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Ph.D. COURSE IN: HUMAN RIGHTS, SOCIETY AND MULTILEVEL GOVERNANCE
CURRICULUM: INCLUSION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL GROWTH
CICLE: XXXVIII

FOSTERING INCLUSIVE CONTEXTS: THE ROLE OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND INCLUSIVE SOCIAL SKILLS TO FOSTER INCLUSION IN CHILDREN

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Declaration

I hereby declare that the present thesis is a product of my own intellectual efforts and that it has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification. It is hereby confirmed that the work submitted is the my own, with the exception of instances where it has been included in publications authored jointly with other researchers. My contributions and those of the other contributors to this work have been explicitly indicated below. It is hereby confirmed that appropriate credit has been given within this thesis where reference has been made to the work of others.

The work presented in Chapter 4 was previously published in the Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology as "'A journey towards Rightsland': An intervention to foster school inclusion" by Valbusa et al. (2025). All authors contributed to the study conception and design. The material preparation, data curation, and intervention implementation were performed by Isabella Valbusa. The first draft of the manuscript was written by Isabella Valbusa, with all authors providing feedback on successive versions of the document. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Abstract

In the contemporary school environment, there is an increasing recognition of heterogeneity among students. Heterogeneity is characterised by differences in cultural backgrounds, abilities, identities, and social conditions. While such diversity is undoubtedly a valuable resource for growth and learning, there are also risks of social exclusion, discrimination, and unequal opportunities, especially for children with stigmatised attributes or identities. In this context, the promotion of inclusion and respect for human rights emerges as a central challenge for contemporary education. In response to this challenge, the research project presented in this thesis investigates whether interventions integrating Positive Youth Development (PYD) and Human Rights Education (HRE) can effectively promote school inclusion from early childhood.

The research project addresses the overarching research question of whether promoting knowledge of and respect for participation rights and inclusive social skills in combination has the potential to strengthen positive peer relationships and reduce the risk of social exclusion. To address this research question, the theoretical foundations of the research have been developed, with the complementary contributions of PYD and HRE being highlighted. Furthermore, critical gaps have been identified, particularly the lack of integrated approaches in early childhood and primary school contexts. The research project was based on a quasi-experimental methodological design and included two empirical studies involving primary school (Study 1) and kindergarten (Study 2) students.

Study 1 developed, implemented and evaluated the efficacy of the intervention programme titled ‘A Journey Towards Rightsland’ with 167 primary school children (aged 8–10). The findings showed significant improvements in peer acceptance, inclusive social skills,

ability to collaborate with others, and the intention to help peers facing rights violations, with particularly positive effects for children at risk of social exclusion. Study 2 adapted the intervention for younger children through the design, implementation and evaluation of the intervention programme titled ‘A Jigsaw Puzzle of Rights’, which was conducted with 51 kindergarten children (aged 5). The results demonstrated increased recognition of rights violations, assertive reactions to discrimination and social exclusion, and an increase in peer acceptance within the experimental group.

The findings emphasise the value of integrating PYD and HRE to promote inclusive school contexts from the earliest years. The results of this research project offer significant contributions to both theory and practice. They demonstrate the developmental appropriateness and efficacy of early school-based interventions in promoting the knowledge of and respect for participation rights, as well as the development of inclusive social skills. The research project puts forward a series of recommendations for researchers and practitioners who are committed to the creation of school environments that actively uphold children’s rights and foster inclusive peer relationships.

Acknowledgments

Throughout the course of my doctoral journey and the process of writing this thesis, I have been fortunate to receive invaluable intellectual guidance and personal support from many people. Their encouragement and assistance were essential to the completion of this work.

Above all, I am deeply grateful to my supervisor, Professor Maria Cristina Ginevra, whose continuous support, thoughtful advice, and constructive feedback have been fundamental to my growth as a researcher. Her guidance has been a steady source of motivation, helping me navigate challenges and refine my work with clarity and confidence. I also wish to warmly thank my co-supervisor, Professor Sara Santilli, for her encouragement, insightful suggestions, and thoughtful reflections, which greatly enriched my doctoral experience and broadened the scope of my research. Both have been a constant source of inspiration, and I feel truly fortunate to have them by my side in my academic and research journey.

