

Gramotnost, pregramotnost a vzdělávání

Odborný recenzovaný časopis zaměřený na problematiku
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Univerzita Karlova, Pedagogická fakulta
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Support in Education and Personal Development Across Educational Levels: Between Individual Needs and Systemic Responsibility

Supporting individuals in education represents one of the key topics in contemporary pedagogical and psychological discourse, permeating all levels of the educational system as well as various domains of personal and academic development. Changes in the educational environment, increasing diversity of educational pathways, and the individualization of educational needs have strengthened the importance of support structures that enable pupils and students not only to cope with academic demands but also to develop their potential, competencies, and ability to navigate both personal and professional life. Educational support should therefore not be understood merely as a response to difficulties, but as an integral part of the educational process that creates conditions for the optimal development of the individual.

This issue of the journal presents support in education as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing the historical development of counselling

systems, empirical reflections on current counselling practice, analyses of individual psychological factors influencing learning, issues related to health literacy, and specific methodological approaches to student support within higher education curricula. Together, the individual studies demonstrate that educational support is not limited to a single domain or level but represents a continuous process that connects systemic structures, institutional measures, and the individual experience of the learner.

The importance of systemic support in education is evident from a historical perspective. The theoretical-historical study by Gabriela Mikulková analyses the emergence of educational and psychological counselling in Czechoslovakia between the 1960s and the 1980s. This theoretical study shows that the counselling system did not arise as a single institutional measure but as the result of the gradual development of professional approaches, institutional structures, and societal conditions. The study identifies

a key process of integration of various counselling domains, including vocational guidance, educational counselling, and developmental psychological approaches, into a unified system of child support in education. At the same time, it highlights the persistent tension between the need for systemic coordination and respect for individual needs. This historical context demonstrates that educational support is not a new issue but a long-standing component of the development of educational institutions, continuously evolving in response to changing societal and pedagogical challenges.

The contemporary form of support in higher education is addressed in the opening article by Anna Kucharská, which analyses the state of university counselling from the perspective of counselling professionals. This empirical study, based on a questionnaire survey among university counsellors, demonstrates how university counselling in the Czech Republic has undergone significant development from a marginal support service to an integral component of the academic environment. Counselling services have become a stable and institutionalized part of higher education. The findings indicate a growing demand for psychological support, with anxiety, overload, uncertainty, and weakened social competencies among the most common student difficulties. These changes reflect a broader shift in the perception of student mental health – from an individual concern to a syste-

mic challenge. Counselling services are increasingly oriented not only toward students but also toward academic staff, who encounter growing diversity in student needs and difficulties in their teaching practice. The role of counselling centres is expanding beyond responding to individual student problems to include preventive, methodological, and supportive functions within the broader academic environment. At the same time, the study highlights structural challenges, particularly limited-service capacity and unequal access to support. The findings confirm that effective student support in higher education requires a systematic approach and appropriate institutional infrastructure, including strengthening the capacity of counselling centres and redefining their role within the university system.

The importance of support is also evident at the level of individual psychological factors influencing academic success and student adaptation. The article by Markéta Švamberk Šauerová focuses on academic self-efficacy among students with psychological difficulties and chronic illnesses, defined as students' beliefs in their ability to cope with academic demands. This research-based study, complemented by reflections from counselling practice, shows that such beliefs represent a key factor influencing students' academic behaviour, motivation, and persistence. The study emphasizes the importance of support measures that strengthen student competencies and

enable effective engagement in the educational process. Proposed interventions, including adjustments to study conditions, psychotherapeutic approaches, and programs aimed at strengthening personal resources, highlight the importance of individualized support and interdisciplinary collaboration among educators, psychologists, and other professionals. Student support is thus understood not merely as compensation for difficulties, but as a process of strengthening autonomy and the ability to actively manage one's own learning. Academic self-efficacy emerges as a crucial protective factor enabling students to overcome obstacles and actively participate in their educational development.

Support for personal development in education is also closely related to the development of broader competencies, including health literacy and preventive attitudes. The article by Josef Krejčí and Barbora Dočkalová examines abstinence as a factor associated with the development of health literacy among adolescents and young adults. Abstinence is understood as a factor related not only to physical health but also to overall personal development and psychological stability. This review study shows that the ability to make informed decisions about one's health represents an important component of personal development, with implications not only for individual health but also for functioning within the educational environment. The study also draws attention to the insufficient

attention devoted to this topic in educational practice and research and emphasizes the preventive role of educational institutions, which can play a key role in fostering health literacy and resilience among young people.

A specific example of systematic student support is presented in the methodological study by Monika Kadrožková and Kristýna Janyšková, which describes the concept of a support-oriented elective course aimed at helping students manage academic demands and supporting their personal development. This didactic study presents a concrete educational intervention integrating the development of academic competencies, self-regulation, and the ability to cope with academic workload directly into the higher education curriculum. The study demonstrates that student support does not need to be limited to counselling services but can be systematically embedded within the educational process itself. This approach reflects a broader shift from reactive interventions toward systematic prevention that promotes the development of self-regulation, stress management, and effective learning strategies. Integrating wellbeing support directly into the curriculum represents an important step toward creating educational environments that foster not only academic achievement but also long-term personal development.

An important dimension of educational support is also the development of foundational literacy skills during the

early stages of schooling. The empirical study by Eva Wildová, using a design-based research approach, examines the use of mobile technologies to support reading literacy among first-grade students at a bilingual primary school. The study tracks students' progress in reading fluency and comprehension over a four-month period while analyzing the pedagogical potential of mobile devices as instructional tools. The results demonstrate improvements across all observed areas, particularly in increased reading speed, reduced error rates, and enhanced comprehension. Furthermore, the use of gamified applications contributed to higher motivation and active student engagement in reading activities. The study highlights the importance of carefully designed digital educational tools in supporting the development of key literacy skills from the earliest stages of education and emphasizes the potential of technology-enhanced learning as an integral component of contemporary pedagogical approaches.

A common denominator across all contributions in this issue is the emphasis on supporting individuals in education as a continuous process that connects historical experience, current practice, and innovative approaches. The individual studies demonstrate that educational support encompasses a wide range of activities - from the systemic development of counselling structures, through strengthening individual student compe-

tencies, to the integration of supportive approaches directly into teaching.

At the same time, it is evident that effective educational support requires coordination among various actors within the educational process, including educators, counsellors, institutions, and students themselves. Support is not a one-sided process but an interaction between the individual and the educational environment, enabling the development of each student's potential. Educational institutions thus play a crucial role not only as providers of education but also as environments that create conditions for personal and professional development.

This issue contributes to a deeper understanding of educational support as a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. It demonstrates that educational support is not limited to addressing difficulties but represents a fundamental component of a high-quality educational system that enables individuals to develop their abilities, competencies, and potential across different stages of their educational trajectories.

Anna Kucharská

University Counselling – History, Current Situation And Future Challenges

University Counselling from the Counsellors’ Perspective

Anna Kucharská

Abstract: The article focuses on the current state of university counselling services in the Czech Republic and on changes in the needs of students and academic staff as perceived by counselling professionals. The introductory section outlines the historical development and institutional establishment of counselling services, including the legislative framework and the professionalization of the field. The empirical part is based on an online questionnaire survey conducted among 22 counsellors working at four Czech universities. The results show that counselling services have become a stable and respected component of the higher education environment, with a significant increase in demand, particularly for psychological support. Predominant student-related issues include anxiety, uncertainty, overload, academic difficulties, and weakened social skills, with counsellors also reporting long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study further highlights the expansion of counselling services toward supporting academic staff, especially in working with students experiencing difficulties. Despite these positive developments, structural barriers persist, including uneven availability of services, limited capacity and unclear expectations regarding the role of university counselling centers. The conclusion formulates recommendations aimed at strengthening systemic integration, prevention and cooperation with the academic community.

Key words: university counselling; students; mental health; academic environment; well-being; COVID-19 pandemic; faculty; specific needs

Theoretical Foundations of University Counselling in the Czech Republic

History of University Counselling in the Czech Republic

The origins of counselling services in the Czech Republic date back to the period between the two world wars, when applied psychology and psychotechnics began to develop. The first counselling centers emerged, primarily focused on the career selection process, educational direction and resolving educational dilemmas. At that time, counselling was not part of the formal school system; the centers operated independently, most often in youth welfare offices, institutions for promoting trade or socio-medical organizations (Kohoutek, 1998). Gradually, a network of career counselling centers was established, not only in Prague but also in regional cities such as Jihlava, Pardubice and Brno, including specialized units like the Student (Academic) Counselling Center at the Central Psychotechnical Institute, founded in 1935 (Brožek & Hoskovec, 1991). Although there were no counselling centers exclusively for university students, these institutions provided services to a broad target group and became an important precursor to later academic counselling centers. They addressed issues such as educational choice, career orientation

and psychodiagnostics, thereby laying the foundations for professional counselling practice and future higher education counselling services.

In the post-war period, counselling activities were suppressed under the influence of communist ideology, and the scope for psychological and career counselling significantly declined. It was not until the late 1960s that the first more systematic efforts to revive counselling activities began, initially concentrated in regional psychological centers for primary and secondary school students. The first specialized counselling center for university students was established in 1968 in Bratislava, followed shortly thereafter by the founding of the first Czech academic counselling center in Prague in 1973.

Until 1989, counselling at universities functioned largely on an informal basis and was often carried out as a secondary activity by individual members of academic staff. These initiatives were typically isolated and short-lived, closely linked to particular professionals rather than to institutions. Counselling practices at the time ranged from career guidance and psychological support to assistance with managing academic demands. No systematic or institutionally established counselling services existed during this period (Kucharská, 2025).

Development of university counselling after 1990

After 1989, the higher education sector underwent a profound transformation, marked by rapid expansion, increasing diversification of student needs and growing pressure to modernize support services. The democratic context of the 1990s created space for institutional autonomy, new legislative frameworks and the development of academic freedoms, enabling the establishment of university structures that had not been possible under the previous regime (Novotný et al., 2021). Interest in higher education rose sharply during this period: student numbers increased steadily, new universities and faculties were established at a rapid pace and the academic landscape expanded significantly.

Concurrently, international and European initiatives to harmonize tertiary education increasingly influenced the system, leading to the gradual modernization of degree programs and the development of new forms of university support. The massification of higher education brought greater heterogeneity within the student population, more diverse learning needs and increased demands on students' abilities to navigate their studies, thereby creating a need for systematic forms of student support. Although informal assistance had existed at many institutions for a long time, typically provided on an individual basis by academic staff, it was only the societal

and institutional changes of the 1990s that created the conditions for the formal establishment of university counselling centers. Consequently, the first institutionally established counselling units emerged in the early 1990s, such as the Counselling Center of Masaryk University (1994) or the Coordination Center for Services for Students with Disabilities at Charles University. At the same time, distinct forms of counselling began to take shape—including academic, career and psychological counselling, as well as support for students with specific needs—and a broader discussion emerged regarding the professionalization and methodological standards of higher education counselling. This process can be interpreted as being driven not only by political and legislative changes, but also by the rapid increase in student numbers, which in turn created a need for new support mechanisms capable of responding to the growing diversity of students' academic and psychosocial needs.

In the second phase, spanning the second half of the 1990s, student support for individuals with specific needs underwent a significant transformation. Counselling shifted from isolated individual initiatives toward a coordinated system aimed at standardizing practices, providing methodological guidance to faculties, and integrating counselling services with academic processes.

At the turn of the millennium, coun-

selling services continued to professionalize and expand to technical and regional universities as well (e.g., CIPS at the Czech Technical University in 2003, and the Information and Counselling Center at the University of West Bohemia in 2006). This period was characterized by the development of multidisciplinary teams, the centralization of services into a single point of contact, the expansion of career and psychological counselling, networking with other university units, and a growing awareness of the importance of supporting academic success and preventing early dropout.

A major milestone was the establishment of the Association of University Counsellors (AVŠP) in 2008. The Association has contributed to the unification of terminology and methodological approaches and has created a professional platform for the exchange of good practice. As a result, counselling services are increasingly viewed as a strategic component of university quality—not merely as a means of addressing problems but as a form of systemic support for student adaptation and development.

Current state of university counselling in the Czech Republic

Contemporary higher education counselling in the Czech Republic is characterized by considerable diversity in both organizational structure and the

scope of services offered. It is a dynamically developing field that responds to the needs of a heterogeneous student population. Universities, owing to their autonomy, are able to design their own models of counselling support—ranging from centralized counselling centers to combinations of central and faculty-based units—with an emphasis on comprehensive and accessible services. Multidisciplinary teams integrate psychology, special education, social work, career counselling and socio-legal support. This model enables the provision of assistance in complex student situations, as many students present with overlapping academic, psychological and social challenges (Association of University Counsellors, n.d.).

The provision of counselling services at Czech universities is primarily established in Act No. 111/1998 Coll., on Higher Education, along with related regulations. Although the Act does not explicitly enumerate specific types of services, it obliges universities to ensure support for their students, including measures to promote equal opportunities. This obligation applies particularly to students with health, social or other disadvantages; however, in practice, counselling services are provided to the entire student population. According to Sec. 6(2) of the Act, each public university is required to define the organization and activities of its components in internal regulations, which must be registered

with the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports. These documents typically also include provisions on counselling services, thereby strengthening their institutional foundation and ensuring greater stability.

Government Regulation No. 274/2016 Coll., on Standards for Accreditation in Higher Education, further establishes the obligation of universities to ensure equal access to education and to provide supportive measures for students with specific needs. Institutions are required to ensure the availability of services and scholarships, to maintain a respectful and well-informed approach by staff toward these students, and at the same time to guarantee that the accommodations provided do not reduce academic requirements.

Professionalization of the field is also crucial. The Association of University Counsellors develops methodological materials, supports the training of counsellors and strengthens the role of counselling within the quality management of universities (Association of University Counsellors, n. d.). Current challenges include the high demand for psychological services, variations in the quality and scope of services across universities, the need to raise awareness among academic staff and the promotion of systemic well-being initiatives. Counselling addresses both individual care and broader systemic change. University counselling has evolved into a multidis-

ciplinary field that connects legislative obligations, professional expertise and the concrete needs of the student population. Contemporary models emphasize an approach based on respect, equality and individualized support, becoming an integral part of the institutional culture of higher education.

The current state of university counselling is assessed by Bláha in *University Counselling in the Czech Republic: Between Strategy and Reality* (Bláha, 2022). The work systematically presents university counselling as a subject of both academic study and public policy. The author analyzes the institutional framework of counselling services, their availability and scope, and highlights significant differences across universities. The study summarizes the types of counselling currently offered (psychological, career, academic, support for students with specific needs, etc.) and points to uneven capacities, funding and methodological guidance. Bláha also notes that the strategic objectives declared by universities often do not align with what counselling services can actually provide. The publication thus provides an important overview of the current situation, key challenges and the need for conceptual support and funding. At the same time, it confirms that university counselling is not only a practical service but is also becoming a research and strategic topic that merits ongoing attention and development.

Who is a university counsellor?

A university counsellor is a professional who provides students (and sometimes faculty) with support in areas such as academic matters, career development, mental health, socio-legal issues or specific educational needs. According to the Standards of University Counselling published by the Association of University Counsellors (n.d.), counsellors are expected to act in accordance with their professional qualifications, ethical principles as well as confidentiality and data protection requirements. The counsellor's role is multidisciplinary, encompassing individual consultations, assessment, methodological guidance, service coordination and the promotion of an inclusive learning environment.

The Code of Ethics of the Association of University Counsellors (2025) emphasizes the principles of respect, confidentiality, equal opportunity, voluntary participation and the professional boundaries of the counselling relationship. This also includes continuous professional development and supervision—counsellors are required to engage in regular training, stay up to date with developments in the field and maintain their professional competencies. Furthermore, they are obliged to protect clients' privacy, secure data and keep records in a manner that ensures confidentiality and adherence to ethical standards. In practice, university

counsellors are professionals with specialized training in psychology, special education, social work or related fields, who provide consultative support, collaborate with faculties and contribute to the well-being of both students and the academic community.

Research Methodology

Objectives of the study and research questions

The aim of the study was to gain insight into the functioning of counselling services at universities from the perspective of the counsellors themselves. The goal was not to provide a representative description of counselling across all Czech universities, but rather to offer an exploratory, qualitative perspective on the experiences of counsellors working in various types of university counselling centers.

To achieve the objectives of the study and gain an understanding of the current state of university counselling services, the research focused on key areas of counselling practice: the nature of the services provided, the most common student requests and how these have changed since the pandemic, opportunities for supporting faculty as well as the strengths and limitations of counselling practice. These areas served as the basis for formulating the research questions.

1. Which types of counselling services are available at universities and what are the most frequent student concerns?
2. According to counsellors, how have students' needs and difficulties evolved as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. What forms of support do counselling services provide to faculty, and what needs or challenges do faculty most commonly bring to the counselling centers?
4. How do counsellors evaluate the strengths and limitations of contemporary university counselling practice?
5. Which factors affect the possibilities for the future development of counselling services?

Research design and data collection

The research took the form of an online questionnaire survey conducted between June and August 2025. The questionnaire included closed-ended, multiple-choice and open-ended questions, allowing for a combined exploratory quantitative and qualitative analysis. It was distributed to 65 counselling staff at universities, with 25 respondents completing it (a response rate of 38.5%). Participants were contacted through the conference University Counselling 2025 – Current Trends and Challenges (Faculty of Education, Charles University, 2025).

Thus, the sample is not representative of all counselling staff in the Czech Republic but rather consists of professionals who actively engage in professional development and monitor emerging trends in higher education and counselling. This selection approach allowed for the collection of expert insights and informed experiences from counsellors who contribute to the development of the field and have a clear view of current shifts and challenges in the university environment. In this sense, the study is exploratory, providing valuable input for further research and helping to identify topics that merit systematic investigation.

Analytical Methods

Closed-ended items were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while multiple-choice questions were assessed by calculating frequencies and percentage distributions of the response options. Open-ended questions were analyzed using content analysis. This process involved open coding of responses, followed by grouping semantically related answers into subcategories, and finally condensing them into higher-level thematic categories. This approach allowed for capturing both the specific experiences of counsellors and the broader trends across universities.

Sample

The study involved counsellors from university counselling offices and centers. They were employed at four universities (Charles University, University of Chemistry and Technology Prague, Czech Technical University and Czech University of Life Sciences), allowing for a capture of the diversity of counselling practice across different institutional contexts. Of the 25 respondents, 23 were women. Responses from three participants were excluded from the analysis due to incompleteness, leaving a total of 22 completed responses. The average age of respondents was 41.38 years ($SD = 10.10$), and their counselling experience averaged 5.31 years ($SD = 3.45$).

Half of the counsellors (11 individuals; 50%) also hold an academic position at their university, which may influence their perception of students' counselling needs as well as their collaboration with faculty. Regarding employment type, most counsellors were employed under a standard work contract (16 individuals), two worked under a service agreement and four provided services on a freelance basis (invoicing). These differences highlight the varied institutional arrangements for counselling across the universities included in the study.

Results of the Survey among Counselling Staff

Typology of counselling services provided to students

Counsellors worked with approximately 10-11 students per month, typically meeting each student three times; the average duration of engagement with a student was 6-7 months. The findings showed considerable variability, which was related to both the counsellors' workloads and their specific involvement in the provision of counselling services.

As can be seen below in the overview of categories, the first three categories dominate, ranging from half to two-thirds of the sample—namely, psychological counselling, academic counselling and crisis intervention. The first three categories dominate, ranging from half to two-thirds of the sample—namely, psychological counselling, academic counselling and crisis intervention. About one-third of respondents reported additional areas, including special education counselling (such as support for students with specific needs), relationship and partner counselling as well as counselling for international students. The final three categories were mentioned less frequently: career and professional counselling, socio-legal counselling and support for students with specific needs. Since the question allowed for additional

comments, it is possible to examine each category in more detail.

Psychological counselling (N=73%).

Psychological counselling is the most frequently reported service. Counsellors address issues such as anxiety, stress, panic attacks, uncertainty, low self-esteem and student overload. A significant portion of cases relates to adaptation to university life, managing academic demands and overall student well-being. The psychological component is a key part of counselling services at most universities.

Academic counselling (N=13, 59%).

Counsellors reported general issues such as “problems with studying” but also provided more specific examples, including insufficient motivation, procrastination, exam failures, communication with instructors, concerns about final exams and study support strategies. Academic counselling is therefore an important component of overall student support.

Crisis intervention (N=10, 46%).

Counsellors reported that crisis intervention involves working with students in acute or rapidly escalating situations, typically in cases of psychological crises, self-harm or suicidal thoughts. It also addresses urgent issues related to studies, family, peers or professors. The focus is primarily on the initial identification of acute psychological or academic risk, assessment of the situation, provision of short-term support and referral to specialized care—often outside

the university counselling setting—with recommendations for clinical psychologist or psychiatric services.

Special education counselling

(N=6, 27%). Services for students with

specific needs represent one of the most specialized areas of counselling. Counsellors focus on functional assessment (a requirement for registering students as having specific needs), adjustments to study conditions, communication with instructors, preparation of recommendations and explanation of the relevant legal framework. This area is particularly challenging due to varying levels of instructor readiness and differing interpretations of what study accommodations entail.

Counselling for international students

(N=6, 27%). Counselling for international students focuses on adaptation

to academic requirements, language-related support, social integration and the resolution of legal and practical issues associated with studying in the Czech Republic. It may also include psychological support related to culture shock, loneliness or social isolation.

Career counselling (N=5, 23%):

Counsellors reported that students also seek support due to uncertainty about their choice of field or future career direction. Career counselling includes assistance with labour-market orientation, CV preparation, decisions about further studies and long-term career planning. This is a rapidly developing

area that complements psychological and academic support.

Social and legal counselling (N=4, 18%). Counsellors also addressed financial and social issues, which have increased markedly in recent years. These include support with accessing scholarships and benefits, managing financial hardship, balancing paid work with studies and navigating legal matters in specific situations. Such requests are often linked to the growing pressure on students who combine their studies with employment.

Support for specific student groups (N=3, 14%). In the counsellors' accounts, this type of support most often appeared in relation to student parents, students from low-income backgrounds, first-generation students and those combining study with paid work. Counsellors noted that these groups tend to face distinct challenges in terms of study organization, financial pressures and increased psychosocial strain, and therefore may require more targeted support or a more individualized approach.

Perceived problems faced by today's university students

We then focused on counsellors' perceptions of the problems faced by today's university students. The qualitative analysis drew on dozens of individual statements and identified six main thematic areas:

Psychological stress and mental health challenges (N=11, 50%). Counsellors reported that contemporary university students who seek support are often experiencing significant psychological strain. Anxiety, fear and panic attacks are predominant, frequently accompanied by depressive symptoms, emotional instability and feelings of overall exhaustion. Students describe overload and signs of impending burnout, as well as long-standing low self-esteem, self-doubt and difficulties with self-evaluation. Perfectionism, fear of failure and concern about making mistakes or disappointing others play a significant role. Many students struggle with intense uncertainty, self-criticism and feelings of being "unable to cope." Emotional overload, psychosomatic symptoms and sleep disturbances are also common.

Academic insecurity and disorganization (N=8, 36%). Common challenges faced by university students include uncertainty about their studies—concerns about exams, final state examinations or completing their degree, fear of academic failure and doubts about the purpose of their studies. Students often struggle to navigate the academic environment, administrative procedures and study requirements, which further increases stress. Poor planning, procrastination, workload pressure and insufficient study strategies or time management are also significant factors. Additionally, personal and emotional issues—such as rela-

tionship difficulties, emotional strain or anxiety—can negatively affect academic performance, reduce motivation, increase the risk of delaying tasks and in some cases, lead to interruption or termination of studies.

Weaker social skills and difficulties in relationships (N=8, 36%). A significant area of difficulties for which students seek university counselling services involves relationship and social problems. Most commonly, these include conflicts with partners or family members, complications in relationships with classmates, feelings of loneliness and difficulties in forming new connections. Counsellors also often report uncertainty in communication with instructors or supervisors, problems in relationships within departments and challenges in integrating into social groups. These situations can lead to feelings of inadequacy and isolation, which in turn increase stress levels and reduce motivation to continue studying.

Career uncertainty and professional direction (N=4, 18%). A significant area of counselling services concerns students' uncertainty about their professional direction. Students often doubt their choice of study program, fear making the wrong decision and question their future career prospects. Indecision between multiple options, fear of making a mistake and the feeling of “not knowing what I want” are common. Counsellors also report pressure from family or society to

choose the “right” field or career, which further increases anxiety and can lead to postponing decisions or feeling paralyzed when choosing the next step.

Social and economic burden (N=3, 4%). Students also report practical pressures, such as the need to work while studying, financial insecurity and difficult life situations that interfere with their study routines. Common issues include balancing work, studies and personal life, chronic time shortages and a lack of rest. Some students face the challenges of being studying parents, caring for children or dealing with unstable housing conditions, all of which can lead to increased stress and threaten academic success.

A significant group of difficulties involves **personality and value-related issues**, which reflect a deeper sense of identity uncertainty among students. Counsellors report that students often reflect on the meaning of life and their future paths, question the correctness of their chosen direction and seek to understand “who am I and where am I going.” Feelings of being unfulfilled by their studies, conflicts between personal values and external expectations as well as uncertainty about long-term direction are also evident. These issues indicate that counselling services are used not only in response to acute problems but also to seek personal grounding and life purpose during periods of major academic and life decision-making.

Changes following the COVID-19 pandemic

Respondents agreed that the pandemic fundamentally changed both the psychological well-being and academic functioning of university students. It represented a significant burden, the effects of which counsellors continue to observe several years later. The results of the qualitative analysis can be divided into multiple categories, as counsellors provided multiple responses.

Decline in mental health (N=16, 73%). Counsellors often reported higher levels of anxiety, uncertainty and social fear among students, particularly when returning to group interactions and communication. According to counsellors, students have more difficulty managing routine academic situations, show reduced stress tolerance and are more prone to feelings of discomfort. For many, returning to in-person learning was associated with significant stress and uncertainty.

Decline in study habits (N=15, 68%). A large portion of the responses describe that during prolonged periods of remote learning, students lost routine and systematic study habits. Returning to in-person learning therefore required a more challenging process of rebuilding discipline, planning and study organization. Counsellors also mentioned students' weaker orientation within the university environment and a greater tendency to postpone fulfilling academic obligations.

Social isolation and impaired interpersonal skills (N=12, 55%). Recurring themes included social isolation, uncertainty in communication and difficulties in establishing connections. According to counsellors, students communicate less in seminars, are hesitant to speak in front of peers or instructors and find it more difficult to integrate into groups. Counsellors noted that the pandemic disrupted regular social learning, which is reflected in weaker relational competencies.

Rising demand for support services (N=9, 41%). All counselling centers reported a significant increase in requests for psychological support. Counsellors emphasized that students are seeking help more frequently and earlier than before the pandemic, and that counselling services have become a much more visible part of the university environment. The pandemic experience has thus heightened the need for supportive mechanisms and underscored the importance of counselling in managing challenging situations.

Positive aspects (N=6, 27%). Although the counsellors' qualitative data predominantly reflect the negative impacts of the pandemic, positive changes were also observed, albeit less frequently (usually expressed as "exceptions," "for some students" or "within part of the group"). Counsellors noted that some students became more independent and were better able to manage the-

ir time and studies because they had to take on greater personal responsibility. Some learned to work more effectively with digital tools and to make regular use of online consultations or hybrid forms of learning, which provided them with greater flexibility. It was also noted that the pandemic contributed to the destigmatization of psychological support—students became less hesitant to seek professional help and were more willing to talk about mental health. In rare cases, counsellors reported that some students experienced less social stress or performance pressure in the online environment and were better able to maintain their personal routines. Overall, it can be said that the pandemic supported adaptability and openness to mental health care in a subset of students, even though this was more of a minority trend.

Faculty counselling services

Most counsellors have experience providing advisory support to members of university faculty (N=18), although they note that it is less frequent than work with students and, in some cases, rather rare. Recurring thematic areas of support for faculty can be identified in their responses.

Academic adjustments and faculty assistance in support of students (N=14, 64%). The most common request involves consultations on how to adapt teaching and assessment for students

who have specific difficulties—or whom counsellors perceive as needing support. This concerns not only formally registered students with specific needs, but also those going through stressful periods, experiencing academic difficulties or facing temporary limitations. Counsellors assist faculty in identifying realistic and pedagogically feasible adjustments to teaching or assessment while also establishing fair conditions.

Responding to student mental health crises (N=8, 36%). In some cases, faculty turn to the counselling center when a student shows signs of a psychological crisis. Consultations primarily focus on understanding how to respond, how to offer support to the student and when it is appropriate to refer the student to the counselling center or other professional services.

Challenging communication and conflict situations (N=6, 27%). The data also include mentions of more challenging communication between students and faculty or occasionally among colleagues in the workplace. Although not a frequent occurrence, counsellors sometimes help clarify communication procedures, responsibilities and the boundaries of the faculty role, or assist in resolving conflicts within the department.

Personal and mental health strain among faculty (N=4, 18%). Counseling services are also provided for faculty experiencing personal difficulties,

although to a much lesser extent. This includes, for example, finding ways to manage workload, stress or even burnout, as well as addressing problems in the family context. Counselling staff assist in finding a balance between work and personal life and support faculty in self-reflection and personal development.

