome feel, and were debriefed afterwards.</p>

A NEW APPROACH TOWARDS THE ACQUISITION OF DEMOCRATIC SKILLS...

Name of school	Description of activity	Key competence	Methodology
BOS Democratic School	BUSTA school club, visits and training a dog in assisted-therapy training for BOS school	Personal, social and learning to learn competence, citizenship competence, cultural awareness and expression competence, multilingual competence, digital competence, literacy competence, mathematics and science competence, technology, engineering and digital competence,	<p>All children were asked to attend a presentation of the project in order to choose whether to participate in the next steps.</p> <p>Children filmed video messages to other children to initiate the exchange.</p> <p>The choice to participate in the project was the result of an autonomous decision-making process taken by each student.</p> <p>Filming video messages initiated exchange with the other children. Participation in all activities was the choice of the students.</p> <p>Children participated in different activities with a therapy dog. Introducing the dog and its training to the children, introducing the dog to the school environment of the BOS school, the dog participated in weekly democratic meeting circles among the students in the woods. The dog was constantly challenging the students' boundaries. The children were adjusting the body posture until she was no longer scared and she felt in total control of her personal space. The children did dog park visits. Once the students detected a limitation in the dog's training, they would spontaneously try to create new strategies to overcome it. At this point it was important for the students to be more aware of their impact and to be consistent with the training methodology. The students walked the dog in public spaces and used public transport. These activities represented a new challenge for the children, and brought out their proactivity, as well as pride in and trust towards the dog and everyone who attempted to interact with it.</p> <p>Strengthening the links in a community reinforces the previously mentioned principles on which we structure our educational goals.</p>

The narratives revealed how attention was paid to cooperation between students, building connections, the development of courage, and the development of various creative, cognitive and social competences. The development of ideas of democracy and the activism of the project helped the students' understanding of how people with disabilities experience the world, what challenges they face, and how we can support their inclusion in society. Another parent of a participating child also pointed to the positive approaches of such an open learning process:

As a parent, I am proud of my daughter's involvement in these experiences. They have allowed her to broaden her horizons, gain empathy and understanding for others, and develop a deeper sense of compassion. Overall, I am grateful that she had the opportunity to gain experience about animal-assisted therapy, disabilities, and inclusion through these meaningful activities.

This experience was also especially useful for strengthening the class team. The students used the benefits of group work increasingly boldly and productively each time, and tried to listen to the opinions of others, adapt to their friends' capabilities, and achieve the group's goals more responsibly. Students acquired conflict-resolution skills, and are able to deal with emotional difficulties more independently. The teachers said about the process:

This project gave children the chance to participate in the training process of therapy animals. The experience allowed them to further develop skills in communication, teamwork, and empathy, which are critical for their personal and professional growth in the future.

Moreover, providing the opportunity for students to be in an environment where they were not just at the receiving end of the knowledge transmission chain, but active participants in the creation of the activities, empowered and strengthened their abilities to be contributors to the implementation phase.

Skills through relations with animals. The interaction between students, as active actors in the training and not just beneficiaries of the therapy, and the animals, had a pivotal impact on the way children relate to other living organisms, promoting respect and care. Through the project, students had the opportunity to interact with animals on a different level, and in conditions that were not common in their daily life, even if they and their families have pets. They had the opportunity to see animals as partners towards a bigger goal. Approaching animals in this new way improved their confidence, and their leadership and communication skills. Teachers who guided children in these educational activities with animals reflected:

Kids tend to develop a psycho-affective relationship with the classroom environment, their need to explore and experience was met by their spontaneous agency in a space they felt comfortable and safe in. Dogs, on the other hand, are

exposed to real-life conflicts between kids, gaining training and practising intervention strategies.

In order for animals to be able to engage in therapeutic activities, it is imperative that they are kept in a setting that respects their nature, to allow the expression of their natural ethology. Animals need to be granted the freedom to choose when and whether to enter into an interaction with humans. Interacting with therapy animals therefore requires a different approach: a relationship of respect, not of control and domination, where the specificities of each species are valued and respected. The therapist of therapy organisation noted that:

Animals usually communicate in a very down-to-earth way and without any preconditions, they believe a human comes for friendship and open collaboration. Therefore, activities suggested for a child with individual needs and those without them gave equal opportunities to participate, connect and develop their competences.

It should be stated that open schooling suggested new ways of learning to children. As Wenger (1998) writes, such new ideas provide a good context for people to explore new insights. This idea is also supported by Gawlicz (2023), based on a democratic school analysis in Poland, and stating that the factors that appear to facilitate the transformative learning process involve primarily embedding in the community of practice, be it the extended democratic education community, or communities of individual schools.

Skills through assisting people with individual needs. The results of the narrative analysis show that there was a significant improvement in the skills developed for children with individual needs, especially attributes such as a better understanding of the world around them, and this broadened their horizons. This exposure led to personal growth, increased empathy, and a more open-minded approach to life, as well as a sense of global citizenship. Teachers from the participating organisations noted:

A positive impact on the participating students themselves, as they were given the opportunity to develop their competences and interpersonal relationships. The children had an opportunity to get to know their peers with individual needs in a different and non-formal context.

Contributing to improving the quality of life of a child with individual needs outside the arbitrary assignments imposed by teachers within the school structure benefitted the students, by restoring a sense of respect, self-worth and belonging to the world. This allowed them to develop an awareness of the impact their actions have on their surroundings, as well as the ability to contribute to the well-being of others. It allowed students to get much closer and understand more about the needs of others, and in particular of people with individual needs. Indeed, teachers noti-

ced that students became more tolerant and calm, and respond more positively to people with disabilities inside and outside the classroom. The teachers noted that:

Not only could children in this project meet people with individual needs, but also travel to other countries and meet new people there. By experiencing different cultures, customs and traditions, they helped young people to develop adaptability, problem-solving and communication, by encountering situations that challenged their comfort zones and forced them to think outside the box. These experiences were invaluable in shaping their character and preparing them for future endeavours.

The research revealed that the BUSTA project provided access to opportunities beyond the traditional school programme's framework for both teachers and school staff. Flexible school activities played a crucial role in the professional development of teachers, as they provided a platform for educators to explore new educational approaches, develop their own lifelong learning skills, and foster cooperation with their students. By engaging in flexible school activities, teachers were able to expand their knowledge base and enhance their teaching skills. This, in turn, had a positive impact on the learning outcomes of their students.

Conclusion

The article observed that there was a significant improvement in students' skills, evident in the quality of relationships with themselves, with others, with animals, and with the environment. The connection between the school and external organisations also allowed for an increase in the skills of schoolteachers, and for the animal therapy organisations themselves. These results show clearly that schools need to be open to society, educating students through connections and real-life relationships. By doing so, a more welcoming society that values diversity and promotes equal opportunities can be developed.

The suggested educational activities with animals, and other activities based on understanding people with individual needs, impacted the real-life experience of children, their critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and social skills. This article underlines the imperative for educators to consider experiential learning.

The research revealed that suggested activities based on training therapy animals, and other educational activities provided by open schooling based on democratic philosophy for children, developed their personal, social and learning to learn competences, and citizenship, cultural awareness, expression and multilingual competences.

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Brigita Kreivinienė, Martina Paone

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