I am also thankful to the Human Rights Center Antonio Papisca for providing the institutional framework within which my doctoral studies took place. I am especially indebted to my PhD colleagues there, whose companionship, discussions, and encouragement made this journey less solitary and more enriching.

My heartfelt thanks al so go to the Larios (Laboratory of Research and Intervention for Vocational Guidance) research group, which has been the core academic community throughout this doctorate. I am particularly indebted to Professor Laura Nota, the Director of the Laboratory, whose leadership, vision, and generosity in sharing knowledge have been a constant source of guidance and inspiration. I am equally grateful to all members of Larios for

their collegial support and for creating a stimulating environment that encouraged me to carry forward my research project and my commitment to fostering more inclusive school contexts.

I also wish to extend my sincere appreciation to the schools and classes that kindly opened their doors to this project and shared their time and resources. Their trust and willingness to engage with the intervention programmes were essential in making this research possible. I am equally thankful to the teachers and participants, whose commitment and active engagement greatly enriched the relevance and impact of this work.

On a more personal note, I would like to thank my family for their encouragement. To my father and my sister, for showing their pride in me and for always believing in my abilities. My deepest thoughts also go to my late mother, whose encouragement and strength remain with me in spirit, guiding me through moments of challenge and reminding me of the importance of perseverance. I am also profoundly grateful to Antonino, my companion in life. His unwavering support, patience, and encouragement carried me throughout the most demanding moments of this doctorate.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge all those who, in ways large and small, contributed to this journey. This thesis is as much a testament to their kindness and support as it is to my own efforts.

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Glossary of abbreviations used

ADHD – Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

CPYD – Critical Positive Youth Development

HRE – Human Rights Education

ICC – Intra-Class Correlation

ICF – International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health

PYD – Positive Youth Development

SEN – Special Educational Needs

SES – Socio-Economic Status

UDHR – Universal Declaration of Human Rights

WHO – World Health Organization

1 Introduction

1.1 Chapter Overview

The present introductory chapter provides the background and rationale for the research project presented in this thesis. The chapter commences with a contextualisation of the current school contexts, which are marked by high levels of heterogeneity amongst students in relation to cultural background, abilities, identities and social conditions. It highlights the importance of fostering inclusion and upholding human rights. The chapter explores how the diversity present within contemporary schools, while potentially offering opportunities for growth and learning, may also lead to social exclusion, discrimination and unequal opportunities, particularly for children with stigmatized attributes or identities. The chapter then builds on recent international literature and policy frameworks to outline the conceptual foundations and evolution of inclusion as a dynamic and contextual process. It also considers the advantages and challenges posed by heterogeneous classrooms. The discussion frames the need for early intervention programmes that can foster inclusive social behaviours and relationships among peers. These programmes should promote knowledge of and respect for human rights, alongside the development of social skills. The chapter concludes with an introduction to the research question and the purpose of the research project.

1.2 Social Inclusion and Schools

In the contemporary era, children live in an interconnected and rapidly evolving world, characterised by global challenges and threats. This includes the persistence of

armed conflicts, the widening gap between the wealthy and the impoverished, the pervasiveness of discriminatory situations and the climate and environmental crisis (United Nations, 2019). These challenges and threats are intensifying migration processes, influencing the development of young generations worldwide and increasing opportunities for social and intercultural exchange and interaction in everyday life (Greener, 2022; Capua, 2020).

In recent times, some scholars have proposed the concept of *superdiversity*, which is defined as the coexistence of diverse linguistic and cultural differences in social contexts, leading to the emergence of new social positions, statuses and stratifications (Troyan & Auger, 2022; Vertovec, 2019). Vertovec (2019) uses this term to emphasise the considerable number of people who are linked to one another from different cultural, demographic and socioeconomic perspectives. These aspects are intertwined with other characteristics, such as gender, the presence of disabilities, learning difficulties, and so forth (Nota & Rossier, 2015), which represent heterogeneous conditions within social contexts. Furthermore, high levels of heterogeneity among children can be observed in today's school settings, which shape social interactions within classrooms and determine the extent of diversity associated with these interactions (Gabaldón-Estevan, 2020). The term *heterogeneity* is used to describe the presence of diversity among children, which can be attributed to several factors, including gender, ethnicity, migration status, sexual orientation and the presence of disabilities (Juvonen et al., 2019). The social and academic benefits associated with the presence of heterogeneity in classrooms are numerous (e.g., Gabaldón-Estavan, 2020). Conversely, the potential risks of social exclusion and marginalisation are also significant, particularly given the prevalence of discriminatory