Achievements of counselling services

One question in our survey focused on what counsellors consider to be the main achievements of university counselling services. Counsellors perceive a number of positive changes that have occurred in university counselling in recent years. These achievements relate both to the organization of the services themselves as well as to their impact on students and the broader academic community. Based on content analysis, the following thematic areas were identified.

Institutionalization of counselling as a core component of the university (N=10, 45%). Counsellors repeatedly emphasize that, at most universities, counselling has become a respected, stable and structurally embedded part of university services. In the past, counselling was often a supplementary or peripheral activity carried out by a few individuals; today, it is seen as a standardized component of academic support. This shift also includes greater visibility

of counselling services, their incorporation into internal regulations, and improved awareness among both students and faculty. The establishment of counselling as an integral part of the university is regarded as a key milestone, enabling the stable functioning of services and the development of additional activities.

Providing a safe space for students (N=10, 45%). Counselling is described as a space where students can openly share their difficulties and receive respectful, accepting and confidential support. Counsellors report that many students come to them for the first time with issues they have not previously had the opportunity to discuss with anyone, such as anxiety, failure, relationship problems, uncertainty or academic crises. Creating a safe environment is seen as a key achievement, enabling students to seek help in a timely manner and prevent more serious problems. Counselling often fulfills the role of psychosocial support that is otherwise lacking within the university environment.

Destigmatization of mental health support (N=8, 36%). Counsellors consider it a significant achievement that students are now less hesitant to seek psychological support. While visiting a psychologist was previously associated with fears of labeling or stigmatization, in recent years it has become much more common to view psychological consultation as part of personal growth or prevention. The COVID-19 pandemic has

further reinforced this trend: students more frequently recognize mental health care as an important aspect of academic functioning. Counsellors also note that destigmatization is evident among faculty, who are now much more likely to encourage students to seek counselling.

Support for academic success and reduction of study-related stress (N=7, 32%). According to respondents, counselling plays a significant role in helping students better manage academic demands and complete their studies. Counsellors assist with study strategies and time management, enhance students' ability to regulate stress and support motivation to complete courses or entire programs. Many counsellors cite specific cases of students who successfully navigated critical periods thanks to counselling. Support for academic success has thus become one of the most tangible effects of university counselling.

Social support and managing life challenges (N=4, 18%). A large portion of counselling successes is associated with the ability to assist students in challenging or non-standard life situations, such as financial hardship, loss of family support, health complications or social-legal issues. Counselling centers provide guidance on scholarships, crisis programs, adjustments to study conditions and legal assistance. Social support is often crucial for retaining students in the academic system, particularly those who are the first in their family to attend

university or are otherwise disadvantaged. Counsellors report that without institutional support, these students would often have had to discontinue their studies.

Professionalization of counselling and methodological guidance (N=3, 14%). According to counsellors, university counselling services have undergone significant professionalization in recent years. Methodological guidance has improved, standards are being developed, counsellors have more opportunities for continuing education and there is increased collaboration across universities. In some cases, universities invest in supervision or team meetings, which enhances the quality of services. Professionalization is seen as a prerequisite for further development of counselling, greater expertise and stronger systemic integration within higher education institutions.

Issues and challenges in university counselling

Although counsellors identify a number of positive changes, the field of university counselling still faces numerous structural, organizational and cultural barriers. Based on respondents' statements, six main areas of concern emerge. These challenges indicate where there is room for further development, methodological refinement and systemic strengthening of counselling services.

Awareness of counselling services (N=7, 32%). Many counsellors reported that both students and staff have insufficient information about the services offered by the counselling center, how to schedule appointments or the possibilities for longer-term support. Although awareness is gradually improving, there is still a group of students who learn about the counselling center by chance or only when a situation escalates into a crisis. Another issue is that students sometimes perceive the counselling center solely as a psychological service, overlooking the broader range of support available (career, academic, social-legal). Low awareness thus limits the usefulness of the service and delays timely access to help.

Limited collaboration with faculty (N=6, 27%). Counsellors point out that collaboration with teaching staff is not always systematic and is often based on personal contacts. Faculty members sometimes do not know when it is appropriate to refer a student to the counselling center or fear that they may “intrude on the student’s privacy.” Some faculty members state that working with students facing difficulties exceeds their competencies, yet they are not accustomed to proactively contacting the counselling center.

Challenges in supporting students with special educational needs (N=6, 27%). Although support for students with specific needs is relatively well developed

at many universities, counsellors point out several challenges. These include, for example, varying interpretations of recommendations across faculties, faculty concerns that academic adjustments may lower standards, lack of time for individual collaboration, difficulties in communication between the counselling center, the faculty and the student, as well as limited systemic support for more complex cases.

Lack of coordination in counselling systems across universities (N=5, 23%). One of the most common problems is the pronounced lack of uniformity in counselling systems across individual faculties and universities. Some institutions offer a wide range of services (psychological, career, social, and academic), while in others, counselling is minimal or inconsistently staffed. Counsellors note that the absence of a unified framework makes it difficult to share best practices. Students often change not only their study programs within a university but also transfer to another institution, where counselling services may operate very differently, leading to confusion and reduced access to support. Fragmentation also extends to the differing working conditions of counsellors, which may limit the quality and scope of services provided.

Unrealistic expectations of counselling (N=4, 18%). Some students and faculty approach counselling with expectations that exceed its capacities—

for example, requesting immediate solutions to long-term problems, therapeutic interventions beyond the time and professional scope of university counselling services, mediation of family conflicts or interventions in academic regulations. Counsellors report that they often need to clarify the boundaries of their role and explain that counselling is not a “universal solution” for all situations. A key challenge for the coming years is therefore to manage the expectations and improve communication with service users.

Systemic constraints and institutional rigidity (N=4, 18%). Counsellors note that the university environment is often rigidly structured, with numerous administrative barriers. Changes are implemented slowly, even in situations where it is clear that students require more flexible support. Common problems include insufficient capacity, lack of stable funding and a heavy administrative burden.

Discussion

The findings provide a comprehensive overview of the current state of university counselling in the Czech Republic and highlight several key trends that should be interpreted in the context of existing literature and broader societal changes. This discussion focuses on three main areas: (1) the nature and evolution of clients’ needs, (2) the role and instituti-

onal positioning of counselling services within universities and (3) structural challenges and recommendations for the future.

The nature and evolution of the needs of students and faculty

The results of the study indicate a substantial shift in the needs of university students. Psychological strain, anxiety, fear of failure, emotional instability and exhaustion are among the dominant issues for which students seek counselling services. This trend is consistent with broader research highlighting an increase in mental health difficulties among the university population (e.g., Švamberg Šauerová, 2021; Brzáková Beksová & Nadvorníková, 2024). At the same time, our data confirm Bláha’s findings (2022) that the contemporary university environment generates an increasingly complex set of psychological, relational and academic challenges, and that psychological support has become an ever more significant component of counselling services.

At the same time, weakened study habits are evident, including difficulties with time management, procrastination, uncertainty about the meaning of one’s studies and fear of academic failure. Counsellors often link these difficulties to the period of remote learning, which is consistent with literature emphasizing

the sensitivity of academic functioning to changes in the learning environment (Berezka & Šimonová (2024). Bláha (2022) similarly notes that the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the growth in demand for counselling services—and our findings fully confirm this trend.

The results of this study are also consistent with other empirical data from the Czech context. Using the example of the Academic Counselling Center at the Faculty of Education, Charles University, Kucharská (2025) demonstrates that students seek support for a wide range of difficulties: from psychological and emotional problems to academic uncertainty and specific educational needs. This confirms the trend of destigmatizing counselling services and the growing legitimization of psychological support in higher education, which is fully in line with our findings.

A significant finding is the expansion of counselling services toward faculty members. Instructors seek support in working with students with specific needs, in crisis situations and regarding the definition of professional boundaries and their own role. This aspect is not emphasized to the same extent in Bláha's study (2022), and our data therefore broaden the perspective on counselling as a tool for supporting the entire academic community, rather than students exclusively.

Counselling services are therefore increasingly perceived not only as

a means of supporting students, but also as a space for supporting academic staff who face growing professional and emotional demands. This perspective is explicitly reflected in several contributions included in the volume *Higher Education Counselling* (Presslerová et al., 2024). For instance, Švamberk Šauerová (2024) emphasises the role of university counselling centres in promoting the occupational wellbeing of academic staff, highlighting the importance of systematic support aimed at stress management, burnout prevention, and sustainable professional functioning. Similarly, Kryštof (2024) discusses the possibilities and limits of coaching academic staff, pointing out both the potential benefits of targeted support for teaching personnel and the structural constraints that may hinder its broader implementation. These contributions complement our results by situating the wellbeing of academic staff as an integral component of contemporary higher education counselling, thereby reinforcing our finding that effective counselling services need to extend beyond a student-centred focus and address the broader academic community.

The role and integration of counselling services at universities

Counselling services are perceived as a stable and legitimate component of the

university environment, reflecting the long-term trend of professionalization in higher education counselling (Čalkovská & Houžvičková Šolcová, 2021; Hájková Peláková, 2023). Similarly, Bláha (2022) demonstrates that counselling centers are now more firmly institutionally anchored, and although their structure and scope vary, they have become a standard part of university policy. Our data confirm this trend—counselling services are not viewed by counsellors as peripheral or supplementary activities, but as a significant component of supporting students' academic success and well-being.

At the same time, it is apparent that the role of university counselling centers is not always clearly defined. Students and faculty sometimes expect the center to perform functions that exceed its capacities (e.g., therapy, mediation or decisions regarding academic measures). The tension between expectations and the actual capabilities of services is also highlighted by Bláha (2022), particularly in relation to limited capacity and the varying conditions across institutions. This underscores the need for clear communication of competencies, institutional support and deeper integration of counselling services into university life. The ambivalent perception of the role of counselling services described by respondents in our study is also reflected in contributions included in the volume *Higher Education Counselling* (Pressle-

rová et al., 2024). For example, Berezka & Šimonová (2024) points to the tension between the increasing demands placed on counselling services and their limited staffing and financial resources. Further development of higher education counselling should therefore aim not only at expanding the range of services provided, but also at strengthening their institutional anchoring.

Empirical data from the Academic Counselling Center at the Faculty of Education, Charles University (Kucharská, 2025) further indicate that counselling services can make a significant contribution to students' academic stability and their orientation within the university environment. Our study expands on these findings from a single institution by incorporating the perspective of a broader group of counsellors working across multiple universities.

Structural challenges and recommendations for the future

Alongside positive trends, structural barriers persist. Awareness of counselling services remains insufficient, and collaboration between counselling centers and faculty is often episodic and dependent on individual contacts. A significant issue is the fragmentation of the system—Bláha (2022) highlights the uneven coverage of counselling centers across universities. Our data refine this

picture by showing that inequalities also exist within a single institution, across faculties and departments (in terms of the scope of services, capacity and stability of counselling staff).

Structural limitations to the further development of higher education counselling are also highlighted by Čalkovská and Houžvičková Šolcová (2021), who argue that this field has long lacked clearer legislative support and a stable funding framework. The authors point out that university budgets do not include a dedicated financial component for counselling services, which results in reliance on project-based funding. Such funding is associated with uncertainty and constrains the long-term sustainability and systematic development of counselling services. These observations are consistent with the findings of our study, in which respondents likewise draw attention to difficulties related to the institutional and staffing arrangements of counselling services.

The COVID-19 pandemic further accentuated these disparities while simultaneously increasing the demand for psychological and academic support. In the context of Bláha's study (2022), our findings can be understood as a complement to the macro-level analysis, providing insights into the micro-level of counsellors' everyday practice—their caseloads, working conditions and the real impacts of limited capacities. Together, both studies highlight the need for

systemic strengthening of counselling services, including institutional stability, methodological support for faculty and the development of preventive tools.

Overall, it is evident that university counselling is not merely a support service but a significant component of ensuring the quality of education and the well-being of the entire academic community. Moving forward, it will be crucial to monitor how counselling services continue to professionalize, how their role in relation to faculty evolves and how structural inequalities in their availability and capacity can be reduced.

Study limitations

The present study has several limitations that should be taken into account when interpreting the results. First, it is important to note that the research relies on a relatively small and intentionally selected sample of counselling professionals, who were primarily recruited through a professional event and networks. As a result, the survey response may reflect the perspectives of active and professionally engaged counsellors who have long-term interest in the development of university counselling. Therefore, the findings cannot be considered representative of all counsellors working at Czech higher education institutions.

Another limitation is that the data are based on **counsellors' self-reported statements** rather than the perspectives

of students or faculty. The study therefore primarily captures the professional viewpoint on client needs and the functioning of the system, which may introduce certain biases—for example, emphasizing particular types of cases or institutional barriers. It is also important to consider that counsellors operate under different organizational and staffing conditions, which may influence their assessments and experiences. Additionally, a large proportion of respondents also serve as university professors, which may provide an additional perspective that cannot be clearly distinguished from that of counsellors working exclusively in this role.

Another limitation is the **predominantly qualitative nature of the analysis**, which allows for a deeper understanding of meanings and trends but provides less opportunity for statistical comparison or modeling of relationships between variables. The study should therefore be understood as exploratory—its aim is not to draw universally generalizable conclusions but rather to open the topic, identify the main areas of need and highlight the structural challenges facing university counselling.

Finally, it is important to note that some of the counsellors' statements reflected the post-COVID-19 situation. Certain changes in students' needs may therefore be temporary, while others may only stabilize over time. These dynamics should be examined further from a longitudinal perspective.

Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insight into the practice of university counselling in the Czech Republic and allows for the formulation of recommendations for further research and the development of counselling services at both institutional and systemic levels.

Conclusion

The survey results confirm that university counselling in the Czech Republic has become a stable component of the higher education environment. Counsellors describe a shift from a peripheral, supplementary service to a professionally anchored practice that significantly contributes to supporting academic success, student well-being and the functioning of the academic community. Particularly notable is the increase in psychological and emotional difficulties for which students seek counselling. These findings correspond with existing literature as well as Bláha's insights on the recent developments in university counselling.

The study also shows that the COVID-19 pandemic played a significant role as an accelerator of change. According to counsellors, levels of anxiety, uncertainty and social isolation increased, study habits weakened and the demand for psychological support grew. At the same time, however, the pandemic contributed to the destigmatization of mental health

care and to the greater legitimization of counselling services. This experience underscores the importance of counselling as a preventive and stabilizing element of university life.

An important finding is the expansion of counselling services toward faculty members. Support primarily concerns working with students with specific needs, responding to crisis situations and defining the pedagogical role. This dimension broadens the traditional concept of university counselling and confirms its strategic significance for fostering an inclusive and safe academic environment.

Alongside positive trends, structural barriers persist—insufficient awareness,

limited capacities, fragmented services and sometimes unrealistic expectations regarding the role of counselling. These challenges highlight the need for systematic development, clear institutional integration, greater emphasis on preventive support and closer collaboration with the academic community.

Overall, university counselling represents a significant tool for supporting both the quality of education and campus life. Moving forward, it will be essential to strengthen counselling's capacities, enhance its professionalization and better integrate it into the strategic management of universities, enabling it to respond effectively to the complex and evolving needs of students and faculty.

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Academic Self-Efficacy in Students with Psychological Difficulties and Chronic Illnesses

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Abstract: This article examines the issue of academic self-efficacy among university students with psychological difficulties and chronic illnesses. It draws on the experiences of academic counselling services at the Faculty of Education, Charles University, and the Palestra College of Physical Education and Sport. The focus is on the impact of these health limitations on academic performance, absenteeism, and the risk of premature study termination. Additionally, it proposes interventions such as modifications to study conditions, mindfulness techniques, cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), and programs aimed at empowerment, which can help students overcome barriers, strengthen their self-confidence, and achieve academic success. The article emphasizes the importance of supporting academic self-efficacy as a key factor in managing academic demands and improving treatment adherence.

Key words: academic self-efficacy, students; academic counselling, mindfulness techniques, academic success, cognitive-behavioural therapy

Introduction: The Growing Importance of Academic Self-Efficacy

Academic self-efficacy, defined by Albert Bandura (1997) as the belief in one's ability to successfully manage academic tasks, is a critical factor influencing academic success and students' psychological well-being. An increasing number of studies highlight the significance of self-efficacy in successfully handling

various life tasks (Collins, MacNamara, 2022; Besharat, Pourbohloul, 2011; Bartimote-Aufflick et al., 2016; Dráberová, 2016; Honicke, Broadbent, 2016; Kryshko, Fleischer, Grunschel, & Leutner, 2022). For university students with psychological difficulties (e.g., anxiety disorders, depression, borderline personality disorder) and chronic illnesses (e.g., Crohn's disease, diabetes, multiple sclerosis, or oncological diseases), this belief is often weakened due to physical,

psychological, and social barriers (see, e.g., Morales-Rodríguez, Pérez-Mármol, 2019; Kucharská, Špačková, Sotáková, 2023). The prevalence of these health limitations in higher education is rising, with some institutions reporting up to 20% of students affected by these issues (see regular editions of the “University Counselling” conference; further details in Presslerová et al., 2024; WHO Collective, 2016).

Theoretical Framework of Academic Self-Efficacy

According to Bandura’s theory of self-efficacy (1977), belief in one’s abilities is influenced by four main sources:

- **Mastery Experiences:** Successfully completing academic tasks strengthens self-confidence. However, for students with psychological difficulties or chronic illnesses, these experiences may be limited due to fluctuating health conditions. For example, a student with multiple sclerosis may struggle to prepare for an exam due to the onset of new biological treatment or may have difficulty completing a written test due to fatigue, which reduces their sense of competence both subjectively and objectively.
- **Vicarious Experiences:** Observing the successes of peers with similar difficulties can inspire (see Rodger, Tremblay, 2003). For instance, a stu-

dent with diabetes who sees a peer successfully managing their studies through an individualized plan may be motivated to seek similar support. Shared experiences of other students significantly strengthen the sense of self-efficacy, using a similar principle as in enhancing patient compliance during treatment for complex illnesses (see more e.g. Graham, Wayne, Perutte-Manning, Pergantis, Vaughan, 2022).

- **Verbal Persuasion:** Positive feedback from instructors or counsellors can strengthen students’ belief in their abilities. For example, praise for completing a challenging task can increase motivation in a student with depression.
- **Emotional and Physiological States:** Psychological difficulties, such as anxiety or panic attacks, and physical symptoms, such as pain or fatigue, negatively affect the perception of one’s abilities (see Honzák, 2017). For instance, a student with ulcerative colitis may experience anxiety about the lack of access to restrooms during field trips, which reduces their self-confidence.

These sources are often disrupted in students with health limitations, leading to weakened academic self-efficacy and a higher risk of premature study termination. However, studying can be an impor-

tant part of these students' psychological well-being, as it provides structure, social interaction, and a sense of purpose.

The ability to fully participate in social life is crucial for a sense of adequate quality of life and mental health. It is also necessary to emphasize that this group has the same distribution of individuals with average and above-average intelligence, meaning their desire to fulfil the need for self-realization, education, and recognition is entirely legitimate. Failure to meet these needs leads to frustration with all its psychological and health-related consequences (see Reed-Fitzke, Lucier-Greer, 2021).

At the same time, studies and practice show that the opportunity to study with the aforementioned health limitations can be a significant factor in treatment adherence, motivation to manage disease symptoms, and maintaining mental optimism in otherwise challenging life situations (see Katajavuori, Vehkalahti, Asikainen, 2023).

Impact of Health Limitations on Studies

Psychological difficulties and chronic illnesses have complex impacts on academic performance, absenteeism, and students' overall well-being. These causes can be divided into several areas: physical, psychological, and psychosocial influences.

Physical and Psychological Influences

Among the primary physical and psychological factors affecting academic performance are pain and fatigue. These can often include the body's reaction to medication strategies, particularly the introduction of new treatment methods upon reaching adulthood, changes in doctors due to the initiative of young people who seek new information and can, upon reaching adulthood, manage their healthcare according to their own discretion.

Students with chronic illnesses, such as rheumatoid arthritis, multiple sclerosis, or oncological diseases, often suffer from chronic fatigue and pain, which hinder their ability to focus on studies. For example, chemotherapy can cause cognitive difficulties, known as "chemo brain" (Medical Tribune, 2007), which impair memory and information processing. Students undergoing intensive treatment (e.g., oncology patients) report that during exam periods, they are unable to study for more than 30 minutes at a time due to fatigue and nausea (see Li, Caeyenberghs, 2018). Similar difficulties are reported by students with diabetes or cardiovascular issues. For students with heart conditions, factors such as current weather, pressure, and temperature play a role—they react poorly to weather changes or extreme heat and

are more sensitive to poorly ventilated rooms during exams.

Due to their health conditions and psychological difficulties, there is often significant and unpredictable fluctuation in performance. Exam periods increase stress (Švamberk Šauerová, Kucharská, 2023), which can worsen psychological symptoms, such as panic attacks or depression, and physical symptoms, such as flare-ups in Crohn's disease or asthma attacks.

For example, a student with an anxiety disorder may struggle with oral exams due to fear of evaluation, leading to worse results than their actual knowledge would suggest.

Students with these difficulties have higher absenteeism due to frequent medical appointments, hospitalizations, or fear of worsening health during classes. For instance, a student with type 1 diabetes may miss lectures (or leave during lectures, seminars or practical) due to the need for regular blood glucose monitoring and insulin administration.

Psychosocial Influences

Among the primary psychosocial influences is social isolation, often related to dietary restrictions, lifestyle measures, or fatigue and nausea, which prevent students from participating in social activities such as student events or informal gatherings with peers. This can also affect their ability to live in dor-

mitories with other students—here, too, the illness may negatively impact their social life. For example, a student with Crohn's disease avoided social events due to fears of sudden digestive issues, leading to feelings of loneliness and reduced motivation to study.

Fear of disclosing their health condition can lead to withdrawal, with students reporting concerns about stigmatization (e.g., "He's the one who injects himself, who's always unwell, always drawing attention to himself, why doesn't he deal with it privately?"). Many students have negative experiences from prior education—for example, a student who felt ill during a post-graduation photo session vomited in front of the group. This experience became traumatic, negatively affecting her participation in group activities organized by peers at university, and she also avoided organized activities. Another example is a student with "Borderline Personality Disorder" who fears their behaviour will be perceived as "unstable," discouraging communication with instructors or peers. Similarly, a student with ulcerative colitis in remission, suffering from acute diarrhoea, may struggle with fieldwork due to fear of "accidents" or lack of restroom access, leading to exacerbated difficulties and secondary psychosomatic symptoms.

Students with low frustration tolerance or psychological difficulties often perceive minor failures as catastrophic, increasing the risk of premature study

termination and fear of failure. For example, a student with depression may lose all motivation to continue studying after failing a single exam.

Real-life examples

The case of a student with multiple sclerosis who experienced episodes of fatigue and impaired coordination during exam periods. These symptoms made it difficult for her to write exams, leading to feelings of being “not good enough.” After implementing individualized exam schedules, the option to write tests on a computer, and access to digital materials, her academic results improved. An individualized approach, including the ability to schedule exams flexibly throughout the academic year, was crucial. After starting new biological treatment, it was necessary to accommodate higher absences in theoretical subjects, with the option to attend classes online. The student was also exceptionally gifted, and her talents were supported through encouragement to engage in publishing activities, participation in student competitions at her discretion, and presenting her activities at a university counselling conference. Gradually, she gained adequate control over stress, and in collaboration with the counselling centre, she led an advanced seminar on physical activities for students with similar health difficulties. All these activities significantly contributed to increasing her academic self-efficacy.

This example demonstrates how targeted adjustments and individualized approaches can strengthen academic self-efficacy and reduce the risk of premature study termination.

Barriers in the Academic Environment

Students with psychological difficulties and chronic illnesses face numerous barriers that complicate their studies and negatively impact academic self-efficacy. These barriers can be divided into three main categories: stigma and attitudes of those around them, particularly instructors and peers; fear of discrimination based on negative experiences from secondary school; structural barriers (e.g., demanding study programs, lack of support); and environmental stressors (see Švamberg Šauerová, Kucharská, 2023).

Attitudes of Teachers as a Barrier

The attitudes of teachers are one of the key barriers faced by students with psychological difficulties and chronic illnesses in the academic environment. These attitudes significantly influence the study experience, academic self-efficacy, and overall well-being of students (see Hinton, Kirk, 2015). Based on the author’s experience in university counselling, some teachers tend to recom-

mend study interruptions without considering their importance for the student's psychological well-being. For example, a student with depression was labelled "lazy" by a teacher, which worsened their mental state and motivation. This attitude reflects a lack of awareness about the impact of psychological difficulties on studies (it is important in this context to prepare practical workshops and methodological support for teachers to increase their awareness).

Teachers' attitudes manifest in their approach to students, communication, willingness to adapt teaching, and responses to students' specific needs. Negative or uninformed attitudes can take various forms:

- **Lack of Awareness of Psychological Difficulties and Chronic Illnesses:** Many teachers lack sufficient training on the specific needs of students with anxiety, depression, ADHD, or autism. Better awareness and collaboration are noted with physical health conditions, such as Crohn's disease. However, some teachers' attitudes suggest that students should primarily focus on their health and not burden their bodies with the stress inherent in the university environment, pointing out numerous other interesting professions the student could pursue without studying. Fatigue and anxiety are often perceived as "laziness" or lack of motivation and initiative.
- **Prejudices and Stigmatization:**

Some instructors may subconsciously approach these students with distrust, for example, questioning the severity of their difficulties, especially for requests perceived as "easy" ("Anyone can handle that!") or viewing requests for accommodations as attempts to gain unwarranted advantages.

- **Low Flexibility:** Instructors may be unwilling to adapt their teaching methods or requirements, such as providing extra time for exams, alternative submission formats, or allowing absences during health deteriorations. In practice, some instructors are reluctant to provide materials to students, fearing misuse or distribution to other students without payment for study resources.
- **Inappropriate Communication:** Non-constructive feedback or insensitive remarks (e.g., "Why can't you attend lectures like everyone else?") can discourage students from openly communicating their needs.

Example: A student with a panic disorder may struggle with presenting in front of large groups. If an instructor dismisses their difficulties and insists on standard requirements without adjustments, it can lead to increased anxiety, academic failure, or even study termination.

Negative teacher attitudes have a profound impact on students with psychological difficulties and chronic illnesses, significantly contributing to lower self-

efficacy. When students feel their needs are not respected, they lose confidence in their ability to succeed academically. This can lead to feelings of helplessness and worsening mental health. Insensitive instructor approaches can exacerbate psychological difficulties, such as triggering panic attacks or deepening depression. As a result of visibly negative attitudes from instructors (and peers), students may avoid contact, minimizing situations where they must interact with teachers, which reinforces instructors' assumptions that the student is uninterested in their field. This creates a vicious cycle, weakening social support.

In extreme cases, negative experiences with instructors can lead to study termination—students may hope for a different instructor or an improvement in their health, which often leads to dropping out. Study termination has long-term negative impacts on further education and career prospects.

Conversely, it has been proven that students with good relationships with instructors have higher academic self-efficacy (see Ayllón, Alsina, Colomer, 2019; Musa, 2020; Gebauer, McElvany, Bos et al., 2020). Therefore, focusing counselling centre efforts on supporting instructors is a key resource for supporting these students.

Factors Influencing Instructors' Attitudes

Instructors' attitudes are not solely a matter of personal approach but are influenced by broader factors. One of these is a lack of information related to the absence of professional training—in the Czech academic environment, access to regular training on inclusive education and support for students with special needs remains limited. In some academic circles, a “cultural norm” persists, suggesting that higher education should be “tough” and that students must manage on their own, which can lead to a lack of empathy. In many cases, instructors argue with “logical” connections between certain types of illnesses or difficulties and professional practice requirements (e.g., social phobia in a social worker, dismissing the possibility of the student engaging in the field on a scientific or theoretical level). Instructors often face high workloads, which can reduce their capacity to individually address students with these needs (see Švamberk Šauerová, 2017; MulaFalcón, Javier, González, Rodríguez, 2022). There is also often a lack of institutional support—legislation is unclear, methodological support is not easily accessible, and specialized facilities are distant or less available.

Possible Solutions and Recommendations

To overcome barriers related to instructors' attitudes, several approaches can be taken. The foundation is education and institutional support. Additionally, expanding counselling centre services (e.g., organizing seminars, creating methodologies, and brochures for specific groups of students with special needs) can be crucial. Instructors can be supported in adopting a general approach to flexibly adjusting their requirements while maintaining basic standards, allowing some degree of flexibility based on students' current situation and condition. A solution may also include the Universal Design for Learning, which offers various approaches to teaching (e.g., combining written, oral, and visual methods), benefiting all students, not only those with difficulties (see Masaryk University or Burgstahler, 2017).

Another solution to overcoming barriers includes workshops for instructors—training focused on understanding the needs of students with special needs can improve communication and instructors' approaches. At the Faculty of Education, Charles University, regular seminars are held where instructors discuss the impact of psychological difficulties (or other special needs) on studies and gain insight into creating an inclusive university environment.

Students themselves play an impor-

tant role in changing instructors' attitudes toward students with special needs. Support groups are organized where students learn assertive techniques, mindfulness practices, build resilience, and are motivated to actively communicate with instructors. In a safe environment, they practice how to effectively communicate their needs, which can help overcome initial misunderstandings from instructors. However, it is crucial that guidance in using mindfulness techniques and meditation is provided by a well-trained specialist.