behaviours and attitudes, especially towards students who may be perceived as different due to stigmatised attributes (e.g., those with disabilities, overweight) or identities (e.g., ethnic minority, immigrant status) (Hes & Švecová, 2021; Juvonen et al., 2019). This results in a significant risk of social isolation, anxiety, depression and other mental health issues for those who experience these situations, particularly for children and adolescents with vulnerabilities (Bacioglu, 2022; Sporer et al., 2020). Moreover, these circumstances represent a violation of the rights associated with social inclusion enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC; United Nations, 1989) (MacKenzie et al., 2020). To address and counteract the risks associated with the presence of heterogeneity in classrooms, school-based interventions for inclusion represent a means of promoting acceptance of diversity and fostering meaningful social relationships. Consequently, such interventions constitute a necessary condition for the realisation of social contexts that respect human rights, regardless of the differences that characterise everyone.

To foster an inclusive school culture, it is essential to consider the heterogeneity of classes and to seek solutions that will facilitate the acceptance and development of all those within them. It is crucial to involve classmates in fostering inclusion and preventing forms of social exclusion and discrimination. This can be achieved through the development of inclusive skills that facilitate harmonious coexistence, cooperation, and the nurturing of tolerance and support for others (Amor et al., 2019; Salmon-Letelier & Russell, 2022). However, the ways in which schools can address heterogeneity and promote inclusion vary substantially across different contexts.

Whilst the principles of inclusion and human rights are universal, their implementation and the challenges faced by schools vary considerably across cultural and

socio-economic contexts (Slee, 2019). In countries with well-developed education systems and strong legislative frameworks for inclusion, such as Italy and other European nations, schools often benefit from established policies, resources, and professional training to support inclusive practices (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2020). However, in many low- and middle-income countries, or where inclusion policies are less established, schools often face substantial challenges, including limited resources, large class sizes, inadequate teacher training, and cultural attitudes that may not prioritise diversity and equity (UNESCO, 2020). These structural and cultural differences shape the extent to which schools can address heterogeneity among students and promote inclusive interactions. Recognising this cross-cultural variability is essential for understanding how inclusion is enacted globally and for appreciating that interventions and policies effective in one context may require adaptation in others. Although the research project presented in this thesis is situated within the Italian context, which has a long tradition of inclusive policies, awareness of these international differences provides an important backdrop for discussing the broader significance of school inclusion and the challenges that persist worldwide.

The next sections of this chapter will address the implications of heterogeneous conditions within school contexts, with reference to the issue of inclusion. Specifically, the concept of heterogeneity will be examined in relation to its distribution in school settings. The concept of inclusion will also be explored considering the most recent literature. Subsequently, the advantages of heterogeneity in the classroom and the obstacles to inclusion will be examined.

1.2.1 Current School Contexts

Diversity is an essential aspect of modern society and a phenomenon that is increasingly visible in schools worldwide (Kilag et al., 2024). Indeed, in school contexts, children and adolescents with heterogeneous characteristics, in terms of gender, socio-economic status, presence of disabilities, etc., can be observed intertwining with each other, influencing the dynamics present in classrooms in terms of social interactions between peers (Gabaldón-Estevan, 2020).

A common theme in discussions of heterogeneity in school classrooms is the identification of conditions that represent vulnerabilities and the resulting difficulties. The most recent literature has focused on children and adolescents with disabilities and learning difficulties, and those with a migration background. These two conditions of vulnerability have been the subject of the most extensive research in the field of inclusion and discrimination within school contexts (Bellacicco et al., 2022; Schachner et al., 2021).

Regarding students with disabilities and learning difficulties, numerous studies refer to them as children with Special Educational Needs (SEN), also indicating attention problems such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). While in some countries these students are placed in separate classes from their peers without disabilities or other difficulties (Schwab et al., 2024), in the Italian context, there is a long tradition of inclusion in regular classes. In the school context, there has been an increase in the number of pupils with disabilities over the years, from 1.4% in 1997 to 3.1% in 2017, reaching 4.3% in 2023 (MIUR, 2019; MIM, 2023). The current student population of Italian schools is approximately 7 million, of whom 311,201 have a disability (MIM, 2024). Among pupils with disabilities, intellectual impairment is the most prevalent

condition, representing 37% of this population. Developmental disorders follow, present in 32% of students with disabilities, while SEN are observed in nearly a fifth of this group. Problems associated with motor impairments (10.5%) and sensory difficulties (visual or auditory) are less frequent, at approximately 8%. Moreover, 39% of these pupils with disabilities have multiple conditions, a situation particularly frequent among those with intellectual impairments, representing 54% of them. Most students possess the required certification, enabling access to the necessary school-based support. However, the support provided is often inconsistent, with 60% of students changing support teachers from one year to the next and 9% during the same school year (ISTAT, 2024). Moreover, some students do not receive support due to a lack of certification or enough support teachers (MIM, 2023).

For students with a migration background, contemporary school environments are characterised by ethnic and cultural diversity as a consequence of international migration (International Organization for Migration, 2019; OECD, 2019). Between 2009 and 2018, there was a notable increase in the number of students belonging to ethnic minorities (i.e., individuals born outside the country of destination or with at least one parent born outside the country of destination; European Commission, 2020) (OECD, 2019). In the Migrant Integration Policy Index report (MIPEX; Solano & Huddleston, 2020), Italy is classified as a *middle of the road* country, where fundamental rights and equal opportunities have been largely extended to students with a migrant background. However, integration policies tend to foster a dichotomous perception of these individuals: on the one hand as equals and neighbours, on the other as foreigners. Italy is regarded as one of the primary destination countries in Europe (United Nations, 2019), with over six million individuals

originating from diverse countries, predominantly from Eastern Europe (e.g., Romania, Albania, and Ukraine), North Africa (e.g., Morocco), and Asia (e.g., China). Pupils with a migration background represent 9.4% of the Italian school population, with a substantial proportion comprising children and adolescents with a first- and second-generation migration history (3.6% and 6.8%, respectively; Ministry of Education - Office for Statistics and Studies, 2021). Of these, 67.5% were born in Italy. Regarding provenance, approximately 44% of students with non-Italian citizenship are of European origin, over a quarter originate from Africa, around 20% are from Asia and almost 8% are from Latin America (Fondazione ISMU, 2024).

In addition to the presence of disability and migration background, other conditions of vulnerability are increasingly being considered by scholars engaged in the field of school inclusion (e.g., gender identity, sexual orientation, poverty, etc.) (Antoninis et al., 2020). Nevertheless, there is a paucity of studies that analyse these conditions or examine their social consequences in school contexts.

1.2.2 How Do Schools Address Pupils' Heterogeneity?

In light of the heterogeneity observed in school contexts, scholars engaged in the field of *school inclusion* propose two main perspectives on conceptualising this phenomenon (Messiou et al., 2020). The first emphasises the importance of protecting specific groups, including children and adolescents who differ in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, country of origin, religion and disability. The second considers a broader range of personal, demographic and organisational characteristics.

Regarding the first perspective, most of the current information on diversity and heterogeneity in school settings is developed in accordance with the initial

conceptualisation of heterogeneity, which, however, is subject to certain limitations. Specifically, as Zhang et al. (2016) observe, the inherent complexity of representing all differences within social contexts precludes the possibility of encompassing all group characteristics within a single definition. Consequently, characteristics that are not explicitly listed may be perceived as being overlooked. The second perspective is more recent and encompasses all elements that are not considered conditions of vulnerability. This position encourages the promotion of equality for all individuals, regardless of their characteristics (Messiou et al., 2020).