Interventions to Support Academic Self-Efficacy in Students with Psychological Difficulties and Chronic Illnesses

To overcome the aforementioned barriers and enhance academic self-efficacy, it is essential for universities to offer targeted interventions. These interventions can be divided into three main areas: modifications to study conditions, psychological support, and programs focused on strengthening self-efficacy and empowerment.

Modifications to study conditions represent a fundamental step, focusing on methods of learning and assessment of required competencies without altering the content of the graduate profile as defined in the accredited study pro-

gram. Specific measures include individualized study plans that allow flexible exam schedules, extended time for tests, or the option to take exams remotely. For example, a student with type 1 diabetes was granted permission for frequent breaks during exams to monitor blood glucose levels, which helped them better manage stress. Technological support also plays an important role—lecture recordings, digital study materials, or text-to-speech software, which facilitates access to education for students with cognitive difficulties following chemotherapy. Collaboration with libraries enables the provision of these materials to students with physical limitations. A flexible environment may include, for instance, the option to take exams in a quieter room for students with anxiety disorders or postponing a compulsory course (e.g., swimming) to a later year for a student recovering from surgery, without negative consequences.

Psychological support is another key pillar. Cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) helps students manage negative thoughts such as “I’ll never manage this.” A female student with panic disorder learned breathing techniques during counselling sessions, which enabled her to better cope with anxiety during oral exams, and gradually reframed her negative beliefs about her own abilities. Mindfulness-based programs (MBSR) involve meditation and mindfulness techniques that reduce anxiety and improve

concentration. A student with Crohn’s disease completed an eight-week course and learned short breathing meditations that helped him manage stress during field trips. Individual coaching focused on realistic goals and time management is particularly suitable for students with low frustration tolerance—for example, a female student with borderline personality disorder created a weekly study plan through coaching, which reduced impulsive behaviour and improved her academic performance (see e.g. Bettinger, Baker, 2011).

The third area includes programs focused on strengthening self-efficacy and empowerment. Self-efficacy represents an individual’s internal belief that they are capable of handling a specific task or challenge; it is a subjective sense of control over the outcomes of one’s actions, shaped through experiences, positive feedback, and successful task completion. Empowerment goes a step further—beyond strengthening self-efficacy, it provides individuals with resources, tools, and autonomy to actively manage their own development. While self-efficacy is primarily belief in oneself, empowerment is the ability to act on that belief and truly influence one’s environment (see more e.g. Liu, Breit, 2013; Khoo, Kang, 2022).

In an academic setting, self-efficacy can be supported by gradually increasing task difficulty, providing constructive feedback, and creating an environment

where students can learn from mistakes. Effective approaches also include modelling successful strategies through peers or mentors facing similar challenges, and reflection on personal progress—for example, regularly answering questions such as “What did I manage to do?”, “How did I feel during the activity?”, or “How are my abilities developing?”. Empowerment involves greater autonomy in choosing topics and work methods, mentoring, peer-learning, project-based and problem-oriented teaching, or involving students in decisions about instruction. Peer groups are highly effective, where students share experiences with each other, gaining a sense of belonging and inspiration to overcome obstacles. Many universities therefore operate open groups for students with chronic illnesses or specific difficulties.

An example of a successful program is the Stanford University initiative focused on strengthening academic confidence, during which first-year students regularly attended mentoring sessions with more advanced peers and wrote reflective essays on overcoming obstacles. Results showed significantly higher academic persistence and confidence in tackling challenging tasks. Similarly, leadership and peer-learning programs at Harvard Business School (e.g., CLIMB) have demonstrated that group work on real projects and support for critical thinking significantly strengthen not only

academic but also professional confidence.

In the Czech Republic, similar programs are gradually being implemented primarily through support centres for students with specific needs, which exist at most public universities (e.g., Teiresiás at Masaryk University, ELSA at CTU in Prague, Carolina Centre Charles University, or the Alfons Centre at BUT in Brno). These centres provide individual counselling, modifications to study conditions, psychological support, and in some cases peer groups or crisis interventions for students with psychological difficulties. Mental health is often categorized under the broader specific needs, including psychological disorders. Foreign models, such as mentoring programs or systematic MBSR courses, can be adopted especially in the areas of peer-learning and reflection, where Czech universities are already experimenting with support groups. However, counselling capacities are often insufficient, and there is a lack of a nationwide comprehensive strategy focused exclusively on academic self-efficacy.

Discussion, Limitations, and Conclusion

Despite the clear potential of these interventions, their implementation faces several challenges. Some approaches, such as mindfulness or CBT, require

regular practice, which can be difficult for students with chronic illnesses due to fatigue or frequent medical appointments. Counselling centres at many universities have limited capacity, so individual support is not always available. Students with depression or low self-confidence often do not seek help themselves due to feelings of hopelessness. Finally, instructors' attitudes vary—some view modifications to conditions as “unfair” to other students, which can lead to refusal to provide, for example, extended time for exams.

When compared to the results of other studies, it becomes clear that the success of interventions depends primarily on their systematic and long-term implementation. While one-off workshops have only limited effects, regular programs (such as those at Stanford or Harvard) lead to measurable changes in academic persistence and self-assessment (e.g., Bandura, 1997; Multon et al., 1991). Meta-analyses focused on students with chronic illnesses confirm that a combination of condition modifications and psychological support significantly reduces dropout rates and increases academic success (Huang, et al, 2024; Lekamge, Jain, Sheen, 2025). On the other hand, studies from European contexts (e.g., Germany, United Kingdom) point out that without cultural change at the institutional level—i.e., without training educators and creating an inclusive environment—

interventions remain isolated and their impact is limited (Waters, Payler, Jones, et al., 2019).

In conclusion, supporting academic self-efficacy in students with psychological difficulties and chronic illnesses is not merely a matter of individual measures but requires a comprehensive approach at the university level. The combination of flexible study conditions, accessible psychological support, and systematic programs strengthening confidence and autonomy has a proven positive impact on academic results, mental health, and long-term academic persistence. The key to success, however, lies not only in the availability of these interventions but above all in creating an environment where students feel safe, respected, and able to actively influence their educational path. Only in this way can the barriers these students face be truly overcome, enabling them to fully develop their potential. In the Czech context, inspiration from abroad could lead to expanding existing centres with specialized programs on self-efficacy, contributing to greater inclusion and reduced academic failure.

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Supporting students at the Faculty of Education, Charles University: balancing academic demands and mental well-being

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Abstract: higher education institutions are increasingly facing challenges related to student mental wellbeing, which is now widely recognised as a key determinant of academic success, persistence in study, and overall personal development. This methodological study presents a comprehensive concept of a support-oriented elective course titled *Managing Study Demands and Supporting Wellbeing*, developed within the ESF+ project at the Faculty of Education, Charles University. The course is grounded in theoretical frameworks of positive psychology, metacognitive approaches to learning, and the recommendations of international organisations (OECD, WHO, UNESCO). It focuses on fostering self-awareness, self-regulation, stress management, effective study strategies, and the ability to maintain balance between academic responsibilities and personal life. The study summarises the theoretical underpinnings of wellbeing in higher education, introduces the PERMA model, and highlights the specific needs of diverse student groups, including those with specific learning difficulties, autism spectrum disorder, and anxiety-related challenges. The text outlines the structure of the course, the methods employed, key thematic areas and study materials, and reflections on student participation. The study demonstrates how systematic support for wellbeing can be effectively integrated into university curricula as a preventive measure against academic failure and as a means of developing essential 21st-century competencies.

Key words: wellbeing, higher education, positive psychology, metacognition, study strategies, stress management, prevention of academic failure

Introduction

Contemporary higher education is increasingly challenged to reflect not

only students' academic performance but also their mental well-being and overall quality of life (Bakker & Mostert, 2024). Research and practical experience

indicate that rising academic demands, competitive environments, uncertainty about the future, and often insufficient preparation for managing workload effectively may lead to higher levels of stress, anxiety, procrastination, exhaustion, and in some cases even premature withdrawal from studies (Gobena, 2024; Wolter et al., 2020).

Universities in the Czech Republic and abroad are therefore responding to this challenge by seeking systematic ways to support student well-being (Gobena, 2024; Kočí, 2022; Walker, 2022; Novotná & Schreiberová, 2021; Nevypust duši, 2019). One such approach involves introducing courses and educational activities focused on developing study strategies, self-awareness, self-regulation, and the ability to care for one's mental health during university studies (Brooker, Larcombe, & Baik, 2019). Support-oriented courses can thus serve not only as a prevention tool against academic failure but also as a means of developing key 21st-century competencies – the ability to reflect on one's learning, manage time effectively, plan, cope with demands, and build a sustainable relationship with both study and oneself (Schulz, Reiner, Olson, & Oberhoffer-Fritz, 2025). The Faculty of Education at Charles University has long been engaged in supporting students with specific needs as well as addressing the topic of well-being within the educational environment. In response to student needs, the elective course

Managing Study Demands and Supporting Well-Being was created as part of the ESF+ project at Charles University (Reg. No. CZ.02.02.XX/00/23_022/0008957). Its aim is to provide practically applicable tools for managing academic workload and strengthening personal well-being during university studies, thereby contributing to student well-being and fostering relationships between students and instructors (Tong, Liu, Cai, & Zhao, 2025).

The objective of this methodological study is to offer readers a clear methodological concept for teaching a support-oriented course focused on well-being, including examples of good practice. The study draws on the theoretical foundations of positive psychology, metacognitive approaches to learning, and current recommendations from international organizations (OECD, WHO, UNESCO). It also includes a detailed description of the course structure, the specific content of individual sessions, an overview of the methods used, and reflections on student participation. The study aims to describe, through an example of good practice, a tool for systematically integrating well-being support into higher education.

Theoretical background

The concept of well-being has, over recent decades, become established as

a key construct in psychology, education, and public policy. It is not a one-dimensional concept but rather a complex state of subjectively perceived life satisfaction, psychological resilience, meaningfulness, and the ability to manage everyday demands (Diener, 2009). In recent years, the well-being of pupils has become an integral part of discussions on the quality and effectiveness of education at both primary and secondary levels. This shift is evident not only in the Czech context but also in international assessment frameworks such as PISA (2015 and 2018), which for the first time included measures of students' socio-emotional well-being. The results indicated that certain components of well-being, particularly cognitive well-being (e.g., self-confidence, motivation, relationship to learning) are significantly associated with academic performance, while the overall influence of schools on students' subjective well-being remains limited (Česká školní inspekce, 2021, 2017).

The topic of well-being is gaining importance in higher education as well, where it is increasingly perceived as a key factor influencing not only academic success but also students' overall satisfaction and persistence in their studies (Corcoran, Pennington, & Worsley, 2022). Research suggests that, similarly to lower levels of education, focusing exclusively on the development of academic competencies is insufficient; it is essential to systematically support

environments that contribute to mental well-being, high-quality interpersonal relationships, a sense of meaning in studies, and a balance between academic and personal life (Govorova, Benítez, & Muñiz, 2020). Higher education well-being is associated not only with personal comfort but also with academic performance, intrinsic motivation to study, the ability to establish and maintain relationships, and a reduced risk of academic failure or dropout (Corcoran, Pennington, & Worsley, 2022).

Models of well-being

Various theoretical models conceptualize well-being from different perspectives. Within positive psychology, one of the most frequently applied is the PERMA model (Seligman, 2011), which defines well-being as a set of five dimensions:

- **P (Positive Emotions)** – experiencing positive emotions and joy
- **E (Engagement)** – deep involvement in activities (flow)
- **R (Relationships)** – high-quality interpersonal relationships
- **M (Meaning)** – a sense of purpose and fulfillment in life
- **A (Accomplishment)** – the perception of success and achieved goals

For the academic environment, factors such as engagement, meaning, and self-efficacy are particularly significant, as they influence intrinsic motivation, the

ability to overcome obstacles, and perceived capacity to manage academic demands (Seligman, 2018).

Well-being of university students

Studies addressing the mental well-being of university students repeatedly highlight the prevalence of anxiety, stress, burnout, and feelings of inadequacy within academic environments (Schulz, Reiner, Olson, & Oberhoffer-Fritz, 2025; Chen & Chen, 2025; Inga-Ávila et al., 2024). These phenomena are often exacerbated by the transition from the structured secondary school system to a high degree of autonomy and personal responsibility, frequently without sufficient support in metacognitive strategies, time management, and mental wellbeing (Cruz & Lopes, 2023). At the same time, research indicates that support interventions focused on well-being—whether delivered through courses, workshops, or mentoring programs—have a positive impact on students' self-perception, academic self-confidence, stress levels, and overall study persistence (Schwake, Wegener, & Kortsch, 2025; Cassidy & Poots, 2020; Jarden, Young, Colla, & Macinnes, 2020).

A systematic approach to supporting well-being in higher education must also consider the needs of specific student groups, such as students with specific learning difficulties, ADHD, autism

spectrum disorder, anxiety disorders, other mental health conditions, or physical and sensory disabilities (Sedgwick-Müller, 2022; Kimball & Thoma, 2020). These students often face not only increased academic demands due to their difficulties but also a heightened risk of frustration, failure, social isolation, and emotional exhaustion (Woodruff, Kuder, & Accardo, 2019). Support for their well-being should therefore include appropriate study accommodations and flexibility in teaching, psychological and counseling services, accessible information systems, the possibility of an individual study plan, and the availability of support personnel such as tutors, academic coaches, or specialists from student support centers (Ishihara et al., 2024; Smith & Garcha, 2023). From a preventive perspective, it is equally important to build an inclusive and accepting environment that enables students to communicate their needs openly without stigmatization (Kats, 2021).

Study context at the Faculty of education, Charles University

The Faculty of Education at Charles University provides systematic support for students with specific needs, primarily through its Academic Counseling Center. Students requiring increased support undergo functional assessment that identify their specific needs and enable

them to obtain the status of a student with specific needs. Based on this service, they may utilize established modified study conditions (for example, extended time during examinations, audio recordings of lectures, assistance from student tutors, or the loan of equipment from the Assistive Technology Center). In addition to psychological, special education, and speech therapy services, the Academic Counseling Center offers participation in growth or support groups and the opportunity to enroll in elective courses focused on managing stress and academic demands (e.g., the course *Managing Study Demands and Supporting Well-Being*).

Methodological framework of the course

The course *Managing Study Demands and Supporting Well-Being* is based on several key theoretical foundations that provide the framework for the proposed activities, methods, and objectives of the seminar. Its aim is not only to develop specific study skills but also to support mental well-being, self-reflection, and the ability to systematically manage workload during university studies (Corcoran, Pennington, & Worsley, 2022; Schulz, Reiner, Olson, & Oberhoffer-Fritz, 2025). Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) emphasizes the importance of satisfying three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence,

and relatedness. Within the seminar, autonomy is supported by allowing students to choose strategies and tools that suit them when planning their studies and coping with stress (Gobena, 2024). Competence is developed through practical exercises focused on effective time management, metacognitive planning, and overcoming procrastination, enabling students to experience self-efficacy and the ability to address academic challenges (Zimmerman, 2002; Cruz & Lopes, 2023). Relatedness is fostered through group activities, discussions, and the sharing of experiences, thereby strengthening students' sense of belonging and mutual support (Jarden, Young, Colla, & Macinnes, 2020).

The seminar places strong emphasis on the development of metacognitive abilities (Zimmerman, 2002), understood as students' capacity to reflect on their own learning, plan their activities, and evaluate their progress. In practice, this includes self-assessment of current study strategies, the creation of individualized learning plans, reflection on the effectiveness of applied methods and the exploration of alternatives, as well as practical exercises focused on feedback and the setting of realistic goals. This approach supports not only academic performance but also a sense of control over one's own learning, which positively influences wellbeing (Cassidy & Poots, 2020). Support for mental wellbeing is embedded in the seminar through skills

related to mental wellbeing maintenance, including relaxation techniques, mindfulness, emotional regulation, and stress management strategies (Schwake, Wegener, & Kortsch, 2025; Inga-Ávila et al., 2024). Students are guided to identify signals of exhaustion, manage excessive workload, and establish a sustainable study routine. These activities directly contribute to the prevention of burnout and enhance psychological resilience.

Within the seminar, students are also encouraged to develop practical skills related to study organization and personal productivity. This involves planning study time with regard to individual needs and priorities (Govorova, Benítez, & Muñiz, 2020), developing anti-procrastination techniques, working with digital tools for the effective monitoring of tasks and goals, and establishing a realistic schedule that supports balance between academic and personal life (Corcoran, Pennington, & Worsley, 2022). The aim is for students to acquire tools that enable them to manage their studies effectively, thereby reducing stress and frustration. The seminar is designed to allow students to share experiences and concerns within a safe environment that fosters empathy, mutual support, and inclusivity (Sedgwick-Müller, 2022; Kats, 2021). This approach helps reduce feelings of isolation, strengthens social support, and facilitates the development of positive relationships among students as well as between students and instructors.

Each seminar session is structured to reflect the theoretical foundations outlined above, for example:

- Activities focused on self-assessment and reflection (metacognition) are interconnected with discussions about competence and perceived success (self-determination) (Zimmerman, 2002; Deci & Ryan, 2000).
- Relaxation and mindfulness techniques are integrated into practical stress management exercises, thereby supporting mental wellbeing as well as the capacity to sustain motivation and engagement over the long term (Jarden, Young, Colla, & Macinnes, 2020; Schwake, Wegener, & Kortsch, 2025).
- Group activities and peer mentoring strengthen relational connectedness, a sense of belonging, and psychological safety when sharing personal experiences (Kats, 2021; Govorova, Benítez, & Muñiz, 2020).

In this way, the seminar integrates theory with practical tools, enabling students not only to improve their study skills but also to strengthen their mental wellbeing and academic resilience.

Seminar syllabus

The elective course *Managing Study Demands and Supporting Wellbeing* is offered as an optional course for undergraduate students enrolled in both tea-

cher education and non-teacher education programmes at Charles University. Students may therefore enrol in the course at any stage of their studies. Its aim is to systematically develop the skills necessary for the sustainable management of academic responsibilities, the promotion of mental wellbeing, and the maintenance of long-term motivation for study. The course consists of eight instructional blocks, each lasting 135 minutes, with a strong emphasis on practical activities, reflection, and student interaction. The primary objective is to cultivate effective study strategies, strengthen mental wellbeing, and prevent stress. Although the course has been delivered at the Faculty of Education for three years, this comprehensive version was implemented for the first time in the summer semester of 2024/2025.

The programme is grounded in the principles of metacognitive learning, mental wellbeing maintenance, and positive psychology. The seminars are conducted in an interactive format and systematically build on reflection of one's own study habits, the search for effective learning techniques, and the development of personal responsibility for the learning process. The structure of the course *Managing Study Demands and Supporting Wellbeing* is organized around interconnected thematic units that systematically guide students toward deeper self-awareness, more effective study strategies, and greater psycho-

logical resilience during their university studies. These thematic areas combine theoretical foundations with practical tools, enabling participants not only to reflect on their current study situation but also to actively develop the competencies required to manage the demands of the academic environment.

Each thematic unit focuses on a specific area—from mapping one's learning style and metacognitive strategies to planning techniques, memory work, stress management, motivation, and the development of supportive relationships. The course integrates insights from pedagogy, the psychology of learning, positive psychology, and time management. Considerable attention is also devoted to the principles of mindfulness, which foster awareness of one's own needs and emotions.

The final stages of the course focus on the practical application of acquired skills, the sharing of experiences within the group, and the creation of a personal action plan. This approach promotes greater academic autonomy, improved self-regulation, and an overall strengthening of students' wellbeing. An overview of the thematic areas, including key skills, is presented in Table 1.

The following section focuses on a description of the content and structure of the individual sessions:
Session 1: Wellbeing – What Does It Mean and How Can It Be Achieved?

Table 1. Thematic Areas of the Course Managing Academic Demands and Supporting Well-Being

Thematic Area	Main Topics	Key Skills / Learning Outcomes
Introduction to Wellbeing	Definition of wellbeing; its importance for study and life	Awareness of the importance of mental wellbeing for academic performance
Self-awareness and Mapping One's Study Situation	Self-reflection; identification of barriers and needs	Increased awareness of one's study situation and ability to articulate personal needs
Learning Styles and Metacognitive Strategies	Visual, auditory, and kinesthetic styles; metacognition	Recognition of one's learning style and implementation of strategies for effective learning
Planning, Monitoring, and Evaluating Learning	Self-regulated learning; plan-monitor-reflect cycle	Development of planning habits and the ability to reflect on progress
Memory and Memorization Techniques	Mnemonics, visualization, associations	Acquisition of techniques that enhance memory and information retention
Retrieval Strategies and Information Retention	Spaced repetition; review cycles	Effective long-term engagement with learning materials and prevention of forgetting
Time Management and Procrastination	Time analysis; planning; GTD model; Eisenhower Matrix	Practical skills for managing time and reducing procrastination
Motivation and Mindset	Intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivation; meaning-making; SMART goals	Strengthened intrinsic motivation and ability to formulate realistic and meaningful goals
Stress, Self-regulation, and Resilience	Stress mechanisms; relaxation; breathing techniques	Increased resilience to stress and application of self-regulation strategies
Mindfulness and Emotional Wellbeing	Foundations of mindfulness; gratitude journaling; working with emotions	Capacity for mindful awareness and maintaining emotional balance
Social Support and Relationships at University	Building support networks; assertiveness; communication	Improved relational skills and awareness of support within the academic environment
Sharing and Group Reflection	Discussions; shared experiences; case studies	Development of openness and a stronger sense of belonging
Final Integration and Self-reflection	Personal action plan; integration of skills	Clarification of future direction, reflection on progress, and ownership of personal development

Source: Authors' own work

Table 2. Materials Related to the Wellbeing Theme

Tool / Activity	Contribution / Objective
Student Subjective Wellbeing Questionnaire (in-class activity)	Self-reflective mapping of the current level of personal wellbeing
Psychological Wellbeing Questionnaire (voluntary assignment)	Broadening perspectives on personal wellbeing through a supplementary diagnostic tool
Commitment to Wellbeing (home assignment)	Formulation of a concrete personal commitment to support wellbeing during the semester

Source: Authors' own work

In the introductory session of the course, students were first introduced to the overall structure of the course and its main objectives. The session then focused on the concept of wellbeing—its meaning, key components, and possibilities for supporting wellbeing in everyday life as well as in the context of academic study. The opening part of the seminar was devoted to a shared discussion on what it means for individual students to “feel well,” what conditions they perceive as necessary for their wellbeing, and what, conversely, undermines it.

This reflective discussion was followed by an introduction to the basic dimensions of wellbeing, including mental wellbeing, physical health, high-quality interpersonal relationships, and meaningful engagement in activities. Emphasis was placed on the interrelatedness of these areas and on the understanding of wellbeing not as a static state, but as a dynamic process that changes over time and requires ongoing, active care.

In the subsequent part of the session, students were guided to identify supportive factors (e.g., social support, sufficient sleep, a regular daily routine, meaningful activities) as well as risk factors that may weaken wellbeing (e.g., stress, overload with academic tasks, social isolation, and an imbalance between study and leisure time). Space was also provided for sharing experiences and strategies that help students cope with academic demands and maintain personal wellbeing during the semester. The seminar adopted an interactive format, combining group and individual work, guided discussion, and self-reflective activities. In the concluding part of the session, students worked with wellbeing assessment tools and formulated personal commitments aimed at strengthening their own wellbeing.

Session 2: Learning Styles and Techniques for Effective Learning

As part of the development of metacogni-

Table 3. Individual Components of the Lesson Focused on Learning Strategies

Lesson Phase	Activity Description
Introduction and Reflection	Discussion activity: <i>"When I study, I feel most comfortable when..."</i> – individual reflection and sharing of experiences.
Learning, Style Assessment	Completion of an adapted VARK questionnaire; identification of preferred learning style (visual, auditory, kinesthetic, or mixed).
Group Work by Learning Style	Division into groups and completion of tasks reflecting different learning styles.
Visual Style	Creation of mind maps, use of highlighters, work with diagrams and visual schemes.
Auditory Style	Listening to audio recordings, explaining content aloud, explaining the material to a peer.
Kinesthetic Style	Engagement in movement-based and hands-on activities, use of manipulatives, and creation of tangible outputs.
Sharing and Reflection	Presentation of group outputs; discussion of the effectiveness of selected strategies and their impact on mental wellbeing.
Conclusion and Transfer to Practice	Summary of effective strategies for each learning style; discussion of combining styles and their application in practice.

Source: Author's Own Work

tive skills, a thematic session was implemented with the aim of helping students understand their individual learning styles and test the effectiveness of selected learning strategies in practice. The session was designed as experiential, interactive, and reflective, with an emphasis on linking theoretical knowledge about learning to students' specific needs. The core starting point of the session was the concept of learning style as the way in which students prefer to receive, process, and retain new information.

Building on cognitive learning theory, students were also introduced to the

distinction between learning style (largely individual and partially flexible) and cognitive style (a more stable characteristic of thinking and decision-making processes, which may still develop over time). Learning styles are not fixed; they may change depending on the type of content, the situation, or the stage of study.

The main objective of the session was to help students identify their dominant learning style and to introduce them to corresponding study strategies that support both effective learning and personal wellbeing. The session was divided into five parts.

Figure 1. Learning styles: a simple schematic overview for students



Source: Jakarta Multicultural School. (2022, 29 November). *The effect of the teacher's learning style on students*. JMS. <https://jms.sch.id/learning-style-on-students/>

Material Used:

For the simple and rapid identification of students' primary learning styles, the *Learning Styles Test* available on the Parakalo.cz website was used. This tool serves as a screening tool for determining an individual's preferred learning style (e.g., visual, auditory, kinesthetic). It enables a better understanding of how students most effectively receive and process new information. Based on the test results, it was possible to identify students' dominant learning styles and

subsequently adjust instructional approaches to better align with their individual needs and preferences. This procedure contributed to a more effective learning process and a higher level of student engagement in the seminar.

Session 3: Effective Note-taking and Memory Strategies

In this session, which focused on reading-related skills and working with numerical information, students reflected on the main difficulties they encounter in these

Table 4. Practical Methods and Learning Strategies

Practical Methods and Learning Strategies	
Method / Strategy	Description and Application
Spaced Repetition	Time-distributed review of information to facilitate the transfer of knowledge from short-term to long-term memory. An individualized review schedule is applied: the first repetition after several hours, followed by repetitions after days and weeks.
Visual and Mnemonic Aids	Associating numbers and words with visual images, stories, or symbols to enhance memorization. The use of graphs, tables, mind maps, and color-coding of key parts of the text.
Active Learning	Engagement of multiple senses and activities, including explaining the material aloud, participating in discussions, creating self-tests (self-testing), and using interactive applications (e.g., Anki, Quizlet).

Source: Authors' Own Work

areas and were introduced to specific strategies for addressing them effectively. The aim was not only to increase students' awareness of the cognitive and didactic aspects of learning, but also to strengthen their ability to apply these insights in practice.

The session began with a discussion of the most common difficulties related to reading, including skipping letters or words, overlooking tasks, losing orientation in more complex procedures, and problems with text comprehension—particularly maintaining the meaning established at the beginning of a sentence. In relation to numerical information, students reflected on the fact that numbers are often perceived as abstract, difficult to remember, and frequently retained only in short-term memory. This, in turn, requires regular repetition and the

use of specific techniques to support effective memorization.

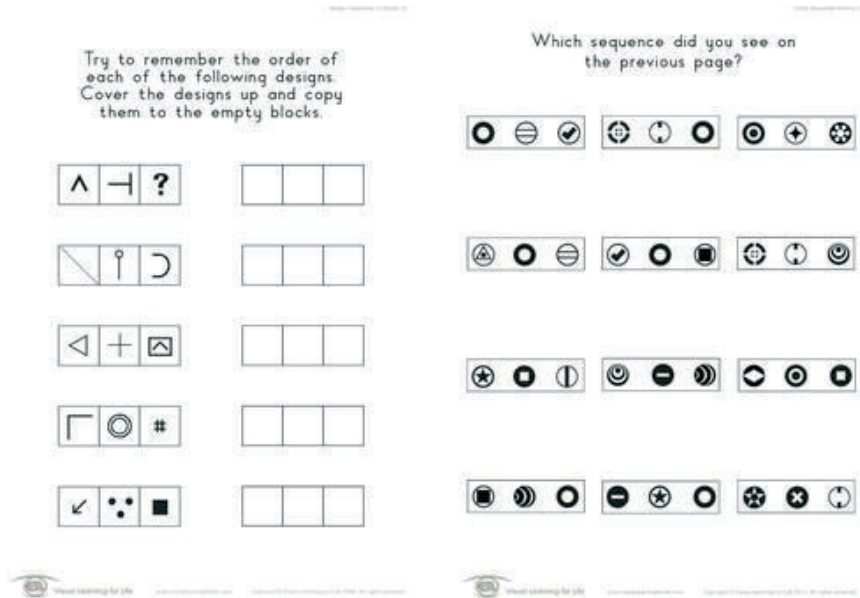
Reflection and Sharing of Experiences

Students presented which strategies were most helpful to them and discussed ways in which the learning process can be adapted to individual needs, particularly when addressing difficulties with text comprehension and memorization of numerical information. Attention was given to note-taking practices that support both working memory and long-term memory. Students became familiar with methods such as the three-step note-taking process and the creation of mind maps.