In school settings, contemporary scholars advocate for a more inclusive and equity-oriented perspective to address heterogeneity, thus embracing the more recent conceptualisation. Specifically, Antoninis et al. (2020) state that inclusion is a process that contributes to the achievement of social inclusion that is generalised to multiple contexts, extending beyond the school context. Moreover, the authors posit that this requires a distinction between *equality* and equity, where the former refers to the state of things and the resulting outcome, whereas *equity* is a process that is contingent upon the actions taken to ensure equality. Consequently, defining school inclusion is a challenging endeavour, as it encompasses both equity and equality. As far as the latter is concerned, actions that value diversity and heterogeneity and contribute to the creation of a sense of belonging are based on the assumption that every person possesses inherent value and deserves respect, regardless of their background, abilities or identity (Messiou et al., 2020).

Considering the aforementioned developments in the field of inclusion, it is crucial to acknowledge that the definition of school inclusion that is currently in use is

the result of a lengthy process, the details of which will be outlined in the following section.

1.3 Inclusion and Equity for All

In recent times, several scholars have underscored the necessity of conceptualising heterogeneity in the classroom inclusively, to promote equity and equality for all students (Bayram Özdemir & Özdemir, 2020; Schachner et al., 2021). This is in line with the broader objective of valuing and respecting everyone's differences.

This conceptualisation of *diversity* has emerged as a result of numerous progressive efforts that have led to the implementation of international policies, especially following the publication of the '2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' (United Nations, 2015). This Agenda, with its Goal 4 on *inclusive and equitable quality education*, calls for the promotion of *lifelong learning for all*. It also aims to create a "just, equitable, tolerant, open, and socially inclusive world in which the needs of the most vulnerable are met" (United Nations, 2015, paragraphs 8 and 9). Consequently, the concept of school inclusion has undergone a process of evolution, resulting in the emergence of a conceptualisation of a *school for all,* founded upon the principles of universal access and non-discrimination (Bellacicco et al., 2022).

In the international context, scholars refer to the fact that all students should be considered as active members of the educational institutions they attend (Slee, 2019). Therefore, the process of inclusion concerns all stakeholders. However, historically, the principle of inclusion has been primarily associated with children and adolescents with disabilities, whose inclusion into mainstream school classes has been viewed as a fundamental aspect of human rights (Gordon-Gould & Hornby, 2023). Initially, it was

acknowledged that physical disability should not impede access to education, whereas intellectual disability remained a significant challenge. Nevertheless, the principle of inclusion as a fundamental human right for all, regardless of disability, began to gain traction. This led to a shift in perspective, whereby students with intellectual disabilities were no longer viewed as exceptions, but rather as children with the same entitlement to school inclusion as any other student.

In Italy, the concept of inclusion has evolved since the 1970s, when civil rights legislation was enacted to guarantee that all children and adolescents with disabilities had the right to receive a free education. Specifically, the concept of *school inclusion* of students with disabilities was proposed, whereby these students would be integrated into regular and mainstream classes (Ianes et al., 2020). Before this, at the beginning of the 20th century, the notion that many of those children and adolescents who were previously deemed unteachable could, if appropriately stimulated, learn and develop autonomy, began to gain ground as a result of the pioneering experimental observations conducted by Maria Montessori. This resulted in the establishment of the first special schools, which were attended exclusively by students with disabilities or other vulnerabilities, and the advent of discourse surrounding the concept of education for all. Other scholars emphasised the necessity of providing assistance to children experiencing difficulties. By the end of the 1970s, the closure of special schools and the placement of all children with disabilities into mainstream educational institutions had become a prominent policy initiative (Bellacicco et al., 2022).

The *placement* of students with disabilities in mainstream classes gave rise to a series of initiatives that progressively enabled their active participation in school activities alongside their peers.

1.3.1 From Placement to Integration

The mere physical inclusion of pupils with disabilities within regular classes is reductive and insufficient (Amor et al. 2019). Consequently, the term *integration* is proposed as a more appropriate alternative. This indicates the necessity of facilitating the active participation of all students with difficulties in school life and their active involvement in the activities conducted, with the provision of support that respects the specific needs of everyone (Nilholm & Göransson, 2017).