Materials and Assignments:

- Three-step note-taking process

Figure 2. Working with Memory: Training Short-Term Memory



Source: Visual Learning for Life. (n.d.). *Circle Sequential Memory (Visual Sequential Memory Worksheets)* [Digital educational resource]. Teachers Pay Teachers. <https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/Product/Circle-Sequential-Memory-Visual-Sequential-Memory-Worksheets-1187374>

- Examples of mind maps and guided mind map creation

Lesson 4: Goal Setting and Managing Procrastination

The fourth lesson focused on goal setting and managing procrastination—a phenomenon encountered by the majority of students during their studies. The introductory part of the seminar was devoted

to reflecting on personal planning habits and experiences with postponing tasks. Students identified situations in which they tend to procrastinate and considered both internal and external factors that reinforce this tendency.

Subsequently, strategies for effective planning were introduced, with particular emphasis on the SMART goals framework as a tool for specifying and

Table 5. Materials and Activities Related to Goal Setting

Activity Title	Purpose / Contribution
Identify Your Current Position	Self-reflection aimed at recognizing the current level of engagement with personal goals and the fulfillment of life aspirations
Distinguish Wishes from Goals	Understanding the difference between vague wishes and concrete, achievable goals
Turn Wishes into Goals	Practice in transforming abstract wishes into measurable and realistic SMART goals

Source: Author’s Own Work

Figure 3. Turning Wishes into Goals

Wish 1: I would like to travel more.
 Wish 2: The number of customer complaints should clearly decrease.
 Wish 3: I would like to do more to improve my language skills.
 Wish 4: I would like to live a healthier life.

Possible Solutions:

+1: During Easter, I will visit my uncle in London; I will spend the Whitsun holidays in Rome, and during the summer holidays I will undertake a trip across Australia.
 +2: From now on, I will use every Wednesday from 4:00 p.m. until the end of the working day to analyze the causes of customer complaints and work on eliminating those that lead to the three most frequent types of complaints.
 +3: By the end of the week, I will obtain the current schedule of language courses, from which I will select a suitable option on Sunday afternoon. On Monday, I will submit my written application by mail. During the Advent season, I will then travel to London to buy gifts in order to test my language skills and reward myself.
 +4: By the end of the year, I will reduce my body weight by 3 kg through a well-considered diet and regular physical activity.

Source: Knoblauch, J. *Goals in Professional and Personal Life*. Prague: Portál, 2013.

clarifying personal intentions. Discussion focused on the distinction between wishes and goals, and on the importance of formulating concrete, realistic, and

time-bound steps that help maintain motivation and reduce procrastination. In the interactive part of the lesson, students worked on their own action plans,

Table 6. Practical Methods and Strategies for Self-Regulation and Wellbeing

Content	Activity / Materials
Introduction and Reflection	Discussion of feelings related to studying and the examination period; introduction of the lesson objectives. Activity: brief discussion "How do I feel when studying?"
Questionnaire Evaluation	Completion and evaluation of the <i>Adapted Study Questionnaire</i> (Czech version) and the <i>Study Skills Assessment</i> (English version). Activities: individual completion, pair work, group discussion
Cornell Method	Theory and practice of effective note-taking using the Cornell method. Materials: examples, note-taking based on a short text
Psychohygiene and Stress Management	Relaxation techniques, break planning, healthy habits, breathing exercises. Activities: discussion, sharing of experiences, practical breathing exercises
Final Reflection and Planning	Development of a personal self-regulation and wellbeing plan; sharing in small groups. Activities: individual planning, group sharing, guided questions
Lesson Materials	Adapted questionnaire <i>Study Skills Questionnaire</i> (Czech), <i>Study Skills Assessment Questionnaire</i> (English), text for the Cornell method, relaxation materials. Format: printed or digital materials

Source: Author's Own Work

aiming to identify one specific area in which they tend to procrastinate and to design a strategy for overcoming this tendency. Emphasis was placed on linking intrinsic motivation with planning tools and a realistic time frame. The lesson encouraged students to view procrastination not as a personal failure, but as a behavioral pattern that can be changed through conscious planning, self-regulation, and the strengthening of personal motivation.

Lesson 5: Self-Regulation and Wellbeing in Higher Education

Based on questionnaire assessment (the *Study Skills Assessment Questionnaire*),

students reflected on their study habits and identified areas requiring improvement, with a focus on developing effective self-regulation strategies, mental self-care skills, and stress management. The lesson introduced the Cornell note-taking method, techniques of mental self-care, and strategies for managing stress during the examination period.

Students were asked to complete the *Study Skills Assessment Questionnaire*, which was adapted into Czech as the *Study Skills Questionnaire*. This questionnaire serves as a self-reflective tool for assessing individual study skills across various domains, such as time management, concentration, test preparation,

Figure 4. Working with Memory: Short-Term Memory Practice


A THREE-STEP PROCESS FOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Becoming aware of conscious and subconscious motivations for studying
Take a moment to pause and think about why you are studying.
Write down at least three reasons why you want to devote yourself to your studies.
Focus on both external motivations (e.g. obtaining a degree, career opportunities) and internal motivations (e.g. personal interest in the subject, development of personal skills).

Examples of self-reflection questions:

- Why did I choose this field of study?
- What do I expect my studies to bring to my professional future?
- What do I enjoy about studying and learning?
- How do I feel when I learn something new?
- What long-term goal motivates me to study?

Let's take 5 minutes to work on this.



Source: Author's Own Work

learning strategies, and stress management. After completion, the results were further analyzed, enabling students to gain a clearer understanding of their individual strengths and weaknesses related to studying, while also providing data for planning targeted support and the development of specific skills. The findings were subsequently used to develop targeted strategies and recommendations to improve learning effectiveness and students' overall approaches to studying.

A group discussion based on the results followed, allowing students to share experiences, compare approaches, and inspire one another. Where needed,

individual consultations were also offered to facilitate a more in-depth analysis of specific areas and to propose tailored support strategies.

Lesson 6: Atomic Habits and Personal Wellbeing

This lesson focused on the development of positive habits as a means of achieving long-term personal wellbeing. The starting point was the book *Atomic Habits* by James Clear, which was introduced to students as a practical tool for implementing sustainable changes in everyday life.

Key principles of the approach were discussed, including the importance of

Table 7. Materials Used

Material	Purpose / Contribution
Fictional case story of a student (Tomáš)	Identifying concrete strategies as well as supportive and risk factors involved in habit formation, followed by reflection on one's own possibilities for application

Source: Author's Own Work

small steps, an emphasis on consistency rather than perfection, and the connection between habits and personal identity (e.g., *"If I want to be a reader, I read for at least five minutes a day."*). Students were encouraged to reflect on which small changes they could introduce into their daily routines in order to better pursue their goals, increase resilience to stress, and strengthen their overall wellbeing.

To support understanding and provide inspiration, the seminar worked with a fictional case story of a student named Tomáš, illustrating how small habits—such as a morning routine or brief preparation for classes—can gradually lead to greater stability and personal satisfaction.

The lesson also built thematically on selected ideas from the book *Joy at Work* (Marie Kondo & Scott Sonenshein), which focuses on creating a supportive and organized work environment that facilitates concentration, decision-making, and long-term perseverance. Together, students reflected on how small environmental adjustments—such as

reducing distractions, visually organizing the workspace, or establishing pre-established work rituals—can support the development of positive habits. In this respect, both books complement each other and jointly promote mindfulness, intrinsic motivation, and a sustainable work routine. At the end of the lesson, students identified one small positive habit they intended to deliberately develop over the following weeks. The aim was to experience the principle of the cumulative effect and to observe how even small steps can lead to greater satisfaction and a stronger sense of control.

Lesson 7: Metacognition and Thinking About Learning

As part of an interactive learning walk, students engaged with first- and second-order metacognition. They learned to observe and develop their own chains of thought (*chain-the-thought* activities). Outputs were shared anonymously via the Mentimeter application, which students interacted with on their mobile devices during the walk.

Figure 5. Fictional Case Story of a Student Tomáš

The Story of Tomáš: How *Atomic Habits* Helped Me Manage My Studies

Who is Tomáš? A second-year university student who frequently postponed studying, missed deadlines, and felt overwhelmed. After reading *Atomic Habits*, he decided to try a small change—not to overdo it, but to start with small steps.

Four Habits Tomáš Implemented

(Each corresponds to one of the four laws of habit formation)

1. Make It Obvious (Cue)

Habit: Every evening, I prepare my desk for studying the next day.

- In the evening, before going to bed, he clears his desk and places a notebook and a highlighter on it.
- This creates a clear visual cue that he will study the next morning.
- He linked the habit to brushing his teeth: „After brushing my teeth, I prepare my desk.“

2. Make It Attractive (Motivation)

Habit: While studying, I listen to gentle instrumental music that I enjoy.

- He created a playlist titled “Studying with Ease”.
- By associating studying with something pleasant, his brain gradually begins to perceive it as a positive ritual.
- He sets a goal such as: “I will study for just 15 minutes.”
- This feels less intimidating and makes it easier to get started.

3. Make It Easy (Action)

Habit: Every morning, I write down what I want to accomplish that day—no more than three tasks.

- He uses the “write and reduce” method: instead of listing ten tasks, he identifies three main priorities.
- This lowers the entry threshold and prevents overload.
- Tasks that remain unfinished are transferred to the next day—without guilt, with the understanding that the process matters more than perfection.

4. Make It Satisfying (Reward)

Habit: Each day he completes his mini plan, he marks a in his calendar in the evening.

- He uses a simple paper calendar with colored dots.
- Seeing his progress brings joy and motivation to continue.
- After seven days, he allows himself a small reward—such as watching a favorite movie or visiting a café.

Source: Author’s Own Work

Linking Learning with the Environment

- Learning does not take place solely in a static classroom setting; active movement and changes in environment can stimulate the brain and support improved concentration and memory. Prague, as a historical and

cultural city, provided an inspiring backdrop that increased students’ interest and engagement.

Supporting Metacognition in Real Time

- Mentimeter enables anonymous and immediate sharing of thoughts, helping

Table 8. Application of Metacognitive Strategies

Stop	Location (Prague)	Activity	Task / Mentimeter Prompt
Stop 1	Charles Bridge	Introduction to first- and second-order metacognition: what metacognition is and why it matters	"How often do you become aware of what you are thinking while studying?" scale from 1 (never) to 5 (always)
Stop 2	Kampa	<i>Chain-the-Thought</i> exercise - recording a brief chain of thoughts while solving a study-related problem	"Write a short chain of thoughts you have just recorded." (open-ended question)
Stop 3	Náplavka	Reflection on second-order metacognition - how can I plan and monitor my thinking?	"What strategies do you use to regulate your thinking while studying?" (multiple-choice or open-ended response)
Stop 4	Old Town Square	Sharing anonymous responses and discussion based on Mentimeter results	"What did today's exercise reveal about your thinking?" (open-ended question)
Conclusion	Charles Square	Summary and recommendations for developing metacognition in practice	"How will you continue to develop your metacognition?" (short response)

Source: Author's Own Work

students to more effectively reflect on their own learning and thinking processes. As a result, metacognitive reflection becomes dynamic, interactive, and directly connected to students' lived experience during the walk.

Enhancing Motivation and Engagement

- The combination of physical movement, group work, and the use of digital technologies (Mentimeter) increased students' interest in the topic, motivated active participation, and supported deeper engagement in the learning process.

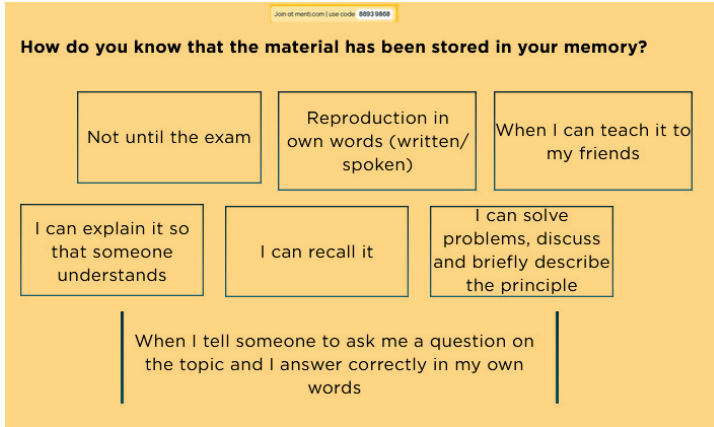
Developing a Sense of Community and Collaboration

- Sharing experiences in an anonymous space facilitates the safe and open expression of ideas and learning from peers. This fosters a sense of shared experience and collective growth, which is particularly important when working with cognitively demanding topics such as metacognition.

Practical Application of Metacognitive Strategies

- The walk-based format incorporating *chain-the-thought* tasks enabled students to directly practice metacogni-

Figure 6. Example of a Mentimeter activity for metacognitive skills and learning styles



Source: Author's Own Work

Figure 7. Example of a Mentimeter activity for metacognitive skills and mastery of learning content



Source: Author's Own Work

Table 9. Ways of Strengthening Wellbeing

Type of Activity	Purpose / Contribution
Learned Optimism (after M. Seligman)	Strengthening the ability to focus attention on positive aspects of situations and developing resilience to setbacks
Visualization of Pleasant Stimuli	Practicing the ability to calm the mind through imagery and to evoke positive emotions in challenging situations
Breathing Techniques	Immediate reduction of physical and psychological tension; support for body awareness and present-moment focus
Mindfulness Techniques (e.g., chocolate mindfulness)	Development of mindfulness and the ability to fully focus on the present moment; strengthening emotion regulation
Relaxation Techniques (rag doll exercise, Jacobson's relaxation, imprint technique)	Release of bodily tension and prevention of psychosomatic stress symptoms; practice of conscious relaxation

Source: Author's Own Work

tive processes in an authentic and informal context, thereby increasing the likelihood that they will be able to apply these strategies in their everyday academic lives.

Materials and Assignments:

- Interactive materials supporting metacognitive development
- Group reflection using Mentimeter

Lesson 8: Relaxation Techniques

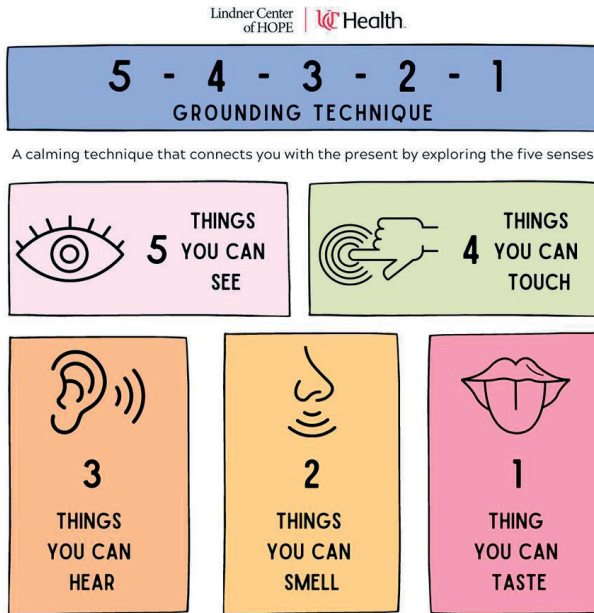
This lesson focused on stress management as a key component of student wellbeing. Students were introduced to the most common stressors affecting their everyday functioning—ranging from academic workload and time pressure to uncertainty about the future, as well as personal and social tensions. The discussion addressed how stress affects

both the body and the mind, its potential short- and long-term consequences, and the importance of recognizing warning signs at an early stage.

The lesson was conducted in an interactive format, with substantial space devoted to sharing personal experiences of stress. Students reflected both on areas in which they are able to cope successfully and on situations in which they encounter difficulties or repeatedly struggle to maintain balance. The open atmosphere enabled mutual learning and the normalization of challenging experiences, thereby strengthening a sense of belonging within the group.

The lesson also included concrete, practically applicable stress-management techniques, such as breathing exercises, visualization, grounding techniques, attention regulation techniques, and

Figure 8. Grounding Technique



Source: Grounding technique example from social media. Adapted from *Lindner Center of Hope* [@LindnerCtrHope] (2021, October 22), Tweet with image, X.com: <https://x.com/LindnerCtrHope/status/1451277460159582219>

planning for rest and recovery. Students additionally experienced a mindfulness exercise using chocolate, as well as simple relaxation techniques such as the “rag doll” exercise and a shortened version of Jacobson’s progressive muscle relaxation. Emphasis was placed on active student engagement and on identifying individually effective strategies that can realistically support mental wellbeing during the course of study.

Methods and Tools Used to Evaluate the Course Impact

The evaluation of the course *Managing Academic Demands and Supporting Well-being* employed a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to capture a comprehensive picture of students’ perceptions of the course and its impact on their study-related functioning. The evaluation focused on perceived benefits of individual

course activities as well as on changes in study habits, motivation, and subjective wellbeing.

Evaluation Questionnaire

Participant feedback was collected using a semi-structured evaluation questionnaire consisting of both closed-ended and open-ended items. The questionnaire was designed to systematically assess the quality of course implementation, identify perceived benefits for participants, and inform further development of the educational intervention. The mixed structure of the instrument enables both quantitative comparison across course iterations and qualitative exploration of participants' individual experiences. The first section of the questionnaire comprised seven closed-ended items designed to provide a concise assessment of key aspects of the course. Responses were recorded on a four-point Likert-type scale, intentionally excluding a neutral midpoint in order to encourage decisive evaluation. Assessed domains included: fulfillment of expectations, quality of facilitation, perceived personal benefit, group atmosphere, opportunities for active participation, perceived impact on study strategies, and interest in continued participation.

The second section consisted of open-ended questions allowing participants to reflect on the specific benefits of the course and to provide additional comments or suggestions. These responses

facilitated deeper insight into participants' subjective experiences, the skills and insights they perceived as most relevant, and the ways in which they intended to apply these outcomes in their further academic or personal lives. The qualitative data also supported reflection on facilitation quality, group-based support mechanisms, and the broader applicability of wellbeing-oriented interventions in higher education.

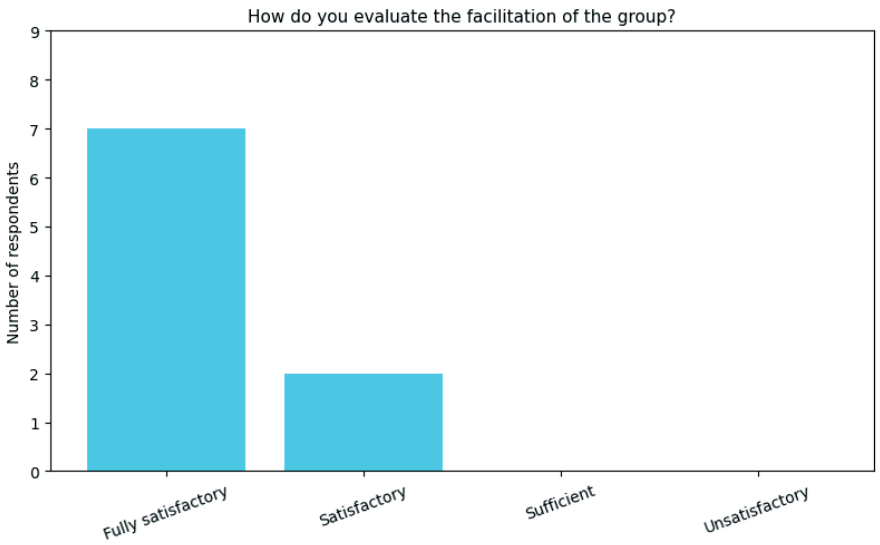
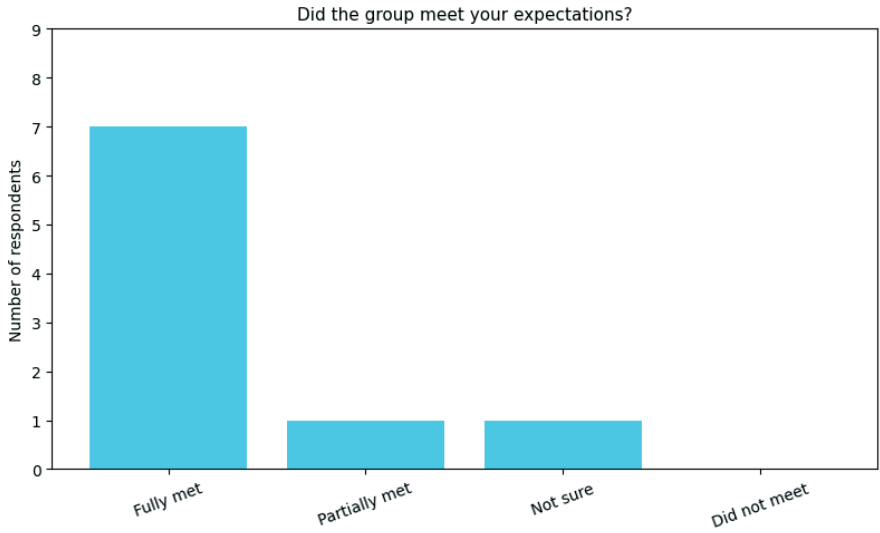
Data Completion and Analysis

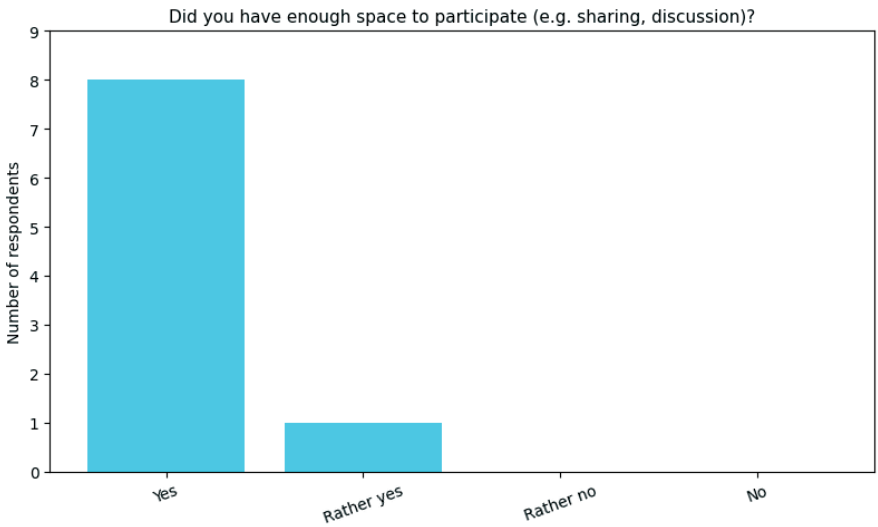
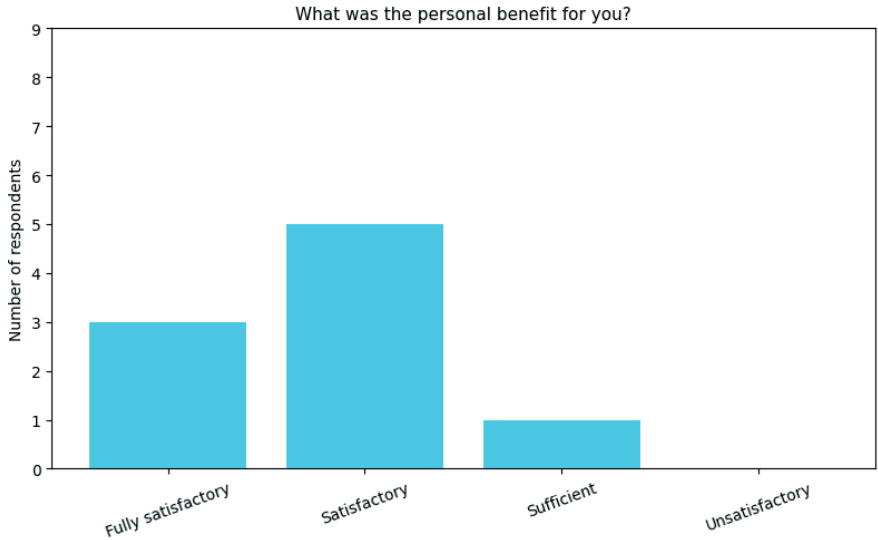
The quantitative section of the questionnaire was fully completed by nine participants; in several cases, this section was returned incomplete or left unanswered. The qualitative section was completed by twelve participants. Due to these differences in response rates, quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed separately. Quantitative responses provide an initial descriptive overview of perceived course effectiveness, whereas qualitative responses offer more nuanced insight into participants' experiences and individual perspectives.

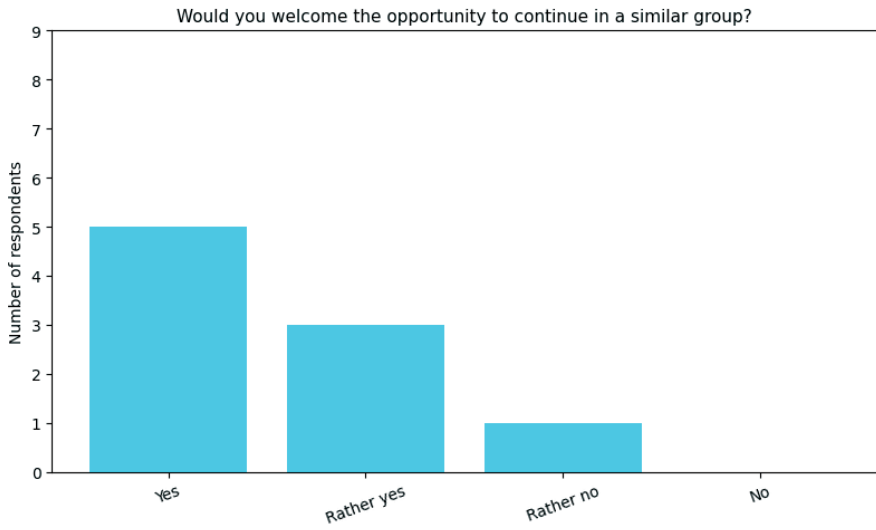
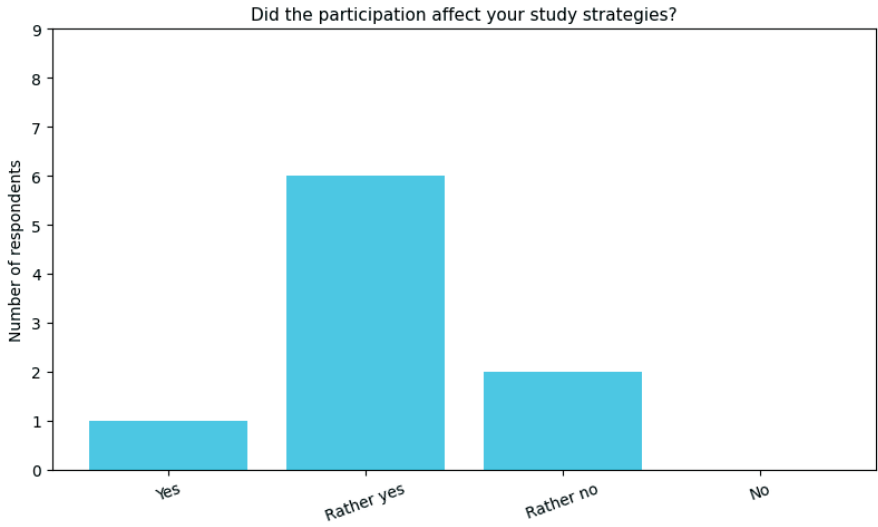
The results for individual questionnaire items are presented below using bar charts, followed by a summary interpretation.

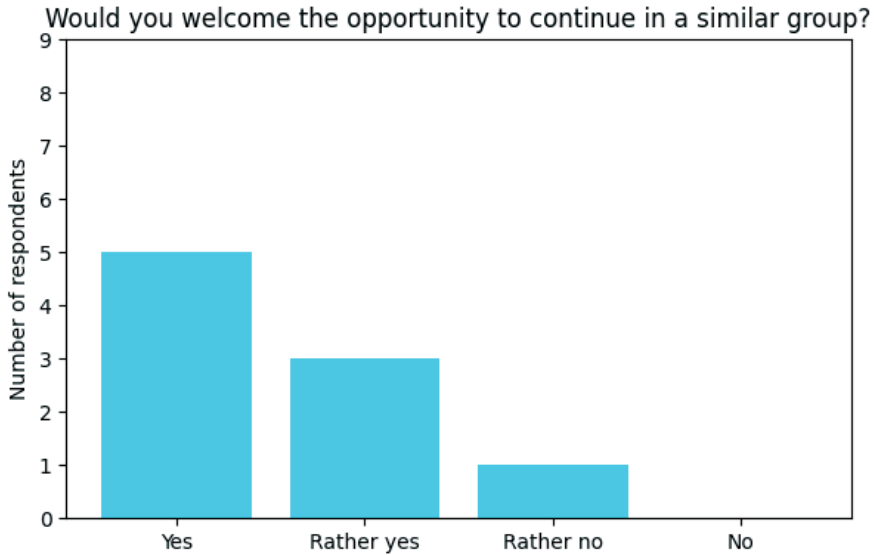
The aim of the evaluation was to examine how participants assessed the growth-oriented group in terms of the extent to which it met their expectations, its contribution to their own study

Figures 9-15. Quantitative evaluation of the course across individual dimensions









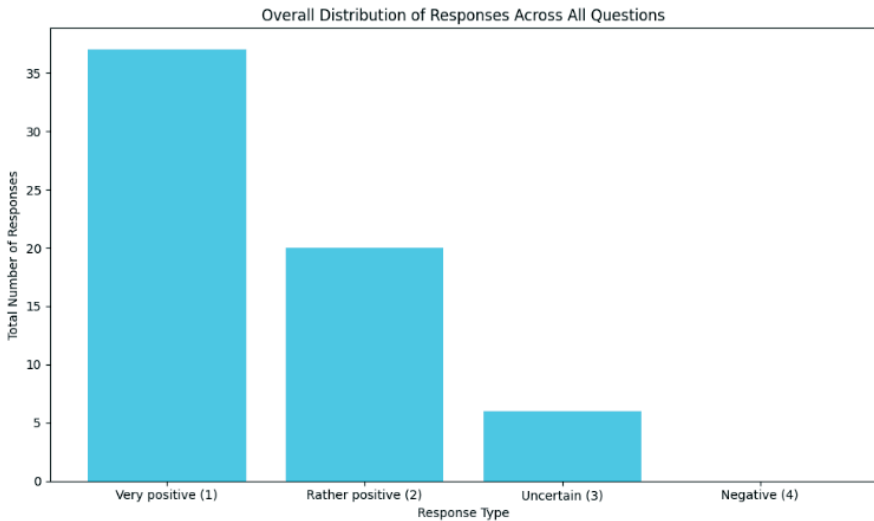
Source: Author's Own Work

practice, and the quality of group dynamics. Data were collected using a questionnaire completed by a total of nine respondents.

Regarding the **overall fulfilment of expectations**, seven respondents indicated that the group fully met their expectations. One respondent selected the option “*partially met*”, and one indicated “*not sure*”. No negative evaluations (“*did not meet expectations*”) were reported. These results suggest a markedly positive perception of the programme.

The **evaluation of the facilitation of the growth group** was also unequi-

vocally positive. Seven participants rated the facilitation as “*fully satisfactory*”, while two respondents assessed it as “*satisfactory*”. Overall, the findings indicate a high level of satisfaction with the facilitators’ approach and its perceived benefit for participants. In terms of **personal benefit**, three respondents reported that participation was “*fully satisfactory*”, five rated it as “*satisfactory*”, and one selected “*sufficient*”. Although one more reserved response was recorded, positive feedback clearly predominated. The **group atmosphere** was largely perceived as supportive: six

Figure 16. Aggregate Distribution of Responses Across All Evaluation Items

Source: Author's Own Work

participants described it as “*very supportive*”, two as “*rather supportive*”, and only one as “*rather unsupportive*”. Despite this isolated less favourable rating, the overall perception of the group climate remained positive.

With regard to **opportunities for active participation**, eight respondents answered “*yes*” and one “*rather yes*”. No negative responses were reported, indicating that participants generally felt they had sufficient space for engagement and self-expression during the sessions. A more differentiated pattern emerged

in responses concerning the **impact of participation on individual study strategies**. Only one respondent answered “*yes*”, six selected “*rather yes*”, and two “*rather no*”. These findings suggest a more moderate or cautiously perceived impact, which may not manifest immediately but could have a more gradual, long-term effect. Finally, responses to the question concerning **interest in continuing in a similarly focused group** were predominantly positive. Five respondents indicated “*yes*”, three “*rather yes*”, and one “*rather no*”. The prevailing interest in

continuation can be interpreted as confirmation of the relevance and perceived value of the group, as well as an incentive for further development or expansion of the programme.

The aggregated overview of all responses indicates a **strong predominance of satisfaction**, with almost all responses falling into the categories of “*completely positive*” or “*rather positive*.” Respondents most frequently selected the highest or second-highest level of satisfaction. Responses expressing uncertainty or dissatisfaction occurred only sporadically. These data confirm that the **growth group met participants’ expectations and had a positive impact**. Overall, the results show that the growth group was perceived very positively by its participants. The majority of respondents reported that their **expectations were fulfilled and highlighted the quality of group facilitation, the personal developmental benefits, and the supportive atmosphere during the sessions**. Although the impact on study strategies was evaluated predominantly positively, most responses fell within the category “*rather yes*.” This may reflect a natural time lag between reflection and actual changes in study habits. An important finding is that **most respondents expressed interest in continuing in a similarly focused group**, which underscores the relevance, meaningfulness, and perceived benefits of this form of support.

Open Student Reflections

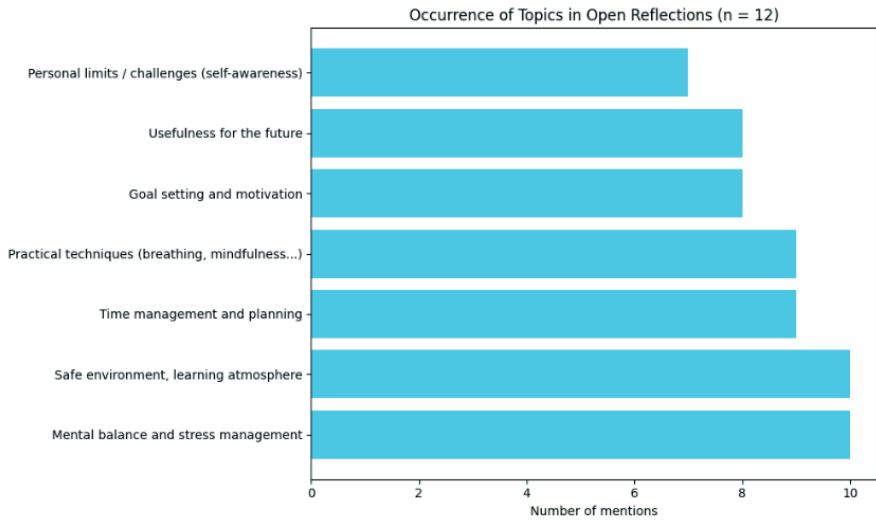
Based on twelve open-ended student reflections, several shared thematic areas can be identified as particularly significant. The domains in which students reported the greatest perceived benefits were as follows:

Time management and planning. All students appreciated working with monthly plans, calendars, and study scheduling techniques. They reported improvements in planning study activities, navigating the university Student Information System (SIS), and preparing for state final examinations. Planning was described as contributing to greater calmness and a reduction in stress.

Self-awareness, motivation, and goal setting. A prominent theme involved working with the distinction between wishes and goals, the application of SMART criteria, self-assessment questionnaires, and increased awareness of the differences between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Reflections indicate deeper self-understanding and positive changes in students’ approaches to goal achievement.

Mental wellbeing and psychological balance. Meditation, breathing exercises, mindfulness practices, imagery, and self-care strategies were perceived as key techniques supporting students in coping with anxiety, stress, and somatic difficulties (e.g., examination-related stress).

A safe environment and openness. All students described the seminar atmo-

Figure 17. Mentioned thematic categories in twelve open-ended student reflections

Source: Author's Own Work

sphere as safe and friendly. This factor was repeatedly identified as *crucial* for the effective functioning of the course.

Practical applicability of techniques. Practical techniques such as mindfulness, guided imagery, grounding exercises, walking meditation, and muscle relaxation were highlighted as usable both in academic contexts and in everyday life. Students particularly valued their ease of application.

Personal challenges and limitations. Reflections also included elements of self-criticism, such as procrastination, anxiety related to completing qu-

estionnaires, difficulties with imagery exercises, or inconsistency in applying learned techniques. At the same time, students emphasized the importance of adopting a non-perfectionistic approach.

Student reflections indicate that the course *Coping with Academic Demands and Mental Wellbeing* fulfills not only an educational, but above all, a supportive and psychosocial function. Students appreciate both the practical benefits in areas such as time management and goal setting, as well as the development of mental competencies through relaxation and self-awareness

techniques. A high level of group identification and the creation of a safe environment foster openness, self-reflection, and acceptance of personal limits. Moreover, the impact of the course extends beyond the university context, finding relevance in everyday life and future professional paths.

Recommendations for Practice

Experience with implementing the course *Coping with Academic Demands and Mental Wellbeing* suggests that its introduction at other faculties or universities can be highly beneficial and desirable. For successful implementation, several key recommendations should be considered:

- 1. Adapt the content to the specific context of the faculty or university.** It is advisable to tailor topics and examples to the academic environment and student profile of the given institution. Core thematic areas (e.g., self-awareness, metacognition, time management, motivation, stress regulation) are broadly applicable, but the form and emphasis should reflect the specific needs of the study programs involved.
- 2. Ensure flexibility in format and delivery methods.** Addressing diverse student preferences—such as offering online or blended formats, interactive workshops, individual consultations, or group sessions—can enhance both accessibility and impact.
- 3. Implement continuous evaluation and content updates.** To maintain

the relevance and quality of the course, it is important to systematically gather feedback from students and instructors and to adapt the course structure, content, and methods accordingly.

4. Engage interdisciplinary collaboration and diverse facilitators.

Involving professionals from different fields—such as psychology, education, academic counselling, and even experienced students—can enrich the course content and provide participants with multiple perspectives for reflection and learning.

5. Offer the course as both a universal and a targeted support measure.

The course can be embedded within the broader system of student support services (e.g., in cooperation with counselling centers, academic libraries, tutors, or career services). In this way, it can serve as a preventive and developmental tool for all students while also functioning as a targeted intervention for students with specific needs. Such dual-purpose design allows the course to support well-being proactively and simultaneously act as an individualized measure to mitigate exhaustion, anxiety, or risk of academic failure.

6. Promote long-term continuity and follow-up support.

Although the course is currently offered in a time-limited format, both preliminary experience and relevant literature suggest that one-off interventions have limited

long-term impact on study habits and wellbeing. It is therefore recommended to offer ongoing support—such as follow-up workshops, individual or group consultations, peer mentoring, or topic-specific meetings during the semester. These formats can help students maintain motivation, track progress, and continue developing their skills.

Finally, we recommend that student wellbeing and the ability to cope with academic demands be viewed not as a stand-alone initiative, but as a continuous and integral part of student support throughout the entire course of study.

Discussion

The findings of the presented project confirm the growing importance of student wellbeing support in the context of higher education, as emphasized by current studies of international organizations (OECD, UNESCO, WHO) as well as strategic documents of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MŠMT) of the Czech Republic. The Czech Educational Policy Strategy 2030+ highlights the need to create a safe and stimulating learning environment that fosters mental wellbeing, the development of competencies, and the reduction of inequalities among students (2022). Reform initiatives within the Operational Programme Jan Amos Komenský (OP JAC) promote education focused on health, mental

wellbeing, and support for students with specific needs – a portion of the allocated budget (over CZK 15 billion) is specifically designated for programs that enhance the quality of teaching and support student wellbeing (2023). Moreover, the MŠMT supports, through the Operational Programme Research, Development and Education (OP VVV) and other calls, the development of projects aimed at systematic care for students' mental health, helping to ensure the prevention of failure, increased academic engagement, and long-term motivation.

The offer of support courses that integrate topics such as self-awareness, metacognitive strategies, time management, and stress management has proven to be an effective tool for increasing student motivation, autonomy, and resilience to academic and psychosocial pressures. These findings align with international research results (Brooker, Larcombe, & Baik, 2019), which emphasize the importance of metacognition and self-regulation for successful higher education performance.

A key benefit of the course lies in its comprehensive approach, combining theoretical knowledge with practical techniques, enabling students to actively apply learned strategies in both their academic and personal lives. Reflective and interactive forms of teaching, such as case studies, group discussions, or model situations, support deeper understanding and increase student engagement, in accordance with the principles

of andragogy (Schulz, Reiner, Olson, & Oberhoffer-Fritz, 2025).

However, it is important to emphasize several limitations of this approach. Above all, the time demands and voluntary nature of participation represent significant barriers to broader implementation and long-term effectiveness. Voluntary participation may result in the course being primarily attended by students who already possess intrinsic motivation and relevant skills, while those in greatest need of support may remain out of reach. Therefore, it is essential to systematically incorporate wellbeing into the compulsory parts of academic programs and to create a supportive environment that is inclusive and accessible to all students.

Another important aspect is the need for close coordination between support courses and university counseling services. The integration of these services can significantly enhance the effectiveness of support, especially for students with specific needs, such as those with autism spectrum disorder or specific learning difficulties. In this respect, there is room for expanding modules to reflect various types of disadvantages and offer more targeted interventions. This need aligns with the model of inclusive education and multidisciplinary support recommended by current scholarly literature (Gobena, 2024; Kočí, 2022; Walker, 2022; Novotná & Schreiberová, 2021).

In conclusion, it is important to highlight the significance of ongoing evaluation and research in the field of student

wellbeing. Given the dynamic nature of student life, cultural differences, and the diversity of academic disciplines, it is essential to continuously adapt support strategies to current needs and trends. It is further recommended to examine the long-term impacts of support courses on academic performance, mental wellbeing, and graduates' professional outcomes. It can thus be concluded that the implementation and development of support courses focused on wellbeing represent an effective and promising direction that can significantly contribute to the improvement of higher education and the promotion of student health and personal development.

Conclusion

Support courses focused on coping with academic demands and promoting student wellbeing represent a significant contribution to both the academic success and personal wellbeing of students. Implementing such courses helps enhance students' self-awareness, fosters the development of effective learning strategies, improves stress management, and strengthens key competencies such as time management and emotional self-regulation. These skills directly impact not only improved academic performance, but also long-term motivation and resilience throughout the challenges of higher education.

Looking ahead, the challenge is not only to expand the range of support

courses, but also to embed wellbeing as an integral part of higher education at a strategic level. Faculties and universities should build comprehensive support systems that connect educational and counselling services in order to ensure high-quality and sustainable support for all students. Such an approach contributes to improving the overall quality of the academic environment, enhancing inclusion, and ensuring that students are not merely passive recipients of knowledge but active participants capable of navigating academic and life challenges effectively.

The implementation of wellbeing-oriented courses also creates space for the

systematic monitoring of student needs and timely intervention in cases of academic or psychological difficulties. By fostering a safe and supportive environment, higher education institutions signal that they value not only performance, but also the humanity and personal growth of their students. In the long term, such an approach can help reduce academic failure, increase the sense of meaning in education, and contribute to the development of responsible, autonomous, and resilient graduates who are better prepared to face the challenges of the modern world.

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The beginnings of educational-psychological counselling in Czechoslovakia: between the system and the child

Gabriela Mikulková

Abstract: this study examines the formation of the Czechoslovak system of educational and psychological counselling between the 1960s and the 1980s, showing that its emergence was not the result of a single administrative decision but of a gradual negotiation between professional concepts, institutional frameworks, and ideological constraints. It analyses three key dimensions of this development: the thematic definition of counselling activities, the theoretical and methodological foundations, and the institutional consolidation of the system. The study traces how previously separate strands – vocational guidance, educational counselling, and developmental-psychological approaches – gradually merged into an integrated concept of continuous support for the child, enabling the profile of educational-psychological counselling to take shape within the school system. At the same time, it highlights the persistent tension between professional autonomy and system governance, a tension that gained a pronounced ideological character during the period of normalisation. The study concludes that this historical experience remains relevant: counselling services always operate at the intersection of systemic requirements and the individual needs of the child, and every reform inevitably reopens this delicate balance.

Keywords: educational-psychological counselling, guidance counselling, institutionalization of counselling, education policy, ideology in education

Introduction

Pedagogical-psychological counselling represents a specific domain of profes-

sional support within the education system, aimed at fostering the educational, behavioural and personal development of children¹. Today's counselling system

¹ For the sake of clarity, the term “child“ will be used in the text collectively to refer to all individuals of school-age and adolescence, including children, pupils, students and adolescents.

is regarded as a natural part of the education system, yet its emergence was not the result of a single decision. Rather, it developed gradually through a long process of professional and institutional negotiation, marking a transition from individually fragmented care to a coherently organised system.

The interest in the origins of this system stems from the need to understand its current form. This includes why it is designed the way it is and which professional and societal debates have shaped its conception. The aim of this study is therefore to uncover the underlying logic on which the system was built and the context that must be understood to engage with it meaningfully today or to develop it further. We thus return to its beginnings, where these questions were first articulated.

A historical understanding of these processes helps illuminate the current tension between the standardization of support services and the provision of individualized support to each learner. This issue remains central to contemporary notions of educational literacy, inclusion, and education policy.

The analysis examines three interrelated dimensions of development: the thematic delineation of counselling practice, the theoretical-methodological framework of the system, and its institutional consolidation. It draws on scholarly publications that retrospectively map the evolution of educational counselling

(Kohoutek, 2009; Liberčanová, 2017; Slavíková, 1996), as well as on contemporary sources by authors who were directly involved in shaping the system (Bažány, 1962; Klímová, 1987). The aim is therefore not to reconstruct a complete factual account, but rather to analyse the key conceptual and institutional steps that shaped the current form of the system. For detailed factual accounts, reference can be made particularly to the works of Kohoutek, Liberčanová and Klímová.

Before turning to the historical context, it is useful to outline the current structure of the school counselling system, which serves as a reference framework for understanding its development.

The current system of school counselling in the Czech Republic

The current school counselling system has a two-tier structure that combines the accessibility of support within schools with the expertise of specialised institutions. Such an arrangement enhances schools' autonomy and enables them to respond flexibly to the needs of their pupils. The system is legally anchored in the Education Act No. 561/2004 Coll., as amended, and in implementing Decrees No. 72/2005 Coll. on the provision of counselling services in schools and school counselling facilities and No. 27/2016 Coll. on the education of pupils

with special educational needs and gifted pupils, both as amended.

School level: school counselling team

The establishment of a school counselling team and the appointment of a school counsellor and a school prevention specialist are mandatory for the headteacher of every primary and secondary school. These positions are held by teachers with the required specialised qualifications². In its extended form, the school counselling team also includes a school psychologist and a school special educator.

The school counselling team provides timely and accessible support within the school, offers methodological guidance to teachers, conducts screening to identify pupils with learning difficulties as well as gifted pupils, and serves as the primary point of contact for pupils and their parents.

Regional level: school counselling facilities

School counselling facilities comprise pedagogical-psychological counselling centres and special education centres. Pedagogical-psychological counselling centres primarily support pupils in the so-called mainstream schools³ who experience learning or behavioural difficulties, adaptation problems, or who need assistance with career guidance. Special education centres focus on supporting the education of pupils with disabilities, including assistance with the use of compensatory aids, training in specific skills, and support for their inclusion in mainstream education.

Their teams are interdisciplinary, including a psychologist, a special educator, and a social worker. These centres are the only institutions authorised to issue formal recommendations for educational adjustments through support measures in accordance with Decree No. 27/2016 Coll. (e.g. adjustments to the organisation of instruction, assessment, provision of personnel support, etc.).

² The school counselor is trained in the field of educational and career guidance and in providing support to children with learning and behavioral difficulties. The school prevention methodologist has extended competencies in the field of prevention of risky behavior, promotion of a safe school climate and intervention in crisis situations.

³ In the Czech education system, the term “mainstream schools” refers to mainstream kindergartens, primary schools, and secondary schools. Alongside these, there are also special schools designed for pupils with more severe types of disabilities or needs that cannot be adequately addressed through standard support measures within mainstream education.

The focus of school counselling: At the intersection of education, work, and care

Any counselling system is defined by its scope and focus—by the understanding of what needs it should address and whom it is intended to serve. In the case of the Czechoslovak system of educational counselling, its thematic core developed at the intersection of education, upbringing, and career guidance. Professional discourse evolved along two main lines: one focused on educational and behavioural issues, and the other on career and vocational guidance for young people (Kohoutek, 1998; Slavíková, 1996).

Career guidance, which Klímová described as “a developmentally older specialised counselling service” (1969, p. 14), began to emerge as early as the period of the First Czechoslovak Republic⁴. At that time, vocational guidance centres, organisationally independent of the education system, primarily performed economic-informational and job-placement functions (Kohoutek, 1998, p. 33).

After the Second World War, this field needed to be re-established on a more systematic basis; however, af-

ter 1948⁵, under the influence of ideological requirements, it developed primarily in administrative and economic terms—within labour offices focused on information provision and job placement (Kohoutek, 1998, p. 34).

At the same time, another line of development focused on learning and behavioural difficulties was emerging, although still outside a unified system. Its roots are primarily associated with psychologists working in health care and social services (Liberčanová, 2017; Slavíková, 1996). Their research—for example, the work of Langmeier and Matějček on psychological deprivation Jirásek’s studies on school readiness—contributed to a deeper understanding of the developmental needs of children. The child was considered from a psychological perspective, but always in relation to the family and the social environment.

In the post-war period, the state pursued socio-economic development and the formation of an ideologically loyal and disciplined youth workforce. At the same time, experts emphasised the importance of psychologically healthy and socially well-adjusted individual development. These two orientations often converged in calls for the prevention

⁴ The term “First Czechoslovak Republic” is a historiographical designation commonly used to refer to the period 1918–1938; the official name of the state at that time was the Czechoslovak Republic.

⁵ The year 1948 marks the Communist Party’s seizure of power in Czechoslovakia and the beginning of a period of centrally governed, ideologically oriented education. The education system was integrated into state administration and became an instrument of the state’s social and economic policy.

of behavioural problems, the promotion of school success, and effective vocational placement of young people.

It was therefore considered productive to integrate both lines of development into a comprehensive framework of child support. A unified guidance system began to emerge through a lifespan-oriented (biodromal) approach emphasising the continuity of development and the interconnectedness of individual life stages. Educational, instructional, and vocational issues were understood as parts of a single developmental trajectory that guidance services were intended to support (Klímová, 1969; Kohoutek, 1998; Slavíková, 1996).

Theoretical and methodological approach to the educational guidance and counselling system

The conceptual preparation of a unified educational guidance and counselling system was carried out from the early 1960s under the direction of a working

group composed of leading Czechoslovak experts – Klímová, Bažány, Bárta, Košč, Doležal and Chmelař (Klímová, 1969). Although formally established as a single team, two distinct conceptual strands gradually emerged within it – the Prague and the Brno–Bratislava approaches – differing primarily in their emphasis on the aims and nature of guidance work.

A shared methodological premise of both strands was the conception of the guidance system as one that links empirically validated knowledge with an understanding of the individual and social aspects of human development. Guidance centres were intended to fulfil both practical and research functions: research was to be grounded in the needs of practice while simultaneously providing the theoretical foundations for its further development.

The Prague centre

The Prague approach drew on the influence of the Institute of Human Labour⁶ in Prague and later centred on the Institute for Youth Research and Educational Counselling and Guidance⁷. The Czech

⁶ The Institute of Human Labour is associated primarily with names J. Doležal, J. Stavěl, and Fr. Hyhlík. It followed on from the Psychotechnical Institute, founded in 1920, which focused on the psychology and sociology of work, particularly on the selection of the workers and their adaptation to working conditions. In the 1930s, it was transformed into the Central Psychotechnical Institute, co-founded by the Ministry of Education. After 1939, it was reorganized as the Institute of Human Labour, which developed research in the field of psychology, physiology and sociology of labour. After World War II, it was incorporated into the newly established Czechoslovak Institute of Labour in 1947 and dissolved without replacement in the 1950s.

⁷ The Institute for Social Research on Youth and Educational Counseling was established in the early

conception emphasised issues of educational and vocational guidance relying on psychometric and diagnostic methods. Test results were to be interpreted within a broader social and developmental context – diagnosis was intended not as a tool of selection, but as a means of understanding the pupil’s personality (Kohoutek, 1998; Slavíková, 1996).

The Institute for Youth Research and Educational Counselling and Guidance published the periodical *Výchovný poradce* (*School Counsellor*), primarily intended for teachers and school counsellors. Its content reinforced the pedagogical-psychological focus of the system and reflected its orientation toward educational issues, school achievement, and vocational choice (Liberčanová, 2017).

The Brno–Bratislava Centre

The Brno–Bratislava line, associated with the Research Institute of Child Psychology and Pathopsychology (Výskumný ústav detskej psychológie a patopsychológie, VÚDPaP), emphasised developmental-psychological and therapeutic approaches. It stemmed from the need to gain a deeper understanding of the child’s individual development, as well as

the family and social context, and from the view that counselling should simultaneously fulfil educational, preventive, and therapeutic functions. This approach aimed to develop a comprehensive, interdisciplinary model of child guidance integrating insights from psychology, medicine, pedagogy, and social work. A key figure in this line was Bažány, who advocated the need for etiological analysis of difficulties and conceptualised counselling work as a process of understanding and supporting the child’s development (Bažány, 1962, 1963).

VÚDPaP also published the professional journal *Psychológia a patopsychológia dieťaťa* (*Psychology and Pathopsychology of the Child*), which became a major platform for the publication of research on personality development, psychodiagnostics, and psychotherapeutic interventions. Unlike the Czech journal *Výchovný poradce* (*Educational Counsellor*), which was aimed primarily at pedagogical practice, this publication targeted a professional audience of psychologists and therapists (Liberčanová, 2017; Slavíková, 1996).

1970s at the Faculty of Education of Charles University. Its establishment followed the activities of the Psychological Institute of the Faculty of Arts of Charles University, led by Jan Doležal, where Marta Klímová—later the institute’s director—was also active. Under her leadership, the institute became a center for research in the field of educational counseling and youth career guidance. After 1989, the institution was dissolved.

Conceptual differences reflected in the names of institutions

Differences between the Czech and Slovak approaches were also reflected in the names of counselling institutions. Klímová (1987) pointed out that the designation “psychological-educational clinic and centre for vocational choice”, used in Slovakia, reflected the separation of vocational guidance from the child’s overall development. By contrast, the Czech conception sought to integrate these strands and emphasise the interconnectedness of pedagogical and psychological approaches—an idea embodied in the name “educational-psychological counselling centre.”⁸

This thematic and methodological synthesis—the effort to link educational, developmental, and behavioural approaches—formed the foundation upon which a unified counselling system could be built. In this spirit, considerations of its systemic and organisational anchoring began, forming the subject of the following section.

Systemic anchoring of the counselling system

During the institutionalisation of a unified system of guidance and counselling,

a central question arose as to how this domain should be positioned within the broader system, and how it should be related to existing forms of child and youth care.

Experts in the 1960s built on the prevailing concept at the time of three pillars of care for children and young people—health, social-legal protection, and education (Klímová, 1969; Bažány, 1962, 1963). The health pillar ensured prevention and support for children’s physical development; the social-legal pillar focused on family stability and the protection of children from neglect; and the educational pillar encompassed personality formation through school-based and extracurricular education.

Bažány (1962, 1963), a leading representative of the Slovak line, proposed the establishment of a fourth pillar of child care—a psychological-educational pillar that would place psychological support on an equal footing with the other three domains. He understood psychological-educational support as a comprehensive service for families and schools, aimed at promoting healthy child development as well as preventing developmental and behavioural difficulties. Bažány (1962) emphasised the family and social context of these difficulties.

The Czech line, formulated by Klímo-

⁸ In M. Klímová’s concept, inspiration from the French reformist thinking of P. Langevin and H. Wallon can be recognized, which emphasized the social function of education—a concept consistent with the ideological framework of pedagogy at the time (Liberčanová, 2021).

vá, viewed the guidance and counselling system as part of the educational domain, which ought to be expanded to include psychological aspects. Klímová emphasised the integration of guidance work within the school environment and its alignment with the school's educational and developmental aims.

According to Liberčanová (2017), the Slovak concept was criticised for its excessive psychological focus and for its tendency to separate guidance work from the school setting and from the broader process of shaping the child's personality.

According to contemporary authors (e.g., Dočkal, Kohoutek, Liberčanová), the placement of the guidance and counselling system within the educational pillar was driven more by ideological considerations than by professional consensus. As Dočkal (2017) notes, this development might also have been influenced by Bažány's emigration after 1969, which weakened advocacy for the concept of independent psychological care. The resulting solution thus represented a compromise between professional ambitions and the ideological pressures of the period: the psychological component was retained, yet subordinated to the pedagogical framework and to the administrative control of the school system.

From a professional standpoint, however, this compromise also had certain benefits. It enabled the stabilisation and systematisation of the guidance and

counselling system, allowing it to build on the existing structure of schooling and to become more accessible to the public. As Liberčanová (2017, p. 150) notes, integration into the pedagogical sphere indeed entailed a loss of some professional autonomy, yet it simultaneously fostered greater professionalisation, methodological support, and wider availability of services.

At this stage, we encounter a tension between professional autonomy and institutional stability—an ambivalence typical of any systematisation of professional expertise. In a totalitarian context, however, this relationship takes on a different meaning: institutionalisation ceases to be merely a means of professionalisation and also becomes a tool of ideological control. This raised the question of how to establish a balance between professional decision-making and political-administrative governance—a challenge that became fully apparent in the structure of the emerging system.

Structure and development of the guidance system

The organisational structure of the system reflected the tension between professional autonomy and institutional control, mirroring both the hierarchy of schools and the broader state administration. As Klímová (1979) notes, guidan-

ce institutions operated under a form of “dual dependence” – administratively subordinate to the national committees while professionally directed by the methodological leadership of the education sector. The Ministry of Education defined the overall framework and organisational structure, whereas the Institute for Youth Research and Educational Counselling and Guidance functioned as the main professional authority. As a result, guidance work emerged at the intersection of political-administrative governance and professional expertise.