The concept of integration has been the subject of considerable attention at the international level, with several initiatives advocating for the rights of persons with disabilities to learn alongside their peers, celebrate diversity, and promote equal opportunities (Foreman, 2020). In the Italian context, this shift in perspective has also begun to be considered by policies, with the enactment of laws such as Law No. 517 of 1977, which regulated access to primary schools (Art. 2) and secondary schools (Art. 7) for students with disabilities of all types and severity. The legislation stipulated that teaching and learning processes had to be based on collective responsibility and on educational and didactic planning that had to be carried out with due consideration for the unique characteristics of different students. The school is increasingly perceived as a place of belonging for all members of society, rather than solely for those deemed fit to attend. This shift in perspective constituted an initial step towards the respect of the rights of those experiencing the most significant difficulties, a principle that is also articulated

in the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994). This document emphasises the necessity to ensure the provision of high-quality education and equal opportunities for social participation for all students in all school activities, with the aim of guaranteeing access to education for all children and adolescents, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, or linguistic condition.

Nevertheless, this specific focus on individuals with disabilities does not fully address the complex and varied needs that arise from the heterogeneity observed in school settings. This limitation precludes the possibility of achieving full inclusion, which, in contrast to the notions of placement and integration, pertains to the contextual ability to promote active participation and satisfactory standards of living for all members of society, extending beyond those with disabilities (Wehemeyer & Shogren, 2021).

1.3.2 From Integration to Inclusion

The transition from the concept of integration to that of *inclusion is the* result of a shift in emphasis from individual students with disabilities to the school context. Considering this, the focus is no longer on the exclusive needs of students with disabilities, but rather on the specific necessities of contexts to meet the needs of all students, including those with disabilities (Schwab et al., 2024)

A review of scientific publications from 2016 to 2019 reveals a progressive increase in the number of articles discussing inclusion in this sense, both internationally and in Italy (Bellacicco et al., 2022). Indeed, there is a growing emphasis on the distinctive attributes of each child and adolescent, and a corresponding affirmation of the right to receive an education that is commensurate with their peers in an environment that encourages active participation, collaboration, and academic and social achievement

regardless of the presence of vulnerabilities (Slee, 2019). In fact, the most recent paradigm of inclusion challenges the simplistic identification of vulnerability based on a focus on difficulties and deficits (Nota et al., 2015). Conversely, the active involvement of all stakeholders in school contexts is essential to fostering a culture of inclusion that celebrates heterogeneity and differences as a source of strength. It is only in this way that *full inclusion* can be achieved, ensuring that all individuals have access to an education of a sufficient quality and standard that prepares the younger generation to become independent and to feel included in their communities (Gordon-Gould & Hornby, 2023).

The increasing presence of heterogeneous conditions in school contexts has prompted international organisations and local governments to develop best practices for their inclusion into the school system. Specifically, at the European level, the Eurydice report 'Promoting diversity and inclusion in school in Europe' (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2023) analyses existing policies at the national level that promote the valorisation of diversity and inclusion in school education in Europe. The report shows that policies and measures are widely implemented in most European school systems, including Italy. For instance, the European Commission (2020) reaffirmed its commitments to inclusion, empowerment of individuals and the promotion of democratic societies through priorities and action lines for the promotion and defence of human rights and democracy. Specifically, in 2020 a series of strategies were adopted to combat discrimination and promote diversity, equity and inclusion, including the school context. Similarly, Italian policies on inclusive education emphasise the role of equity and inclusion in schools, providing guidelines for the involvement of all those engaged in the growth and education of children and adolescents, from parents to teachers, school

managers and other professional figures (Legislative Decree no. 96 amends Legislative Decree no. 66/2017).

As can be seen from this historical overview, the evolution of the concept of school inclusion in international literature and policies is mainly related to a shift in focus from students with specific characteristics of vulnerability, namely students with disabilities, to a focus on all students attending school settings regardless of their attributes or identities.

1.3.3 Towards a Broader Understanding of Inclusion

In promoting inclusive school environments, it is essential to consider the diverse contexts in which people live, as this shapes their quality of life and social participation (Nota & Rossier, 2015). Indeed, school inclusion should serve as a basis for broader social inclusion, which should be extended to other contexts (e.g., community, sports, etc.). This would facilitate the formation of positive social relationships and promote inclusive learning and work experiences (Antoninis et al., 2020).

Therefore, the concept of inclusion concerns contextual changes that can meet the social and educational needs of all students (Bellacicco et al., 2022), regardless of gender, culture, educational requirements or social background (Haug, 2017). This entails a focus on students' strengths, that is to say, their abilities and unique characteristics, and not their deficits and difficulties. This concept of inclusion is also evident at the international level, for example, in the ICF (International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health), developed by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2007). The ICF describes and measures health and disability, focusing on human functioning and the interactions between health conditions, environmental factors, and personal characteristics. In this

way, the ICF (WHO, 2007) advocates a shift in focus from abilities and functioning at the individual level to a consideration of the activities, participation and impact of the environment and health conditions of people with disabilities.

As previously stated, the concept of inclusion is contingent upon context. *Context*, in this sense, refers to the set of circumstances that characterise the living environment of the individuals within that environment (Nota et al., 2015). It can be conceptualised as both an independent and an intervening variable (Shalock et al., 2020). As an *independent variable*, context encompasses personal and environmental characteristics that are typically not manipulated, such as age, language, culture, ethnicity, gender and family. As an *intervening variable*, context pertains to systems and social policies and practices that can be modified to improve human functioning. Furthermore, the concept of context is integrative in nature, providing a framework for the description and analysis of personal and environmental aspects that impact individuals (Shalock et al. 2020). In the field of inclusion, this analysis could facilitate the planning of inclusive practices and policies by positively influencing the development and growth of individuals and contexts.

This definition is aligned with the multidimensional model proposed by Shogren et al. (2020). This model posits that contexts possess three fundamental properties: they are multilevel, multifactorial and interactive. These three dimensions are represented in *Figure 1.* Regarding *multilevel* property, contexts can be understood as micro-, meso- and macro-levels. As for the *multifactoriality*, it refers to the fact that there are several contextual factors that can influence outcomes. Finally, concerning the *interactivity*, different elements at distinct levels interact in different ways that can be more or less helpful for change over time. This model can be used as a reference for the improvement

of social contexts and the promotion of social change (Shogren et al., 2020). This requires a contextual analysis across these three levels as social change is produced by exchanges and actions between these levels. This model makes it clear that a change towards building inclusive social contexts is a complex process that goes beyond just considering individual difficulties and vulnerabilities. Therefore, it becomes essential to also consider the others who make up the different environments, including students with and without vulnerabilities who attend school settings.