Within this structure, three mutually interconnected levels of guidance provision gradually developed: school-based, district, and regional. The core of support was intended to be located within the school, backed by regional specialist centres and methodologically aligned within a unified nationwide network.

School-based guidance: The emerging role of the school-based guidance counsellor

The professional profile of school counsellors was the subject of lively debates at the turn of the 1950s and 1960s. The original designation “school psycholo-

gical counsellor” gradually shifted to “school-based guidance counsellor”, reflecting a move from conceiving the counsellor as a specialist psychologist to viewing the role as a pedagogical staff member embedded within the school structure (Liberčanová, 2021). This development reflected a broader controversy regarding the nature of guidance work—whether it should be primarily individual and psychological, or institutionally pedagogical. Over time, the pedagogical conception prevailed, defining the counsellor as a member of the teaching staff responsible for coordinating guidance and counselling support within the school.

The role of school counsellor was initially piloted in selected nine-year basic schools. From 1962, it was implemented nationwide across all nine-year basic schools and, a year later, extended to general secondary schools⁹. From the mid-1960s onwards, specialised post-graduate training began to be offered for the performance of this role.

According to Klímová (1969), the school counsellor was intended primarily to assist the headteacher by coordinating career guidance, monitoring pupils with learning difficulties or exceptional ability, and providing methodological guidan-

⁹ In 1962, the Ministry of Education issued the Directive on the Establishment of Educational Guidance and Counseling System in Nine-Year Primary Schools (Ref. No. 1868/62), and in 1963, the Directive on Education for Career Guidance in General Secondary and Vocational Secondary Schools was published (Ref. No. 18711/63_11/5).

ce to the teaching staff. Individual work with pupils was rather exceptional.

Regional centres as the backbone of guidance practice

Alongside the development of school guidance, the idea of a regional system of specialised support also emerged. A model was provided by the psychological-educational clinics rooted in the Brno-Bratislava tradition. In 1967, the Ministry of Education issued a directive entitled “On the Establishment of Regional Psychological-Educational Centres”, which initiated the creation of additional facilities. Each centre was required to include an affiliated vocational guidance unit.

The remit of these regional centres included gaining insights into child personality development, providing methodological support to the newly established district guidance centres, training school counsellors, and ensuring the provision of expert information in the field of career orientation. Their services were directed primarily towards teachers and parents (Ministry of Education and Culture, 1967).

A unified system: Standardisation of terminology and governance

By the mid-1970s, the process of establishing a comprehensive system of

educational counselling had reached its culmination. After more than a decade of conceptual debate and experimentation, guidance services were formally integrated into the structure of the education system and placed under unified governance. A key document in this process was the Instruction on the System of Educational Counselling within the Competence of the Ministry of Education of the Czech Socialist Republic (1976), which defined the tasks, competencies, and organisational arrangement of the system.

The system comprised three interconnected levels:

- school counsellors,
- district educational-psychological counselling centres,
- regional educational-psychological counselling centres.

At the regional level, psychological and educational clinics were established in the 1960s. In connection with the formation of a unified system and on the basis of the 1976 Instruction of the Ministry of Education of the Czech Socialist Republic, these institutions were gradually transformed into pedagogical-psychological counselling centres. The change in terminology symbolically reflected a shift in emphasis—from a clinical-psychological approach towards a pedagogical-psychological one.

This Instruction was followed by Decree of the Ministry of Education No.

130/1980 Coll. on educational counselling, as amended. At the same time, Act of the Czech National Council No. 76/1978 Coll. on educational institutions, as amended, established a general legislative framework for the functioning of educational institutions. Together, these legal regulations anchored the network of counselling services within the education sector. At the same time, the role of school counsellors was extended to secondary vocational schools and apprenticeship training schools.

The influence of politics and ideology

Political and ideological factors fundamentally shaped the framework within which the counselling system developed. In socialist Czechoslovakia—much as in other totalitarian regimes—the relationship between science and decision-making was governed by what Weiss (1979) terms a political model: expert knowledge was not applied according to its scientific validity but according to its ideological compatibility with the official line.

The humanities, particularly psychology, became a sensitive domain. Approaches that emphasised individuality or innate dispositions were dismissed as bourgeois pseudoscience. By contrast, the conception of so-called Marxist psychology—conceived as a tool for shaping personality through the social

environment and education, especially schooling—was considered ideologically appropriate. In this framework, the school was expected to cultivate the “socialist individual” (Kohoutek, 1998; Liberčanová, 2017).

Ideology and the Transformation of Terminology

The renaming of psychological-educational clinics to educational-psychological counselling centres carried primarily symbolic and ideological significance. As Dočkal (2017) notes, “nothing essential changed” in their activities—the centres continued to carry out diagnostic, intervention, and methodological work, but were newly expected to emphasise the pedagogical dimension and their subordination to the educational system. According to Kohoutek (1998), they remained “scientific-practical, operative, and methodological units,” though with a stronger emphasis on pedagogical leadership and a weakening of psychologists’ autonomy. Liberčanová (2021) adds that even after the renaming, the centres continued to operate at a professional level, indicating that the change represented an ideological shift rather than a professional transformation.

As a consequence, the balance of power between disciplines was transformed: pedagogues gained greater influence over the direction of counselling work than psychologists, thereby

shifting the centre of practice toward the school's educational function at the expense of therapeutic or developmental care (Dočkal, 2017; Kohoutek, 1998). However, as Liberčanová (2017, p. 150) points out, this integration also had positive effects—counselling services expanded, became more firmly embedded in schools, and became more systematic.

Dual subordination and interference in practice

As noted earlier, the counselling system operated under a form of dual subordination—it was professionally and methodologically guided, yet administratively subordinate to state authorities. In its early phase, this structure created a space in which ideological steering could permeate everyday practice, particularly in areas of economic or political significance.

The most visible manifestation appeared in career guidance, where conclusions regarding students' occupational choices were often "optimised" to reflect the current economic needs of the state. According to Liberčanová (2021), counselling services were expected to "broaden the interests" of individuals toward occupations aligned with the planned needs of society. Decision-making was further influenced by methodologists and officials without professional qualifications, whose role was to "direct" the work of specialists (Dočkal, 2017; Liberčanová, 2021).

There were concerns that the counselling system would gradually become an instrument of state educational and employment policy—responsible not only for supporting children but also for fulfilling broader social and economic objectives. Although counsellors strove to maintain professional and ethical consistency in their work, their conclusions and recommendations could be administratively adjusted ("optimised") in accordance with prevailing political priorities.

Over time, however, increasing professionalisation and methodological standardisation took place. While counselling practice remained embedded within the structures of school administration, these developments enabled greater stability and professional expertise (Kohoutek, 1998; Liberčanová, 2017). Ideological pressure did not disappear, but it shifted into the structural background rather than functioning as a direct tool of everyday governance.

Conclusion

The development of the Czechoslovak educational guidance and counselling system in the 1960s–1980s demonstrates that its final form emerged through a gradual process of negotiation among professional concepts, institutional structures, and political constraints. What had originally been separate strands—educational, vocational, and

developmental-psychological—gradually converged into an integrated understanding of continuous support for the child, forming the foundation of subsequent educational-psychological counselling.

Anchoring the system within the education system also revealed that counselling services inevitably arise at the intersection of two logics: the systemic requirements and the individual needs of the child. The ideological framework of the 1970s intensified this ambivalence and altered the balance between professional autonomy and institutional steering.

At the same time, the development of counselling in the analysed period cannot be reduced solely to its ideological function. The analysed historical studies show that counselling services retained a significant professional and practical role even under conditions of political constraints. Alongside institutional and ideological pressures, their activities also consistently included

professional care for children with learning and behavioural difficulties, developmental complications, milder forms of intellectual disability, as well as for gifted children. Although this clinical-pedagogical dimension was often addressed only marginally in historical syntheses, it nevertheless constituted an important part of everyday counselling practice and contributed to maintaining continuity and the gradual professionalisation of professional work within the system.

From a contemporary perspective, this historical development serves as a reminder that no reform of counselling services—whether related to support measures, inclusion, or career guidance—can avoid the question of how to connect the logic of the system aims with the logic of individual development. Counselling practice consistently takes shape at the intersection of these two perspectives, and maintaining this balance remains a persistent challenge for current school counselling.

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Abstinence among adolescents and young adults as a significant factor in the development of health literacy

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Abstract: Health literacy has been identified as an important health construct with an impact on the health of both individuals and the population. Abstinence is considered a significant preventive factor, and adopting this attitude has an impact on the development of a person's entire personality, especially in terms of strengthening mental health and the aforementioned health literacy. It seems that a certain level of health literacy is necessary to decide to abstain, and conversely, adopting an abstinence attitude is linked to the development of an interest in one's health. However, little attention is paid to the phenomenon of abstinence in the theory and practice of school education. This is reflected in the low number of research surveys and theoretical studies that focus on the abstinence lifestyle (in general). The aim of this text is to define the concept of abstinence in the context of large studies and smaller research projects; to place it in a global and Czech framework; to map its potential as a resilient tool; and to highlight the importance of this issue in the Czech environment using specific stories from pilot research.

Key words: health literacy – psychology of health – adolescents – abstinence – protective factors

Introduction

On a global scale, the abstaining population outnumbers the drinking population. Only in three regions of the world does more than half of the population

consume alcohol, one of which is Europe¹, where consumers make up 60% of the population and abstainers make up the remaining 40% (WHO, 2019). Czechia ranks among the countries with the lowest proportion of abstainers worldwi-

¹ The other two are America and the Western Pacific region.

de and in relation to the European average (EUDA, 2025). According to the NAUTA study, 3.6% of the population reported lifelong abstinence in 2020, and 12.2% reported abstinence in the last year, with an increase in abstinence currently being observed in the population (Csémy et al., 2025). These results correspond to Eurostat data (2022), which show that the proportion of all abstainers in the Czech Republic is approximately 15.2% of the population, with a similarly low incidence in Norway, and only Denmark records a lower proportion of abstainers in Europe (9.4%).

The prevalence of substance use and trends in consumption within society are relatively well and regularly mapped (Chomynová et al., 2024; Csémy et al., 2025). Many social, political, and health sectors also aim to reduce substance use in the population, as excessive consumption has far-reaching negative effects not only on the individual but also on society as a whole (Nováková & Mravčík, 2020). Abstinence as a phenomenon with all its consequences is nevertheless an under-researched area. According to some authors, attention has long been focused

on the prevailing culture of drug use, the identification of predictors of harmful use, and its impacts (Conroy & de Visser, 2014; Herring et al., 2014).

Most experts agree on the definition of abstinence as a certain restraint, primarily from alcohol, but also from cigarettes, drugs, and gambling (Kalina, 2001; Provazníková & Nešpor, 1999). Thus, not only those who have no experience with addictive substances can be considered abstinent, but also individuals with previous experience² who have not used addictive substances for some time (Conroy & de Visser, 2014). In research and practice, it is essential to distinguish between lifelong abstainers, abstainers with previous experience, and ex-users who have decided to abstain spontaneously or after treatment interventions (Kalina, 2001; Nepustil, 2014).

In recent years, therefore, the base of literary sources focusing on the experiences of those who renounce addictive substances or significantly reduce their use has gradually begun to expand, especially abroad (Piacentini & Banister, 2009; Bartram et al., 2017). However, the abstinence approach can also be linked

² There is no longer a consensus among experts on how long an individual must abstain from addictive substances in order to be considered abstinent. Skála (1988) considers only a person who has not consumed alcohol (drugs) in any quantity for at least three years to be abstinent, whereas other studies/surveys consider abstinence to be, for example: if a person uses a given substance/stimulant a maximum of two to four times a year, this is still considered abstinence (which brings us to the imaginary line with recreational use), or it is sufficient for the person to label/define themselves as such (which, as we know from clinical and therapeutic practice, can mean anything).

to new phenomena such as addiction to digital technologies (Whelan, 2019). This and other data indicate that adopting an abstinence stance is closely related to an individual's level of health literacy (WHO, 2013), which appears to be a key preventive factor (Stewart et al., 2013; Rolova et al., 2020).

Abstinence as a resilience factor

Researchers are increasingly recognizing the importance of protective factors and are increasingly interested in ways to help individuals adopt a healthy lifestyle and promote physical, mental, and social health (Ostaszewski & Zimmerman, 2006; Graber et al., 2016). In a broader context, we are talking about the concept of resilience, which includes the participation of individual, relational, social, and cultural factors (Arrington & Wilson, 2000). Abstinence as such appears in the literature as one of the (essential) individual factors of resilience (International Resilience Project, 2006).

Individual factors and peer groups

Significant protective factors at the individual level include a positive attitude towards oneself – self-confidence, self-esteem, increased frustration tolerance, self-control, the ability to solve problems in an appropriate manner, adequate soci-

al skills, resistance to peer pressure, and the ability to join a positive peer group (Ostaszewski & Zimmerman, 2006; Brooks et al., 2012; Miovský, 2015).

Preventive measures often support the development of a positive self-image, self-efficacy, critical thinking, or aim to raise awareness of the risks associated with substance use (Miovský, 2015; Kalina, 2003). According to Kalina (2003), it is important not only to increase the amount of information about drugs available to individuals but also to help them sufficiently reinforce positive beliefs that will take root in their value system and subsequently influence their behavior. During adolescence, however, individuality is not as prominent as the influence of peer groups, which have a significant impact on the formation of individuals' attitudes. The relationship of a particular group to drugs strongly predicts the use of the individual.

Peer pressure also influences the rate of substance use among adolescents, as belonging to a particular group is particularly important during this period (Bergh et al., 2011; Kokkevi et al., 2007; Aura et al., 2016). Authentic and loyal friendships and supportive social networks of friends who use addictive substances moderately or not at all appear to be a significant protective factor in preventing substance use (Graber et al., 2016).

Leisure activities are also associated with the occurrence of risky behavior,

including substance use. Protective factors include meaningful and creative interests. Organized leisure activities have a protective effect against risky behavior, as they are often monitored by adults (Kohútová & Almašiová, 2018; Chomynová & Kázmér, 2019). Unstructured meetings with peers who already use drugs have the opposite effect (Medrut, 2015; Caldwell & Darling, 1999). Peer pressure and boredom during leisure time increase the risk of substance abuse among adolescents (Hendricks et al., 2015).

Chomynová and Kázmér (2019) examined the latest trends in leisure activities among Czech youth, noting a significant decline in unorganized socialization, such as going out with friends in the evening. The authors link this decline to a reduction in alcohol consumption among Czech students. Whether the peer environment acts as a preventive factor against drug use depends on several circumstances – the peer group in question, peer pressure, the individual's ability to resist pressure to consume addictive substances, and their ability to choose a positive reference group with appropriate interests (Caldwell & Darling, 1999).

Family environment

A positive family environment can play an important role in delaying the onset of psychoactive substance use and in

the subsequent level of use (Čablová & Miovský, 2013; Bergh et al., 2011). Ryan et al. (2010) analyzed longitudinal studies examining the effects of parental behavior on adolescent alcohol consumption and created an overview of protective parenting strategies. The amount and frequency of parental alcohol consumption, positive parental role models, and increased supervision of the child's activities predict delayed early alcohol consumption in adolescents. Spending time together, limiting alcohol availability, the quality of relationships and emotional bonds, and open communication also play a role. Later, more moderate alcohol consumption is associated with similar family predictors. Effective factors also include clearly communicating disapproval of adolescent drinking and adhering to established agreements.

Livingston et al. (2010) challenge the assumption that allowing adolescents to drink under parental supervision appears to be an effective strategy for reducing later excessive drinking. The results of the study suggest that adolescents whose parents allow them to drink at home perceive greater parental approval of alcohol consumption, which subsequently does not deter them from excessive drinking outside the family environment. In connection to these findings, Engles and Van der Vorst (2003) add that positive parental role models can influence the choice of peers who also do not consume addictive substances.

Many studies demonstrate the influence of cohesion, family structure, parenting style, parental behavior, communication, control, and type of attachment in predicting the prevalence and frequency of drug use (Čablová & Mioviský, 2013; Nash et al., 2005; Thorlindsson et al., 2007). Sibling constellations are also worth mentioning. Older siblings in particular influence the use of legal and illegal substances and access to them (Kokkevi et al., 2007). Not only parents but also siblings serve as role models on the basis of which individuals adopt attitudes and specific behaviors toward substance use. It is therefore crucial that parents are aware of their irreplaceable role in preventing and influencing their children's behavior. In this context, building positive values is crucial, as it carries more weight than simply communicating about drugs or imposing prohibitions (Ennett et al., 2001).

School environment and social factors

The school environment also has a significant influence on the formation of positive values and the reduction of substance use. Protective factors include a positive school climate, appropriately set school standards, regular school attendance, a sense of belonging to the school, and the implementation of effective prevention programs (Ellickson et al., 2003; Kokkevi et al., 2007; Brooks

et al., 2012). In the context of general prevention, peer programs have been proven effective in practice. These programs work on the principle of involving pre-educated peers who influence the formation of attitudes towards drugs or other risky behaviors. Identification with a peer is easier for young people due to their similar age and social situation (Kalina, 2003).

Preventive measures should continue even after individuals have achieved abstinence. Rinker and Neighbors (2013) point out that there are few programs focused on preventing drinking among students who are already abstinent. They recommend that prevention programs focus on reinforcing the reasons for not drinking and avoiding addictive substances that individuals have already developed. The goal of these programs should be to support the maintenance of abstinence and health despite what is approved by those around them, as well as to help develop interests in other activities.

The broader society also contributes significantly to changing young people's attitudes towards addictive substances. Protective factors within the community and society as a whole include prevailing positive norms and values, a balanced system of laws and sanctions, sufficient financial support for prevention programs, education, and overall care for the environment (Mioviský et al., 2015; NIDA, 2003). Across Europe, we have

seen a decline in substance use in recent years, with alcohol and cigarette use falling particularly among children and young people (Chomynová & Kázmér, 2019; Chomynová et al., 2020; Inchley et al., 2020). In many countries, this change in adolescent behavior has been linked to the introduction of more restrictive drug policies (Chomynová & Kázmér, 2019; Bendtsen et al., 2014).

A declining rate of alcohol consumption has been repeatedly confirmed in the Czech Republic (Chomynová et al., 2020). This decline has attracted the interest of some authors, as no significant changes in alcohol restrictions have been recorded in the Czech Republic, and the Czech Republic is one of the countries with a very liberal approach to anti-alcohol measures (Hnilicová et al., 2017). The latest results of the ESPAD study from 2019 and 2024 show that addictive substances remain highly accessible among young people in the Czech Republic (Chomynová & Dvořáková, 2025; Chomynová et al., 2020). Hnilicová et al. (2017) state in this regard that it is appropriate to implement sufficient anti-alcohol measures, such as high taxes, restrictions on alcohol availability, or advertising bans. There is evidence that the price of alcohol affects its consumption among young people; for example, Seaman and Ikegwonu (2010) found in their study that the price of alcohol is a more effective protective factor for young people than health considerations.

Effective change in cultural and social attitudes requires the development of population-wide strategies (Herring et al., 2014). Young people need to be provided with sufficient positive adult role models. Perceiving the wider adult community as supportive reinforces a sense of security and acts as a protective factor in preventing risky behavior (Brooks et al., 2012). Social discourse plays a crucial role in shaping a social climate that fosters a healthy lifestyle, providing young people with sufficient opportunities and activities that enable them to lead healthy and productive lives (Herring et al., 2014).

Abstinence in the context of health literacy

As already mentioned, the percentage of young people choosing abstinence has been increasing in recent years, yet this choice is still perceived as “outside the norm” (de Looze et al., 2015; Ng Fat et al., 2018). This phenomenon is particularly evident among adolescents, for whom excessive alcohol consumption and experimentation with addictive substances are a normal part of adolescence and the perception of freedom (Seaman & Ikegwonu, 2010).

Therefore, the question is how adolescents construct their social identities in contradiction to the established social norm of alcohol consumption, which is reinforced not only by their peers but also by the overall upbringing in many

families, schools, and the media (Conroy & de Visser, 2014). In any case, for some individuals, the decision not to drink (or to drink in moderation) becomes central to their identity, and abstinence becomes a highly valued personal value, for which individuals take pride (Rinker & Neighbors, 2013; Seaman & Ikegwonu, 2010). For others, the choice of abstinence is just one of many decisions they make about their lives, and they do not attach too much importance to it (Herring et al., 2014). Nairn et al. (2006) examined how young people construct their identities outside the norm of consumption and identified four overarching ways in which non-drinkers constitute their identities in opposition to the prevailing norm:

1. Creating alternative identities - based on sports, ecology, religion, etc.
2. Creating an oppositional identity - questioning drug use as a prerequisite for entertainment.
3. Internalizing the norm that alcohol consumption is unacceptable - creating negative discourse around drug use.
4. Hiding one's identity as a teetotaler.

How do people perceive someone who abstains?

Discourses surrounding young people who do not drink alcohol or consume it in moderation are often burdened by certain stereotypical attitudes on the part of the consuming society (Herring

et al., 2014). We often learn about these reactions from those who are marginalized by this majority group. Regan and Morrison (2011), presented consumers' views on attitudes towards abstainers. The authors confirmed their assumptions that those who consume alcohol to a greater extent and tend to get drunk more often report more negative attitudes towards non-drinkers. More negative attitudes towards abstainers also correlated positively with a greater need to belong.

Conroy and de Visser (2013) described three main discourses that regular alcohol users construct around young people who avoid alcohol.

1. The first discourse presents abstinence as something unusual that requires explanation. Non-drinkers often arouse curiosity and speculation about the reasons for their decision, especially in situations where alcohol consumption is considered normal. In contrast, other studies (Nairn, 2006) state that it is not meaningful for abstainers to ask drinkers to justify their decision to drink. Drinking societies thus face ambivalent attitudes towards abstainers. On the one hand, non-drinkers command respect, but on the other hand, they represent a minority group from which it is necessary to keep distance, as they reject shared social activities.
2. The second discourse is also characterized by ambivalence, with non-drinkers being viewed as less soci-

able due to their non-participation in group activities involving alcohol consumption, but at the same time being portrayed as more socially competent than drinkers because they are able to socialize successfully without alcohol.

3. The third discourse focuses on the different reactions to abstinence in men and women. While women who decide not to drink are more likely to encounter understanding reactions, male abstinence is often associated with negative consequences. The decision not to drink in men represents a risk of losing „masculinity“ and a higher likelihood of rejection by the group.

It has been repeatedly confirmed that abstinence jeopardizes fitting in among peers and poses a risk of social exclusion for both women and men. Individuals who do not want to engage in the prevailing type of behavior face pressure to conform to the prevailing group. Herman Kinney and Kinney (2013) convey the experiences of abstainers, many of whom have experienced stigmatization. Abstainers face direct and indirect, verbal and physical „attacks“ for their anti-consumerist attitudes.

Conroy and de Visser (2014) examined the experiences of college students who chose abstinence. Their respondents' statements show that social events accompanied by excessive drinking make abstainers feel alienated from their

peers. Respondents described a variety of reactions from those around them when they found out they did not drink. These ranged from silence, a barrage of questions, persuasion, and direct pressure to attempts to „correct“ their behavior and persuade them to consume alcohol. Abstainers may also be perceived as boring or socially unengaged (Herring et al., 2014).

Studies also show that individuals who previously identified as heavy drinkers but have decided to significantly reduce their consumption face greater pressure. Individuals who try to drink moderately are also subject to greater social pressure (Piacentini & Banister, 2006). Findings that the negative evaluation of abstinence by peers decreases with age (Fehm et al., 2005; Steinberg & Monahan, 2007), indicate that peer pressure decreases with age, or rather that abstainers perceived greater pressure at a younger age (Denscombe, 2001).

In contrast to the prevailing intolerant attitudes of alcohol users towards abstainers, the study by Herring et al. (2014) shows that most abstainers do not consider drinking alcohol to be wrong. Respondents believe that although alcohol is not suitable for them, this does not mean that it cannot be a suitable choice for someone else. This supports the belief that abstainers consider drinking alcohol to be a personal, not a moral choice. Abstainers emphasize that responsibility and knowing one's limits are important. They add that most non-drinkers would

like their preferences to be respected and recognized as valid by society.

Abstainers and their strategies for coping with social situations

Alcohol plays an important role in many social occasions (Bartram et al., 2017). Sharing alcohol can be a means of maintaining personal relationships and can symbolize reciprocity and conformity with the group, both on positive occasions, such as celebrations, and as a way of showing solidarity after a negative event (Cherrier & Gurrieri, 2013; Emslie et al., 2013).

Seaman and Ikegwuonu (2010) argue that alcohol consumption is an important factor for young adults, facilitating social interaction and contributing to the creation and maintenance of friendship groups. Those who choose not to engage in such behavior risk rejection and ostracism by the social group that consumes alcohol (Griffin et al., 2009). Abstainers thus seek ways to cope with being separated from the mainstream culture that promotes consumption in social situations. They are often forced to justify and defend their decision to those around them (Nairn et al., 2006; Piacentini & Banister, 2009; Bartram et al., 2017).

Some abstainers experience positive reactions from time to time, such as admiration and respect from their peers, but more often than not, most

feel stigmatized for choosing not to drink (Romo, 2012). Abstinence provokes a strong reaction from drinking peers, whose responses tend to be non-accepting and undermine the decision of the non-drinker who has chosen not to go with the majority. According to the findings of Conroy and de Visser (2014), all respondents want a rich and regular social life in which their decision not to drink would be accepted by their peers. Abstainers thus face the dilemma of how and whether to communicate their attitudes towards alcohol to those around them.

Avoidance strategies

One possible strategy is to actively avoid situations where drinking alcohol is expected, such as bars and house parties (Herring et al., 2014; Piacentini & Banister, 2009). Individuals who choose this strategy try to replace social occasions associated with alcohol consumption with completely different activities. They change their values and focus primarily on studying, sports, or traveling (Bartram et al., 2017). A more acceptable tactic for some abstainers seems to be encouraging their drinking friends to engage in activities that do not involve alcohol and suggesting other ways to spend time together, such as going for a walk, visiting an exhibition, or watching a movie (Herring et al., 2014).

According to Bartram et al. (2017), these alternative activities serve the

same purpose as social occasions associated with alcohol consumption. The authors also found that these new activities are more successfully implemented within a group where the individual has sufficient status to change and influence the form of interaction within that group. Other abstainers do not mind spending their free time among people who consume alcohol and do not want to miss out on these social events. At the same time, however, they are more often exposed to pressure and offers to consume alcohol.

Direct communication abstinence

In his study, Romo (2012) finds that some individuals assert their positive identity despite the threat of stigmatization and exclusion from the group. Individuals perceive certain benefits from disclosing their attitude toward addictive substances, including staying true to themselves and being a role model for others. Herman-Kinney and Kinney (2013) discuss a strategy they call therapeutic disclosure, in which abstainers communicate their true motivations for not drinking, discuss sobriety, and the negative consequences of drinking in an effort to influence the attitudes of others. Some abstainers do not drink precisely because others have decided not to (Romo, 2012; Seaman & Ikegwuonu, 2010). In a study by Conroy and de Visser (2014), some respondents communicated their attitude

toward alcohol consumption directly from the outset and clearly stated that they would not drink alcohol. This strategy requires a certain degree of self-confidence, and if abstainers acquire it, they face less peer pressure.

Some individuals also set their own conditions for participating in social events involving alcohol—they leave early, arrive late, and feel that they can freely and politely decline offers to drink alcohol or leave an uncomfortable situation (Piacentini & Banister, 2009). Some are less willing to proactively communicate their stance, but reveal their identity when asked directly or offered alcohol. Due to fears of stigmatization, they try to be more cautious, politely decline offers, and try to shift the conversation to other topics. This strategy allows them to abstain from alcohol without rejecting the drinking company (Romo, 2012).

Assuming legitimate and responsible roles

For some teetotalers who openly proclaim their stance on alcohol, it is important to take on a meaningful role within the group that allows them to legitimately participate in the community of consumers. Individuals seek positions where sobriety is an advantage and take on roles associated with responsibility (driver or caregiver). Accepting these roles gives them a clear purpose that allows them not only to participate in social events involving alcohol, but

above all to be accepted among drinkers (Seaman & Ikegwuonu, 2010).

It should be noted that not all abstainers like to identify with such roles. Some individuals find the idea and reality of caring for intoxicated people unpleasant; they are also not interested in dealing with the negative consequences of their decisions. On the other hand, they feel a moral obligation to help people who become more vulnerable under the influence of alcohol (Herring et al., 2014). Frustration also arises from feeling responsible for the health of drunk friends, which can sometimes overshadow one's own enjoyment of the social event (Piacentini & Banister, 2009).

Strategies for providing fictitious information and strategies for concealment

Herman-Kinney and Kinney (2013) observed a strategy among their respondents whereby individuals, fearing rejection by their peers, cite valid health reasons for not drinking (“defending themselves”). Some then combine their health condition with fictitious health problems. Abstainers sometimes give false or misleading information about why they do not drink. They say that they do not want to stand out and explain their situation, that they do not like the taste of alcohol, have never drunk it, etc. They prefer to give a reason that they think will be better accepted by others. Those around them consider reasons such as

not being able to drink due to medication or driving to be more legitimate (Conroy & de Visser, 2014).

Bartram et al. (2017) identified a strategy where individuals simply replace alcohol with a non-alcoholic beverage. Such a small change in an individual's behavior allows them to continue participating in interpersonal rituals involving alcohol with virtually no change. Hiding abstinence can take many forms. Some abstainers try to completely hide their different attitudes and pretend to consume alcohol, holding cups of alcohol and acting as if they were drunk (Romo, 2012). Herman-Kinney and Kinney (2013) report that concealing one's true attitudes appears to be only a temporary solution. For the respondents in their study, hiding abstinence is time-consuming and also causes them increased stress from being exposed. Over time, these factors lead to the adoption of alternative strategies and the gradual disclosure of their true attitudes.

All strategies (although they help abstainers cope with peer pressure) carry the risk of individuals being excluded from certain social groups. It is important to maintain a support network of people who understand and respect their lifestyle choice. Tolerance from close friends appears to be an integral aspect of social well-being. Most respondents report that they do not need to hide their abstinence or its true reasons from close friends, as true friends accept their choice as part of who they are, and failure to accept their

decision can lead to the breakdown of friendships for some (Herring et al., 2014; Conroy & de Visser, 2014).

Abstinence in the Czech Republic – preliminary results of pilot research

The basic starting point for our qualitative research (Dočkalová, 2023) was the fact that we can find out how many people in Czech society abstain from alcohol from the media, surveys, or annual reports. However, we did not find a large number of studies that described abstinence as a phenomenon in greater depth. We decided to seek out people with an abstinent lifestyle and conduct narrative interviews with them about their experiences.

The key criteria were that they had been abstinent for more than a year and that they presented themselves as abstinent. We managed to obtain a total of 15 different stories about abstinence, 4 of which are from individuals with lifelong experience. The resulting research sample consists of 15 respondents—9 men and 6 women with an average age of 25 (range 20-28). The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and one hour, during which the respondents reported on their experiences with abstinence throughout their lives. In their statements, they often looked back on their adolescence and described their experiences either as abstainers or as young users.

Among the respondents in our

research, there was greater variability in behavior that can be classified as abstinence than simply the exclusive renunciation of all addictive substances for varying lengths of time. Abstinence can therefore be presented as a wide range of behaviors, from lifelong abstinence to occasional use of addictive substances (e.g., drinking on birthdays “so as not to offend”). Lifelong abstainers can thus be considered exceptional cases within the research sample, whose experience was specific in many respects. The other eleven respondents have extensive personal experience with addictive substances, which they decided to give up after a certain period of time for certain reasons.

We recorded two respondents who are struggling with health problems that are incompatible with the use of addictive substances, especially alcohol consumption. Both of these respondents would consider ending their abstinence from alcohol if they did not have health problems. We included them in the “involuntary” abstinence category and decided to include them in our research, as health problems or doctors’ recommendations do not necessarily mean that a person will comply.

We called another type of abstinence “ritual use,” which is represented by individuals who, on certain occasions, usually significant social events, step out of their role as abstainers, consume alcohol or another addictive substance in a single small dose, and then return to

abstinence. The third respondent in this category, after many years of not using any addictive substances, decided to occasionally use hallucinogens for the purpose of self-development and expanding his own consciousness.

Three respondents associated their abstinence with the straight edge movement. Straight edge (SXE) is a social movement that was formed as an antithesis to the foundations of the punk scene. The SXE community offers its members a collective identity of abstinence, i.e., abstinence from smoking, alcohol, drugs, or promiscuity. In a broader sense, it is a lifestyle that promotes a responsible approach to oneself and one's surroundings. It includes full respect for human and animal rights, anti-racist ideas, left-wing attitudes, or protest against consumerism (Irwin, 1999; Haenfler, 2006; Wood, 2006).

Strategies among abstainers in the Czech Republic

All respondents had encountered some form of pressure to consume alcohol, in extreme cases even through (almost) manipulative methods, such as “do it for your mom and have a drink,” or, as one respondent described, when a teacher promised her a better grade if she drank. The respondents' experiences with encouragement to consume alcohol can be divided into three main forms:

1. verbal (repeated suggestions, offers, persuasion)

2. physical (pouring, buying alcohol, bets, bribes, slipping alcoholic beverages into drinks)
3. emotional (refusal of alcohol is considered by those around as disrespectful or arrogant).

Across studies, there is often a strategy of deliberately concealing one's abstinence, but this did not appear even once in the narratives of the respondents in our research. The respondents in our research do not boast about their abstinence, but in certain situations where they feel it is appropriate to clarify their attitude towards addictive substances, they openly share it. Some deliberately (and purposefully) provoke discussions to influence the consumption of others and make them think about their own consumption. Only when those around them are not inclined to discuss the issue do they resort to other strategies, such as not explaining their true motives or leaving the situation.

Reasons for abstinence

Among the positive reasons that lead respondents to abstinence, health considerations, a healthy lifestyle, and the importance of sports are most frequently cited. Respondents see no point in consuming alcohol, have never found reasons to consume it, and generally show little motivation to do so. For lifelong abstainers, abstinence is a natural continuation of previous stages of development. Respondents view alcohol as a waste

of time and an obstacle to doing what they consider meaningful. They also do not need alcohol for entertainment and can have fun without it. Disagreement with a social setting in which there is a high tolerance for substance use is another motive that becomes an impetus for abstinence. Respondents largely accept the role of positive role models and show society that not drinking is a normal choice. Financial benefits are also a frequently mentioned bonus.

The most common negative motivations were personal or mediated unpleasant experiences with the use of addictive substances, especially alcohol. Respondents observed many negative effects of alcohol on thinking and behavior in themselves or those around them. Respondents want to avoid not only intoxication, but also its immediate effects, which for them include hangovers, shame, and remorse. Maintaining rational judgment is essential for them, and loss of self-control causes them fear. Respondents often dislike alcohol, have never felt like drinking it, or assume that it does not taste good (which was also mentioned by lifelong abstainers). In the long term, the most frequently mentioned factors in the narratives are health benefits and concerns about the negative effects of alcohol on the human body.

Conclusion

Insights from abstinent individuals can be instrumental in strengthening health

literacy, shaping effective drug policies and prevention programs, and building healthier approaches to substance use (Herring et al., 2014; Conroy & de Visser, 2015). Understanding the experiences of individuals who have chosen to abstain can help challenge the established assumption that all (young) people consume alcohol and experiment with other psychoactive substances (Griffin et al., 2009; Piacentini & Banister, 2006).

In the near future, there are plans to transfer the pilot qualitative research into a broader context with the aim of obtaining more interviews and thus gaining greater support for the creation of an “image of abstinence” in the Czech Republic. However, the difficulty of the research lies in its very beginning, e.g., in the selection of the research sample. The “snowball” method (Hartnoll, 2003) works well in similar qualitative research, but it has not proven successful in the case of abstainers – few abstainers know anyone else like them and so cannot recommend another contact. It seems that, compared to addiction, the phenomenon of abstinence has been little researched, even though findings in this area could be beneficial in many areas.

The insights of abstainers can be applied to promote public health (Conroy & de Visser, 2014; Nairn et al., 2006; Herring et al., 2014). One area where the insights of abstainers can be effectively applied with the aim of building health literacy is primary prevention. According to Graber et al. (2016), the insights of

abstainers can help identify protective mechanisms that can be implemented in a range of intervention programs. Through primary prevention programs and peer consultants, positive role models can be passed on to young people, conveying to them the message that abstinence is normal behavior and represents a positive and free choice.

Conroy and de Visser (2018) identified many benefits of not drinking in the context of social occasions where alcohol is commonly consumed and suggest that effectively promoting the specific benefits of not drinking as perceived by non-drinkers themselves may help promote more moderate patterns of alcohol use among others. According to other authors, strategies can be disseminated among young people, and they can be taught tactics that non-drinkers find useful in various social situations (Nairn et al., 2006).

Another way to use the knowledge of abstainers to develop health literacy is to expand social opportunities where the primary focus is not on alcohol consumption, but where there is also the option to have fun without it. These could be vari-

ous accompanying programs for events that provide entertainment in forms other than drinking alcoholic beverages. The authors also call on businesses themselves to respond by promoting non-alcoholic beverages at affordable prices more effectively. Advertising campaigns can also help to promote more positive attitudes towards substance use. Advertisements can be targeted at promoting alcohol-free entertainment and activities (Nairn et al., 2006; Conroy & de Visser, 2014).

Similar measures can gradually change the established assumption that alcohol consumption is an essential element of (good) entertainment and encourage individuals who decide to change their patterns of use. The experiences of abstainers and the strategies they successfully apply in social situations can serve as examples for others who want to change their consumption.

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Reading Activities on Tablets for Improving Fluency and Comprehension in Primary Education

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Abstract: Reading literacy is a central focus of primary education and a prerequisite for engagement in the broader educational context. Since modern society is being impacted by technologies, more efficient learning approaches are needed for core skills like reading. While mobile learning is a rapidly growing field in education, the question remains: can it be effectively integrated into classroom settings? The study examines the progress of sixteen multilingual first graders learning English in the Czech Republic, over a four-month period using tablets, focusing on the following sections; reading fluency and comprehension. More specifically, design-based research was applied to provide an in-depth and comprehensive examination of the pedagogical impact of innovative designs within handheld devices, through iterative testing, analysis and refinement in authentic classroom settings. Results suggest potential improvements in post-test scores, with students reading faster, making fewer errors and showing a better understanding of the texts. Furthermore, the use of various gamified applications also increased students' motivation and enthusiasm for reading. The findings emphasize the value of using mobile learning technologies in reading literacy instruction as a key tool to improve the performance of young readers.

Keywords: reading fluency, reading comprehension, mobile technologies, mobile learning, primary education

Introduction

Theoretical Background

In today's rapidly expanding educational landscape, technology plays a vital role in transforming how and where learning takes place, extending beyond specific periods. Sustainable access

to social media, networking tools and digital knowledge resources through electronic devices has become an integral part of modern education. In the early stages, computers were used within existing infrastructure, but their application gradually developed. Over time, the trend shifted toward faster and more

convenient access, through smaller yet more powerful devices. This evolution brought mobile phones, smartphones, tablets, PDAs, iPads, iPods, netbooks and similar portable devices into prominence, leading to the emergence of the term “*mobile learning*” (or m-learning). While its precise conceptualization has been widely debated, all definitions agree to the fact that it allows people to learn in an “*anywhere*” and “*anytime*” manner and to access information whenever needed (e.g. Quinn, 2000; Kukulska-Hulme, 2007; Mehdipour & Zerehkafi, 2013). Researchers have noted the dynamics of mobile technologies as flexibility, accessibility, interactivity and engagement (Liu et al., 2014), recognizing its impact on the quality of education and its potential to lead to new regulations, platforms and solutions for future facts (Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020), with the ultimate goal of introducing them into curricula and creating teaching techniques (Toquero, 2020). Mobile learning became even more popular due to the recent emergency that arose around the world. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the entire education system globally (Sai-kat et al., 2021) and the new generation integrated digital tools into their daily routines, they adapted and modified the innovations to suit their specific needs and preferences.

Building on that research, the role of mobile learning is important to be examined particularly in subjects like lite-

racy. While proficiency in reading and writing traditional texts remains important, it is no longer sufficient on its own (Lankshear and Knobel, 2011). To begin with, reading is the ability to understand various types of texts for both learning and pleasure and apply written language forms that are meaningful to society and valued by individuals (Mullis et al., 2006; OECD, 2001). But let’s clarify what effective reading requires; fluency and comprehension, which means allowing readers not only to recognize words efficiently but also to understand them in context (Davis, 2006). Research has shown that these two pillars are closely connected in reading, with each helping to strengthen the other and a complete definition of each must highlight its strong link to the other (National Reading Panel, 2000). Nowadays reading literacy extends beyond printed texts; it is the ability to decode, encode and interpret meaning not just through words, but also through signs, symbols, images, sounds and movements in digital spaces. International literacy assessments like PIRLS and PISA now include on-screen reading, acknowledging the growing expectation for children to engage with digital textbooks. It is a fundamental skill necessary for success in academic, personal and professional settings and is a key component in lifelong learning and development to become a useful member of modern society (Wildová, 2014). For that reason, encouraging children’s natural

acquisition of reading skills from a very young age remains essential, requiring a stimulating environment and appropriate teaching methods to spark their interest (Wildová & Kropáčková, 2015).

Related Work

There is a growing need to enrich educational settings with digital tools, as they have proven effective in supporting reading activities and promoting engagement. Since the younger generation embraces mobile technologies in their daily lives, their influence on reading habits becomes more evident. Many children now have access to devices and the internet at home, with a significant number already engaging in electronic reading outside of school. A study by the National Literacy Foundation (Picton, 2014) revealed that 70% of children prefer tablets and smartphones for reading, indicating a lower proportion of children engage in print reading compared to that format. As this is a relatively new area of study, research findings remain inconsistent and diverse, emphasizing the need for further exploration.

In terms of reading fluency, most recent studies involved experimental methods or pre- and post-tests, with predominantly positive results observed in general elementary education. For instance, the study of Al Ali et al. (2024) involved 104 students in the second grade, divided into two groups. The

experimental group dove into gamified learning, playing interactive games with rewards and exploring a digital library with group reading and discussion, while the control group worked in traditional settings. After measuring fluency, originality and flexibility, the results were clear; students using games read more confidently and smoothly, practiced and challenged more and had fun doing it. Gamified reading not only made learning enjoyable but worked well for different types of learners in various settings. Another study (Ahmed et al., 2022) worked with children around 12 years old who read a daily 55-minute block using tablets. With a mixed-methods approach, the researchers gathered detailed insights into reading fluency, which came from how the tablets were used. They offered interactive, scaffolded and engaging experiences that helped students focus, process stories more easily and practice reading again and again without feeling intimidated. For students with learning difficulties, tablets also made reading less stressful and more fun, allowing them to sustain attention, read more words and see their fluency improve dramatically. A few key takeaways: first, schools should make this technology available to every student who could benefit from it; second, teachers should be encouraged to integrate tablets into their lessons for reading. On a different note, a study in Turkey by Isik (2023) examined the reading skills of third- and

fourth-grade students across these two formats: paper and screen. Interestingly, the results showed no significant differences in overall reading ability between the two mediums, although fourth graders read more words correctly, faster and with better expression than third graders. The author concluded that, since students' reading performance is similar on mobile devices and on books, schools can support the use of electronic media, which offers convenience, easier information sharing and cost savings. The study also highlighted that the widespread use of technology contributes to the unconscious development of screen reading skills, which are increasingly important for communication, information access and instruction in educational settings.

Among the studies that are analyzed, reading comprehension was the one that was examined the most. Prados Sánchez et al. (2023) conducted a quasi-experimental study with 85 fourth graders using a gamified platform for various reading activities and found that students in the experimental group achieved significantly higher reading comprehension scores and reported more positive attitudes toward reading than the control group. Multimodal, interactive experiences, incorporating images, colors and shapes, appear to reinforce reflective thinking and greater confidence in comprehension. Hsiao and Chen (2015) investigated what makes children

more motivated to learn with mobile devices, specifically e-readers, focusing on how technology affects reading comprehension. They worked with third grade students and used, as well, a quasi-experimental design where students read interactive e-books that included animations, sounds and clickable features. The results showed that students who used these e-books understood main ideas more easily and demonstrated higher comprehension, likely because the multimedia features increased concentration and helped them "*catch the point*" of the story. Furthermore, Moon, Francom and Wold (2021) examined how different approaches to using iPads affect reading comprehension in 47 pupils in fifth grade. The study compared a "*learning from technology*" approach, where students passively received content, with a "*learning with technology*" approach, in which students actively created digital products such as comics, concept maps, presentations and animations to demonstrate understanding. Conducted over an eight-week period of reading related activities, the study found that students in the "*learning with technology*" class felt more control and showed greater attention. However, a point of interest is that comprehension lasted only during the study and returned to pre-study levels once the activities ended, likely due to activities being suspended, which may have led to a loss of motivation and learning among participants. This was

reported from other studies that the effect was significant only during short-term use (Kaman & Ertem, 2018), who investigated the impact of digital texts on 30 primary students in fourth grade in Turkey. The participants were assigned to an experimental group with tablets and a control group with printed materials. Texts were selected from three types of Turkish lesson themes, including storytelling, informative and poetic texts. The longer the activity lasted, the smaller the overall impact of reading digital text in comprehension. The opposite happened with printed ones; extending the activity had a meaningful impact on the reading comprehension control group.

Some of the research has specifically examined the relationship of mobile devices with English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL). Research in this field is wide and tends to emphasize in key reading skills such as phonological awareness and grammatical knowledge (Hori et al., 2025), vocabulary acquisition (Yang et al., 2025) or overall academic performance, fluency and comprehension with students feeling happy and showing a positive attitude toward mobile devices in English classes (Al-Omari & AbuSeileek, 2023). Much of it is concentrated in the age of upper primary or junior high school to university levels (e.g. Al-Jarf, 2022; Honarzad & Soyoo, 2023). Systematic reviews from a decade till now (e.g. Gutiérrez-Colón, Frumuselu & Curell, 2023; Alotaibi & Zeidan, 2023)

reveal limited data on primary school students learning to read in English as a second or foreign language with the valuable mobile ICT or game-based learning tools.

In a study involving 120 fourth graders, participants were assigned to either gamified or traditional instruction groups and their English skills, including reading comprehension, were evaluated before and after the program. Findings indicated that students who experienced various gamified activities showed significantly greater gains in reading understanding ($F = 18.93$, $p < 0.001$) compared to their peers in the control group (Tayeh, Krishan & Malkawi, 2024). Similarly, Nitiasih and Budiarta (2021) conducted a study with 31 students learning English in grade five and once again gamifying local Balinese stories had a positive impact in post-test scores on reading comprehension because of the interactive and engaging format which encouraged active participation and provided opportunities to respond to questions correctly. The frequency of the students raising their hand when they wanted to answer the question given, suggests that incorporating culturally relevant stories in mobile game apps promotes motivation which is also essential for comprehension. Alharbi (2022) developed and evaluated a mobile reading application based on Universal Design for Learning and digital storytelling with second grade primary

EFL students and found that it significantly improved reading fluency and comprehension. Self-paced storytelling activities helped students to read more accurately, smoothly and with prosody in the experimental group. Moreover, Zahran (2025) investigated the impact of using Nearpod, an interactive presentation app, with images, web content, drawing boards, filling the gap, polls and quizzes. In combination with a guided reading strategy on EFL Egyptian primary pupils, students who received instruction through technology significantly outperformed their peers that continue working with traditional methods in reading comprehension. The author notes that the application's activities meet young learners' preferences and should be integrated into elementary reading classrooms, as they encourage interaction, friendly competition, reduce anxiety and cultivate positive attitudes toward reading (Zahran, 2025). On the other hand, not all digital reading contexts were equally effective. Salmerón et al. (2021) found that 10–13 year old Spanish EFL students, especially the ones with lower reading skills had more trouble comprehending informational passages on tablets than on paper. This might be because they associated tablets more with fun activities, like games, rather than academic reading. Liman Kaban and Karadeniz (2021) conducted research with sixth grade students in Turkey including personalized, gamified

and PDF formats on how their views of these practices affected their reading comprehension and motivation in English as a foreign language class. The findings showed that while there was no significant difference in comprehension between, students who read on screen reported significantly higher levels of motivation.

Although digital reading offers many benefits, studies of primary school cohorts have found that it correlates with lower reading outcomes (e.g. Delgado et al., 2018; Reich et al., 2016). It seems that may negatively affect concentration and users are also more prone to distractions such as browsing the web, playing games and visiting social networking websites, frequently focusing on the device rather than the content (O'Toole & Kanass, 2018). Overemphasis on rewards or leaderboards can distract from content and issues like unequal access, privacy concerns and short novelty add further challenges (Mirzaie Feiz Abadi et al., 2022). Moreover, children who have primarily used tablets for entertainment at home may perceive these devices as tools for play rather than learning, so it is reasonable to assume that they may adopt a more relaxed approach (Salmerón et al., 2021). Another barrier seems to be the availability of Wi-Fi support with slow internet connection that may lead to negative emotional experiences (Ebadi & Ashrafabadi, 2022) and the institutional technological infrastructure that

may not work properly and affect learning (Crompton, 2013), the high cost of devices, as well as the need to purchase educational apps, many of which are not free (Henderson & Yeow, 2012). Other technical challenges include the size of the tools, risk of sudden obsolescence, frequent changes in device models, battery life and security (Sarkar, 2021). Lastly, there is also a growing concern about the overuse of technology among children. Excessive screen time can negatively impact mental health, attention, sleep quality, physical activity and social development (Twenge & Campbell, 2018; Priftis & Panagiotakos, 2023). Consequently, many schools are implementing policies to limit or carefully manage mobile devices to balance educational benefits with student well-being. At the same time, they should not be entirely removed from educational contexts; instead, their effectiveness depends largely on how, when and for what purpose they are used. When they are purposefully designed and pedagogically guided, they can support learning without contributing to problematic overuse (OECD, 2024).

Research Aim & Questions

As it has been demonstrated in the previous chapter, by providing interactive experiences through handheld devices there might be a huge potential to foster positive results in educational environments. It is notable that this technology

became accessible some years ago, making them still relatively new hardware. Due to this and other factors that have been discussed, there is still limited targeted investigation on the application of m-learning that has been narrowed to the effect on reading in compulsory education. Building on this foundation, the aim of this research is to examine how mobile devices can impact reading skills among primary school students. More specifically, it examines students' progress in grade one over a four-month period using tablets in a bilingual school, focusing on the key aspects: reading fluency and reading comprehension.

On the basis of the existing literature are formulated the following questions:

Q1: To what extent does the use of mobile devices in the classroom improve English reading fluency among first grade elementary school students at a bilingual school?

Q2: How does the use of mobile devices affect English reading comprehension and support understanding of texts in grade one in a bilingual primary school?

2. Methodology

Research Design

The research approach adopted is qualitative and design-based research (DBR) is the chosen methodology, as it perfectly

aligns with the goal of the current study. The term first appeared in 1992 as a “*design experiment*” and its concept was introduced as a new method in educational research (Brown, 1992; Collins, 1992). Since then, the approach has evolved and is now commonly referred to as “*design-based research*”, continuing to develop and adapt in the field. This approach proves to be particularly appealing and effective in settings like kindergartens and elementary schools, especially when integrating technology (Wang & Hannafin, 2005). The focus of this tool lays on developing and refining educational practices, theories and artifacts through repetitive cycles of design, implementation, analysis and redesign of a product in real-world settings, while encouraging a dynamic interaction between the researchers and the participants (Wang & Hannafin, 2005). In short, it uncovers what is happening beneath the surface when students’ thinking changes in response to instructional interventions and it also examines what students do, how they behave, what ideas they form and how they interact socially in that learning environment (Barab, 2014). The framework of design-based research as outlined by Anderson and Shattuck (2012), includes the five following characteristics: (a) iterative process, (b) integration of theory and practice, (c) collaboration between stakeholders (researchers and practitioners), (d) application in real educational contexts and

(e) use of multiple data sources by mixed methods. Other studies, such as those by Design-Based Research Collective (2003), McKenney & Reeves (2013) or Zheng (2015) are in agreement with that conceptual framework described in more detail in the next paragraphs.

Mobile learning is a complex phenomenon that requires long-term investigation and multiple forms of data collection. Design-based research was selected for this study because it supports iterative cycles of design, implementation, analysis and refinement. In the beginning, the study followed the initial phase, which included selecting mobile applications, the objectives of each activity and the execution plan. In parallel, the literature was reviewed. At this stage, the purpose and research questions for the development iteration were formulated, as it was deemed essential to identify them before beginning the intervention. After that, indeed it was the actual implementation (first cycle). Data was collected and analyzed to determine what worked well and what needed improvement. For instance, if a particular application or activity did not significantly have results in reading fluency or comprehension, adjustments were made to better align with the research’ needs. Based on the insights, the refinements that were made led to a new iteration of the design (second cycle) and so on (third, fourth, etc). In each cycle, they planned solutions using relevant educational theories

and bibliography related to early literacy, reading skills, digital technologies and the use of ICTs and mobile learning for primary education. At the same time, the research was grounded in various methodological approaches, action research, case studies, experimental methods and not only, with a huge variety of tools used. The fundamental element of DBR, which is collaboration between researchers and practitioners, was more than needed in the current study. Teachers and school staff worked closely with the researchers, since they are the ones having experience with students, being aware of the classroom achievements and dynamics and knowing the needs of each student. When teachers' ideas and concerns are included in the design process, every innovation works better, since they are based on actual experiences and are more likely to be used in other classrooms. What is often missing from research is concrete action, as many studies focus mainly on statistical results or reported perceptions without directly experiencing the challenges involved (Armstrong, Dopp & Welsh, 2022). It is more than obvious that DBR not only evaluates the effectiveness of a new tool, in this occasion the m-learning environment for reading, through theories, but it examines it in real-world educational settings. Lastly, the study utilized multiple data collection methods, which will be examined in greater detail in the following chapters.

Participants

The sample consisted of 16 first graders (6-7 years old), 7 girls and 9 boys, who were attending a bilingual school in Prague, Czech Republic. The school works with multilingual students from different countries all over the world who have varying knowledge of Czech and English, with small class sizes that allow personalized lessons to meet individual student needs. The main courses, literacy and math, are taught in both languages, while others such as science, arts or music, are only taught in English. Most of them have already attended an English preschool and they also speak English with their friends. At home, they speak their native language. Only one of the students is considered native English speaker, coming from America.

Regarding whether they have any exposure to mobile or electronic devices at home, it seems that a percentage of $n=64,70\%$ do (Table 2). Out of 16 students, 10 own a tablet or iPad, while others might rely on phones, laptops or have no personal device. The main purposes of use include games and videos. Usage frequency varies from very little to almost every day. Most of them rarely use tablets and when it happens they use primarily for games and videos, focusing on entertainment. Only a small percentage, approximately 3 to 4 students, use these devices more frequently, several days per week. Most students who read on their portable devices report high

interest, particularly those who use them for entertaining reasons, while a few students do not engage in reading on their devices. When the research first began, the school introduced tablets as a new innovation, distributing 20 tablets that teachers could reserve for their classes. Prior to this, the only technological advancement in the school was the use of smartboards in every classroom. The English teacher, with many years of experience in primary education, was in her first year at this specific school. However, the students were already well-acquainted with her, as the research was being conducted in the second academic semester. Her expertise proved invaluable; she could assess the students' language levels and assist the researchers with materials, tests and questionnaires. Additionally, information was collected from other teachers who had been working with the students in various classes. The data is kept anonymous and each student will be referred to in the project using the nickname "Student" followed by a unique number, denoted by the letter "S" (e.g. S1, S2, etc.).

Tools

The methodological data collection process began with both participatory and non-participatory classroom observation. The use of observation in this study served two main purposes: firstly to familiarize the students with the researcher's

presence in the classroom and secondly to gather data on the students' participation in the lesson, their reading abilities in English language and the teaching techniques used by the teacher. As a tool, observation offered several advantages because it allowed researchers to observe events first-hand for more accurate and reliable data. It also helped for the subsequent organization of the intervention to be as close as possible to the students' needs.

The main tool for examining their reading fluency and comprehension was the students' pre- and post-tests. The pre-tests involved a text that was inspired by the book *"Biff's Fun Phonics"*, a non-entirely unfamiliar passage, comprising 90 words. The children were instructed to read the text aloud and the number of words they read was recorded over one minute to assess their fluency. Additionally, five comprehension questions were included based on the content of the text to evaluate their understanding. The post-test consisted of a more advanced text that included both familiar and new words (133 words). The rationale behind this was that students had primarily been learning these words through repetitive activities on the tablets. The inclusion of new words aimed to assess whether they had truly mastered the spelling of words and whether they were prepared to comprehend additional vocabulary they had encountered over time. Unpracticed texts allow researchers to measure

genuine improvements rather than just gains due to text memorization (Nes Ferrara, 2005). Moreover, using exactly the same tests would not give useful or reliable results because, at the beginning, the students are not familiar with the content (Marsden & Torgerson, 2012). Reading fluency and comprehension is text-dependent and best assessed using different but equivalent texts (Scholin & Burns, 2012). The teacher played a key role in shaping the difficulty of tasks and materials ensuring that they were appropriate for their language level, in cooperation with school practitioners and the researchers.

Furthermore, a questionnaire with closed type questions about the demographic characteristics was distributed and the use of digital devices at home, including frequency and reasons for use. It's important to note that the questions were adjusted to match the students' English language level based on the observation data without complex vocabulary. At the end of the intervention, students were also asked to respond to simple questions regarding their experience. In the post-test phase, the questionnaire items served as a theoretical basis for developing the semi-structured interviews to strengthen the design-based research scheme. The interviews included open-ended questions to not only help share views regarding the pre-determined questions but also flexibly add new thoughts. For instance, students

were asked about their experience of the intervention and whether they felt they had learned anything valuable from it. Afterwards, it investigated detailed thoughts on tablets as a tool for reading skills, preferred applications, etc. When answers were not sufficiently clear, follow-up clarifications were requested. Questionnaire and interview instruments addressed similar themes within the same learning contexts, allowing the two data sources to complement and enrich one another (Harris & Brown, 2010).

Moreover, the diary by the researcher was the main tool for controlling the entire research daily and was carried out after the conduct of each lesson when using tablets. The diaries were not only descriptive of their scores in activities, but the descriptions were accompanied by the interpretation of the notes, which functioned as means of reflecting on educational practices. The use of records in a diary was considered a necessary condition for the systematization of the effort to understand, but also to monitor the entire research and redesign process.

Lastly, various mobile applications were employed as part of the data collection. The topic of that didactic materials was chosen based on the curriculum and the level of students, followed by the school, without introducing unrelated content. The researchers and the teacher selected carefully the applications and the activities on them with the ultimate

goal of improving reading fluency and comprehension, described below.

Materials

The most frequent application was “Kahoot!”, a widely known game-based learning platform. In this app, questions are displayed on the smartboard and students respond using their tablets. Activities are timed and primarily consist of multiple-choice or true-or-false questions (Figure 1 & 2). Another similar platform named “Blooket” was also used with the same quiz elements and a variety of game modes (Figure 3). The difference between the two platforms is that in Blooket questions are displayed repeatedly on students’ tablets rather than on the smartboard until the game ends at the teacher’s selected time. Furthermore, they can earn either coins or points during activities which adds a huge incentive (Figure 4). Another example is “English comprehension”, an educational app made for young learners in 1st, 2nd and 3rd grades. Its primary goal is to help children improve their reading comprehension skills by offering a variety of stories at different levels. Each story is followed by questions to test their understanding of the text and once all answers are correct, they can progress to the next level. Lastly, one more often used application was “Wordwall”, that offers a wide range of templates for various activities, inclu-

ding quizzes, match-ups, word searches and crosswords, which can be easily tailored to fit specific learning goals. Other activities were as well used, during the design-based research phases, but less often and in a combination of the above (e.g. Youtube, Pear Deck).

Example of activity (Figure 1)

Activity description: Students participated in a 10-question quiz, answering based on a short text of 3-4 sentences displayed on the board. The text included familiar vocabulary that students had encountered but not extensively practiced, with many CVC words and a few unfamiliar ones to assess their ability to comprehend in context. Sufficient time was provided to all students, including slower responders, who could complete the activity.

Activity goals

- Improve reading comprehension by extracting keywords from short texts and answering related questions.
- Enhance reading fluency by encouraging students to read smoothly, accurately and with appropriate pacing while answering questions.
- Develop vocabulary recognition and understanding of familiar words while introducing new ones in context.
- Use the interactive and competitive nature of Kahoot! to keep students

Fig 1: Kahoot! question format displayed on a large screen.

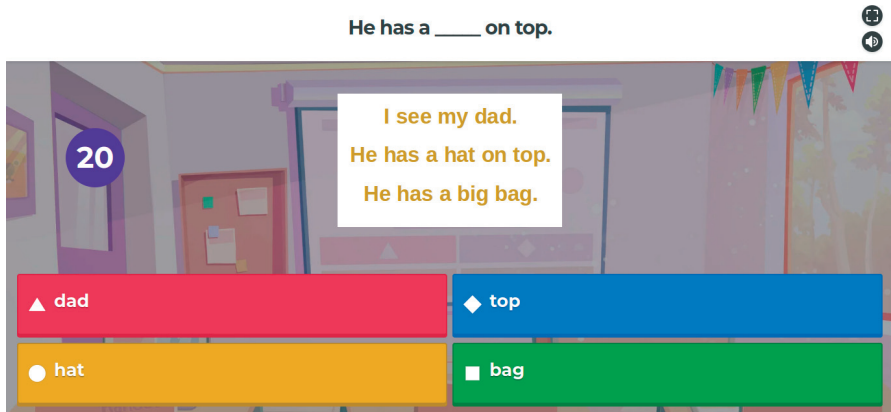
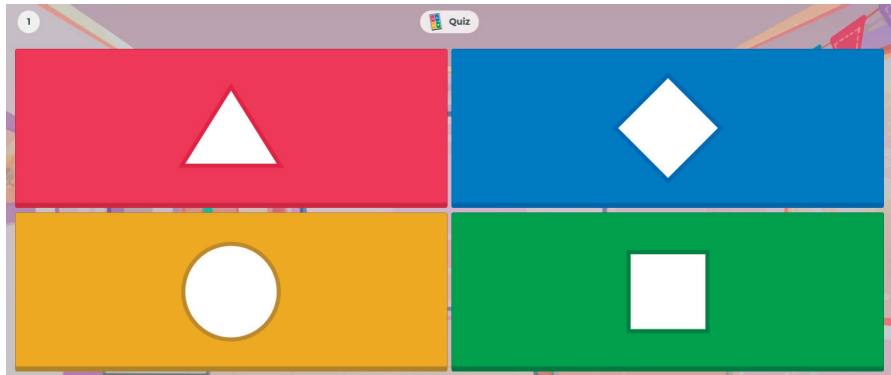


Fig 2: Kahoot! answer format displayed on the tablet.



motivated and engaged while practicing reading skills.

- Increase reading confidence where students feel comfortable engaging with texts at their level.
- Identify which areas of the text or

specific reading skills need further review or instruction based on student responses.

- Provide instant feedback on students' answers to clarify misconceptions on incorrect answers.

Fig 3: Blooket question format displayed on the tablet.

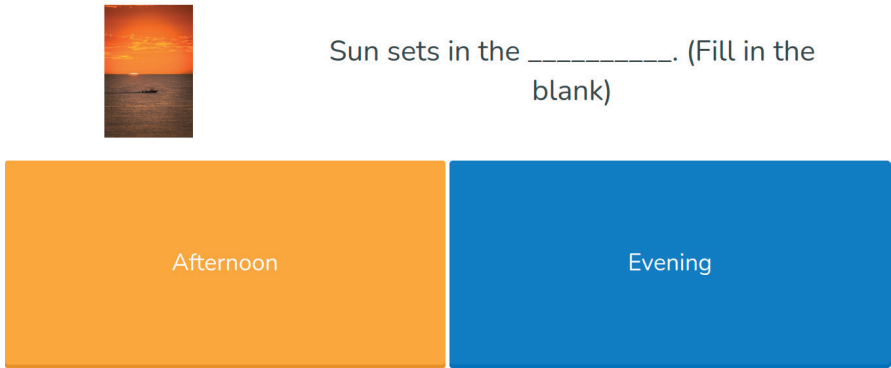
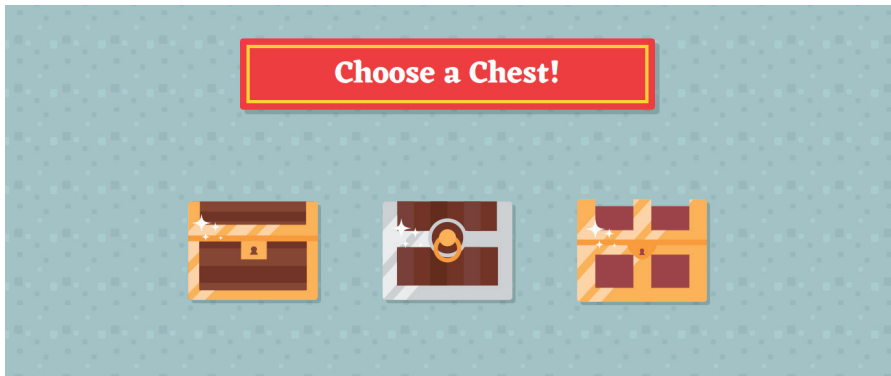


Fig 4: Example of Blooket challenges for winning extra points on the tablet.



Example of activity (Figure 3)

Activity description: Students were asked to use Blooket for 15 minutes, to engage in a fill-in-the-blank quiz, with 20 questions designed to improve reading fluency, comprehension and motivation.

The activity presented students with sentences with keywords missing. They were tasked with selecting the correct word from a set of options to complete the sentences.

Activity goals

- Enhance reading fluency by encouraging students to quickly recall and apply vocabulary, helping to improve reading speed and accuracy.
- Improve reading comprehension by requiring students to understand the sentence and select the appropriate word that fits the context.
- Increase motivation through the gamified nature of the activity, where students are rewarded for correct answers and progress, making the learning process more engaging.
- Reflect more carefully on their answers and learn new things through repetition of information instead of passively absorbing facts presented.
- Provide instant feedback on students' incorrect answers encouraging retention and correct usage of vocabulary.

Selection of Educational Materials

The selection process was guided by technical, contextual and mainly pedagogical considerations and all applications were tested through practitioners in advance to ensure their suitability for grade one pupils and alignment with the general objectives of the study (Felicia, 2009). According to Felicia (2009), from a technical perspective, priority was given to tools with a clear, intuitive interface that young learners could navigate independently (e.g. Kahoot!, Blooket). Additional

features such as audio control options, short activity duration and easy access across devices were also considered important for classroom integration (e.g. Wordwall). Customization options, including adjustable difficulty levels and task formats, were valued for supporting differentiated learning (e.g. English reading comprehension). She continues that contextual factors such as age appropriateness, language level and time required to complete activities should be carefully evaluated to ensure that tasks could be completed within limited classroom time. Pedagogically, emphasis was placed on applications that offer a gentle learning curve, clear objectives, visible progression and immediate, supportive feedback. Opportunities for collaboration and peer interaction were also considered essential, as competitive and cooperative game modes can enhance motivation and social engagement. It is important to also consider teachers' attitudes and experiences when implementing educational applications, as many may be using such tools experimentally rather than with prior expertise. From their perspective, personalized guidance, immediate feedback and emotional support remain fundamental for students' holistic development (Reche et al., 2024). Applications such as the ones described exemplify this balance. Kahoot! is one of the most frequently used applications in the literature, making it difficult to exclude from this study. Its widespread,

positive use and ease of implementation also help teachers feel more confident and comfortable using it in the classroom (Stakhova et al., 2024).

Procedure

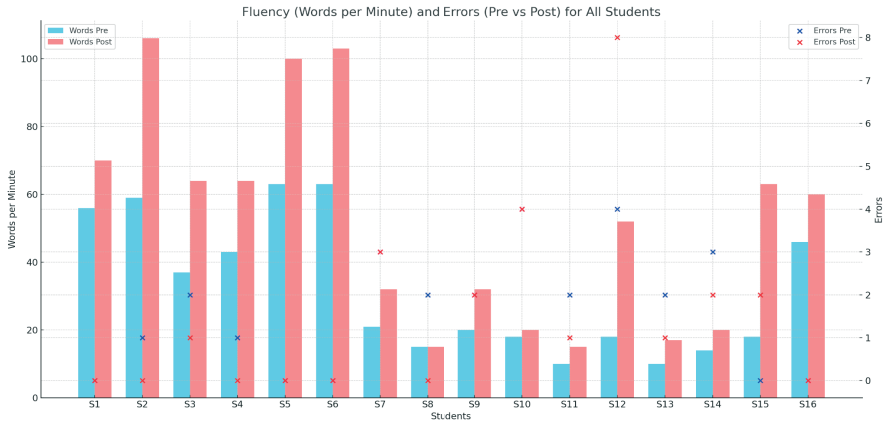
The process of collecting data from each participant was done individually, in a quiet place and in the presence of only the researcher. The study was conducted in accordance with ethical research guidelines; written informed consent was provided by parents, while students gave their verbal assent to participate in the study. Before data collection, participants were informed about the objectives of the study and the procedures to be followed and were assured that all recorded data would be used only for research purposes and the responses are confidential and their anonymity will be strictly secured. After the preliminary stages, the experiential part began, from 15/02/2024 to 15/06/2024. The first week prior the intervention was only the observation. The tablets were introduced at a frequency level of approximately three times a week for two teaching hours during the English language lesson. Both the researcher and the teacher thoroughly explained what a tablet is, how it works and what it was expected while using them. Each activity was as well explained in detail when it was time to implement them during the designated weeks. On the

first time, only five tablets were introduced, allowing the kids to take turns using them to become familiar with the devices. The next step involved placing one tablet on each desk, as they were seated in pairs and ended the bigger part of the study to work individually. Certain activities were intentionally designed to be completed by groups of two or three students to promote collaboration and teamwork. Over time, students became capable of independently connecting to the applications on their own by typing in the web, logging in the game, writing the password and their nickname.

Data Analysis Framework

Since DBR involves continuous cycles and multiple types of data resources they will be analyzed from different perspectives for more comprehensive outcomes. Content analysis and thematic analysis will be used; they are widely used analysis methods in qualitative research because they offer systematic and transparent procedures for organizing and interpreting non-numeric data, which helps to make the analytical process clear and replicable for children (Vaismoradi & Snelgrove, 2019). Both involve coding data and then grouping those codes into larger categories or themes that reveal patterns and insights relevant to the research question. Content analysis will systematically categorize and quantify

Table 1: Students reading fluency achievements, words they read per minute in pre and post tests.



data, breaking it into manageable pieces for evaluation. That means results from the pre- and post-tests individually for each student, their written or verbal responses and their scores from activities within mobile applications. Their performance across different reading tasks will be tracked and relate them with demographic characteristics and past interactions with reading materials and technology. Each student's data will be analyzed separately, then compared across groups for a detailed understanding of trends in relation to factors mentioned. Meanwhile, thematic analysis is mandatory to interpret those results and identify the recurring themes and patterns of participants' experiences.

Results

Fluency academic performance

From the data gathered, there is a difference between the pre- and post-tests in the number of words students read per minute and the errors they made (Table 1). On average, students read 47.8% more words in the post-test compared to the pre-test and their reading speed improved, with a 63.3% increase in words read per minute, rising from 31.9 words to 52.1. The mean number of errors decreased slightly by about 6%, which means their error rate per word actually improved, if we consider the

amount in words read in the post phase. Following up to the table below, it will be presented case studies of students to draw conclusions from their post-test responses and open-ended questions.

To begin with, S12, a foreign boy with only half a year of English learning and no spoken at home, showed progress with the use of the tablet, by increasing his reading output by a factor of 1.89, meaning he nearly doubled the reading performance almost twice over from pre- to post-test. His engagement levels were lower when using traditional methods, often appearing bored and unmotivated. The kid explained *“I learn better with a tablet. I focus more because I like using a tablet, but books make me distracted. I love it!”*. Apart from that, the reduction in errors showed a positive trend in reading accuracy with fewer mispronunciations and less skipping of words. Similarly, S15, she showed an extraordinary level of engagement when using the tablets compared to paper books from 18 words to 63, an increase of over 50% after four months of using the devices. Although she owns a tablet, using it occasionally for games, she doesn't regularly read on it. According to the feedback this high level of enthusiasm with reading materials in the school's tablets contributed to the ability to learn new vocabulary, an important factor to increase fluency. The apps supported the acquisition of words in a different manner and the ones that had more of

a competitive character *“make me feel that I want to achieve so I was focused on reading properly”*.

An interesting observation emerged with S7, from Czechia, who has been learning English for two years and does not speak the language at home but he regularly uses it with friends. It is also a student who had frequent access to a tablet at home. His familiarity with the device seemed to give him an apparent advantage during activities like Blooket, which required quick thinking and fast responses. Although S7's progress wasn't dramatic, it showed steady and consistent improvement over time. Initially S7 showed limited participation and struggled with unfamiliar or complex words, often pausing or hesitating. He increased his reading speed from 21 to 32 words per minute. As classroom activities increasingly integrated tablets, S7's convenience and proficiency with the device led to developments in word recognition, reduced hesitation and a stronger grasp of vocabulary, ultimately boosting his reading accuracy and general confidence.

S10, appears to have shown stable results without any difference from the pre-tests. This student often expressed how much he enjoyed the applications, calling them *“super fun”*. However, he did mention a challenge with some of the games, like Kahoot! and Blooket, which had fast-paced time limits. *“The speed sometimes made me feel stressed*

to read and pressured to answer quickly", which impacted the ability to read with speed, accuracy and with expression. Interestingly, when the activities became more personalized and student-centered, allowing him to work at his own pace individually on a tablet, he demonstrated greater comfort and confidence. Activities such as anagrams, crosswords and fill-in-the-gaps were particularly effective for improving word decoding, learning correct spellings and building a stronger vocabulary, which helped focus more carefully and reduce mistakes during reading.

It is also worth mentioning that S6, who is the one girl coming from an English speaking country, excelled in reading fluency and continues to perform well in this area. The results highlight an outcome: students for whom English is a second language might face further challenges in achieving fluency. Tablets helped to move from 63 to 103 words per minute, with zero errors in both assessments, demonstrating not only speed but also excellent prosody and accuracy. Unlike her peers, S6 likely entered the study with a solid foundation in vocabulary, grammar and phonemic awareness, which allowed her to benefit from the mobile learning intervention in a different way. Rather than catching up, she was able to extend and refine her skills. Her familiarity with English may have also enabled her to engage more deeply with the content of reading tasks, rather

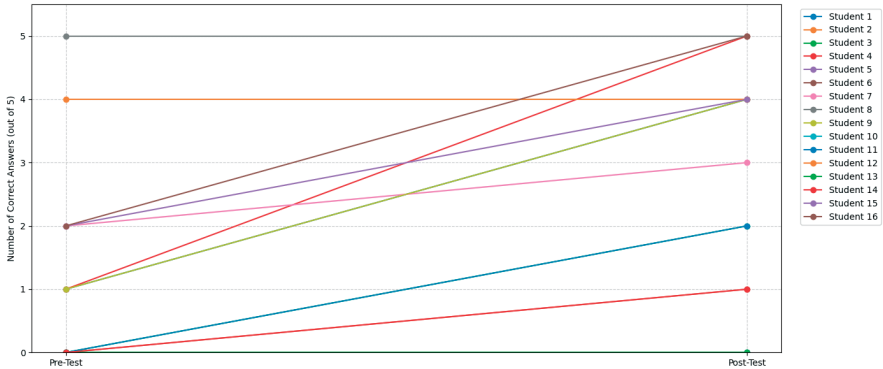
than focusing on decoding or basic comprehension. Lastly, she frequently requested to use the tablets in class, describing how much she valued the tool. The specific pupil called the tablet an *"amazing device"* and stated that she prefers it over traditional print-based reading activities, which she finds less appealing, even though she was, anyways, an excellent student.

Comprehension academic performance

Regarding comprehension, almost all participants were able to reply to at least more than one question of the text given at the end of the process (Table 2). On average, they answered 2.63 out of 5 questions correctly before the intervention and 3.75 out of 5 after it; this means their performance increased by about 42.6% overall.

As reflected in the data, S8, S9 and S12, initially identified as having poor understanding abilities of the material in the pre-tests, but over the time of the intervention, they acquired basic skills that enriched their performance. For instance, S8 expressed the enthusiasm for using the tablet, emphasizing: *"It's more fun to reply to questions on the tablet, I pay more attention to the meaning of the text because I like using the device. Books are also nice but when I have to read I am not focused much"*. The interactive nature of the tablet contributed to a higher

Table 2: Individual student progress in reading comprehension from pre- to post-tests.



level of concentration and understanding of the text. Apart from that, S9 increased the score from 1/5 questions to 4/5 and according to the background data, the kid used mobile devices regularly at home for only entertainment purposes. That perspective with the frequent digital exposure, even if it is non-educational, seemed better able to adapt to the mobile learning format. S9: *“Videos and sounds helped me look at them, as the combination of pictures, colors and sounds make the stories more attractive”*.

Other examples include the ones related to the English comprehension application. In the very first initial attempt, students 11, 13 and 14 faced challenges at level 1 and needed considerable guidance to complete the task. These students share a common charac-

teristic of having limited experience with the English language; ranging from just six months to two years and none of them speak English at home. This limited exposure likely influenced their initial struggles with the reading comprehension tasks, as they may not have been fully familiar with the vocabulary or structured language encountered in the assessment at level 1. In contrast, most other students were able to manage level 3 by themselves, with two even reaching level 5 in a shorter amount of time. To support their progress, the activity was revisited after the students practiced sentence composition and text comprehension through games like Wordwall. This repetition led to better understanding of the materials and at a quicker pace, which boosted their confidence and motivation

to reach higher levels in that application. While their progress was moderate, the small improvements seen in their scores can be considered meaningful given their minimal exposure to both the English language and educational technology. Till the end of the intervention all students were able by themselves to reach minimum level 5 in one academic hour. Students such as S1, S2, S4, S5 etc. showed impressive performance in both the pre- and post-tests. They shared that S2: *“earning points or completing levels can motivate me to read and learn more on a tablet than with just a book”*, S1: *“Mom and dad can’t help me with tablet because we don’t have at home and I don’t know how to do it alone, so I enjoy it here. Home I can read books.”* What distinguished Student 2 was his drive to excel in gamified tasks. He was highly motivated during competitive activities such as quizzes, where his desire to win seemed to boost his participation. This competitive edge likely contributed to his comprehension, as the fast-paced format pushed him to read quickly and accurately under pressure and focusing on the meaning of the sentences, even though English wasn’t his first language. His case shows how motivation can influence understanding and enhance the effectiveness of digital interventions in general reading literacy development, however there was a negative impact on some occasions when the Internet was unavailable, the student became visibly frustrated.

It’s important to mention that students were also asked to read aloud, allowing us to assess whether they were engaging with the text properly. Indeed, S16 made a note that during games like Kahoot!, she felt like reading aloud or maybe hearing the teacher read the questions aloud or the device having reading it, could provide further clarity and might help her process the information more effectively, in order to have more accurate answers. Her comment presents how auditory support can play a significant role and if we see that widely, the significance of multimodal learning environments, those that combine visual, textual and auditory inputs, as a way to support varied learning styles and improve outcomes. Portable devices appear to provide that advantage, enabling teachers to address the diverse needs of all learners.

Discussion

The outcomes confirm the research questions according to the existing literature and suggest that mobile learning environments enhanced both English reading fluency (e.g. Al Ali et al., 2024; Ahmed et al., 2022; Alharbi, 2022) and comprehension skills (e.g. Prados Sánchez et al., 2023; Nitiasih & Budiarta, 2021), as shown by differences in pre- and post-intervention test results. The intervention was most effective for students with the least English expo-

sure (0.5 to 2 years), especially from non-native backgrounds. Gender was not a major differentiator, though boys showed slightly more improvement due to initially lower scores. Country of origin and years of English learning were the most significant demographic factors influencing progress. Additionally, the findings suggest that the educational benefits of mobile learning are not solely dependent on prior digital experience or device ownership. Many students with some technological background still had an advantage but they showed progress, due to the importance of guided use, teacher support and purposeful integration of applications within lessons.

In the section where students were asked to describe what they enjoyed the most about using tablets, many emphasized that they are more entertaining and engaging tools compared to traditional books which have been already addressed in prior research (Moon, Francom & Wold, 2021; Isik, 2023). Reading progress was expected, given that the students were learning to read, yet the remarkable effect was the way tablets increased engagement. Motivation has been viewed as one of the primary determinants of student reading and understanding of the texts (Wigfield, Gladstone & Turci, 2016); pupils who are highly motivated spend more time reading, while those with low motivation often avoid reading activities (Alhamdu, 2015). In this study, the

dynamic and interactive features offered, provided opportunities for students who may find conventional text overwhelming or uninteresting. For example, students who generally expressed a dislike for reading, did not report any negative experiences during the intervention and even stated that they enjoyed reading on the tablets. In a context where learning to read in English can be particularly challenging, devices provided opportunities that encouraged internal interest, pleasure and curiosity. External features also appeared to positively influence outcomes as many students reported, e.g. awards, etc. Also, the gamified aspect of certain applications gave them a sense of achievement or “*winning*” and greatly motivated them to read carefully and pay closer attention to details in the text (Zahran, 2025). The countdown timer and background music in Kahoot! and Blooket didn’t distract from the questions; they reminded students of the competition.

Another essential factor that was examined was students’ feedback about what they enjoyed the least while using tablets. A significant part of responses emphasized internet connectivity as a major issue. As seen in the literature, technical problems and unreliable internet access can increase learners’ anxiety (Ebadi & Ashrafabadi, 2022). In this study, when the internet failed to work properly due to new infrastructure in the school, it impacted the overall

atmosphere among the students causing frustration, feelings of sadness and disappointment as some were able to progress faster in the tasks while others were delayed. Especially, the competitive element of some applications, which many pupils found motivating, became a source of disappointment during these interruptions (Salmerón et al., 2021). However, despite that challenge, the students remained eager to use the devices, with many being super motivated to continue working with them. And it is more than valuable to mention that this is one of the several challenges the research faced.

Furthermore, some instances were observed where students became distracted after completing the tasks they were supposed to (O'Toole & Kannass, 2018). Some were found engaging with other games instead of returning the tablets to adults, momentarily losing focus but this issue was promptly managed and their attention was redirected to the task at hand. On a different note, students raised concerns about the potential overuse of tablets and digital devices. They worried that frequent use might harm their eyesight, especially since they were already using screens at home. This concern points to the importance of balancing screen time and integrating non-digital activities to promote a healthy approach to technology in education (OECD, 2024). Lastly, teachers' lack of expertise can limit its effective use in the

classroom. They should reflect on their digital skills and stay informed about trends in mobile technologies to provide up-to-date, empirically supported evidence. Overall, there were no major issues throughout the intervention, but one important takeaway is the need for caution regarding the specific applications used. It would be beneficial to ensure that students are familiar with the apps beforehand, particularly in terms of safety features and login procedures. For example, certain platforms might require passwords or specific app downloads, which should be communicated clearly to the students ahead of time to avoid confusion and distractions. Interestingly, about 44% of students expressed a preference for both books and tablets. They recognized that each medium offers unique advantages; books provide a sense of familiarity, while tablets make reading fun and exciting. This dual appreciation suggests that tablets did not diminish the value of books but rather complement them.

Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate how a long-term mobile learning environment influences reading fluency and comprehension skills in first graders learning English. Design-based research, using iterative cycles of implementation and analysis, was employed as an innovative approach to generate new knowledge

and develop effective educational practices in today's rapidly evolving technological world. Research on this topic, especially in elementary education, remains limited. For that reason, this study contributes to the academic literature by showing that mobile devices can positively influence students on their reading achievements in fluency and comprehension. Motivation plays a central role in this effect and methods that maximize motivation when learning to read in another language are needed. Tools such as tablets appear to support this effectively. Given these considerations, the findings raise important questions for future research: Which specific features of tablet activities most effectively support reading fluency and comprehension across diverse classrooms and student populations? Do students participate in learning activities because they genuinely enjoy them or because they are motivated by the educational value they expect to earn? How can future interventions maximize the benefits of mobile learning while minimizing potential limitations or variability in student progress? Some limitations of the methodological approach should be acknowledged. Previous research shows that pre- and post-tests can be either identical or slightly different and when different but related tests are used, there may be a greater margin of error or regression effects. Factors such as school events (history), natural development (maturation),

repeated testing, changes in testing conditions (instrumentation), student absences (attrition) or naturally low starting scores (regression to the mean) may influence results (Marsden & Torgerson, 2012). Nonetheless, Direnga et al. (2017) explain that it is still possible to assess learning outcomes reliably. Many threats were minimized in this study, because students experienced the same learning environment, many educational practitioners and experts cooperated together and the intervention was delivered under consistent and supervised conditions. These controlled conditions and the use of multiple data collection tools reduce the likelihood that external factors explain the improvements observed in the post-tests. While including a control group would have strengthened the study, the composition of the participants did not allow for this. Therefore, the focus was on the individual reading development of each student before and after the intervention. In addition, measuring the long-term effects of design-based research interventions is complex, as educational outcomes may take time to materialize and external factors can interfere with results. For example, the active involvement of researchers in both the design and evaluation phases can introduce bias, as their close participation may unintentionally influence the development and assessment of the intervention, potentially compromising objectivity.

Other limitations that need to be considered as well is the relatively small sample size and participants' reading abilities were different. As a result, future research could benefit from involving a larger and more diverse sample to make the findings more widely applicable. The specific type of school where the research was conducted may have influenced the results and factors such as duration, teacher guidance, text selection and individual pacing, too. Apart from that, while this study highlights the potential of certain applications, exploring a broader range of apps, especially newer and more specialized ones, could

present different and perhaps more comprehensive results. It is also essential to prepare future educators to integrate digital devices effectively into their teaching, thereby fostering students' digital literacy. With appropriate training and thoughtful implementation, tablets can serve as powerful tools for developing reading skills both in and out of the classroom. While further research is needed, particularly in primary education, to assess long-term outcomes, this study provides a valuable foundation for understanding the potential of mobile learning environments in early reading literacy development.

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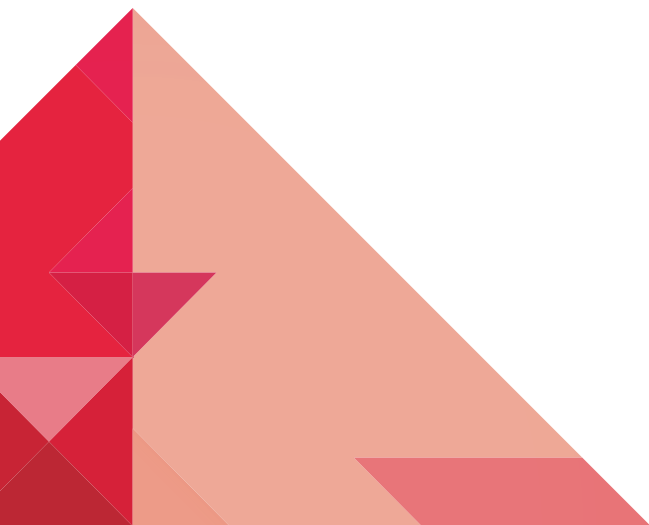
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