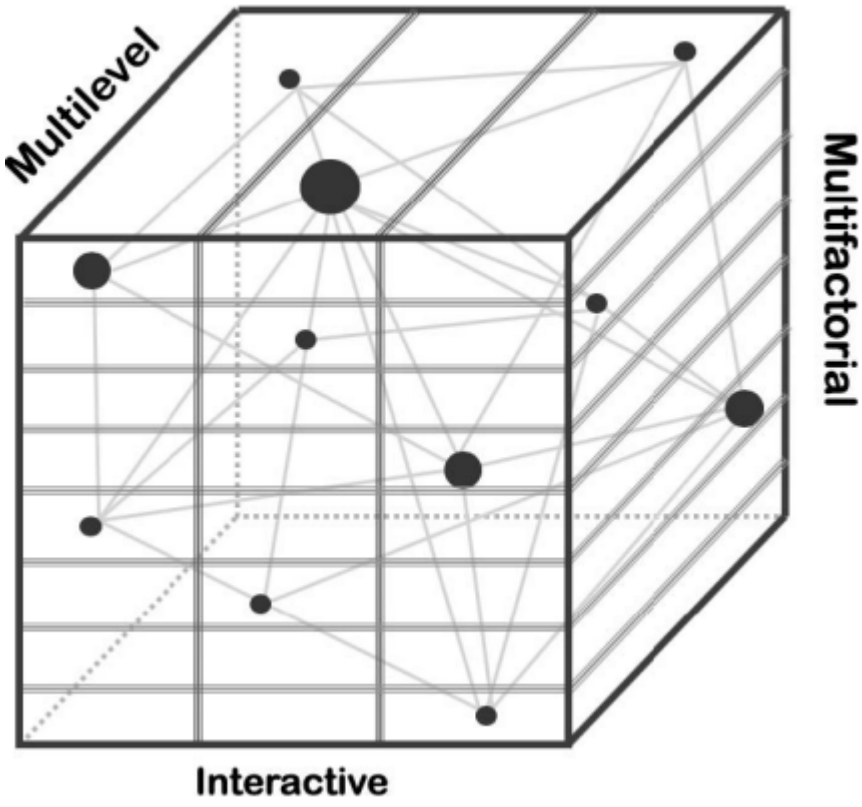

Figure 1. *A multidimentional model of context (Shogren et al., 2020)*

In conclusion, an inclusive social context should be welcoming, tolerant and supportive, recognising the differences between individuals and taking care to meet their needs (Merrigan & Senior, 2020; Schwab et al., 2024). It should also acknowledge the

heterogeneous characteristics of its members and, among its basic requirements, emphasise the need to promote the building of positive social relationships between peers and the acceptance of diversity. To achieve this, it is necessary to act on several levels and consider the interaction between different elements that impact on those attending the schools. Students are of primary importance, as they can be enriched through their relationship with each other.

1.4 The Advantages of Heterogeneous and Inclusive School Contexts on Students

The opportunity to attend classes with children and adolescents with heterogeneous conditions is beneficial for all students involved. Several studies have demonstrated that the inclusion of students with disabilities and migration backgrounds in mainstream classes has a positive impact on both academic performance and social skills (e.g., Karataş et al., 2022; Kart & Kart, 2021; Kefallinou et al., 2020; Ordaz & Mosqueda, 2021). This is achieved by creating an inclusive school context that values heterogeneity and diversity (Dalcin, 2022).

Most studies analysing the cognitive and social benefits of school inclusion focus on the advantages for students with disabilities. Recently, however, some scholars have begun to consider the benefits for typically developing children as well. In the case of students with disabilities, Kefallinou et al. (2020) posit that school inclusion facilitates enhanced academic success, as well as provides the opportunity for growth and development in inclusive contexts, especially from early childhood onwards. Conversely, the authors argue that separation from their classmates can result in regression. In another systematic review, Alshoutwi et al. (2020) investigated the effects of inclusive contexts

on the school performance and social interactions of students with hearing disabilities. The findings indicated that inclusive environments were associated with improved school performance and social interactions. Furthermore, from a behavioural perspective, inclusion allows all students to observe social behaviours among their peers, including completion of work, staying seated during instruction, raising a hand to be called upon, and so forth (Kefallinou et al., 2020). In this way, students who have a disability may experience peer acceptance when they are engaged by their classmates. Therefore, they are exposed to socially acceptable behaviours and behavioural norms that facilitate the improvement of their behaviours.

Since school inclusion requires that all learning environments ensure growth and development for all students, some scholars have recommended an examination of the effects of school inclusion on typically developing students (Francisco et al., 2020; Katz & Kart, 2021). Considering cognitive effects, a review of the literature reveals that inclusion in early school grades is associated with positive outcomes, whereas these effects tend to be neutral as the years progress (Kart & Kart, 2021). Furthermore, a longitudinal study (Szumski et al., 2022) revealed that the academic achievement of typically developing students remains consistent throughout their academic careers, regardless of the presence and participation of peers with disabilities in their classrooms. Regarding social effects, Roldan et al. (2021) highlight that typically developing students benefit from interaction with peers with disabilities, learning respect, acceptance of differences and developing new friendships. Moreover, students without disabilities show a reduction in fear, prejudice and discrimination, leading to an increase in tolerance and understanding (Kart & Kart, 2021). Manitsa et al. (2023) analysed the impact of inclusion

on the social skills of adolescents with and without visual impairment, and their findings indicated beneficial outcomes for both. In light of these recent studies, it can be concluded that typically developing students benefit from school inclusion and heterogeneity in classrooms, resulting in improved school performance and social interactions.

The advantages of heterogeneous classrooms are also associated with the differences inherent to *cultural diversity* (Rucinski et al., 2019). This can be defined as the percentage of students with a migrant background and the number of different ethnic groups (Aral et al., 2021). It provides opportunities for social interaction between students with different ethnic and cultural backgrounds within schools, thereby offering basic institutional support for the development of respectful peer relationships (Karataş et al., 2022). In this regard, Rucinski et al. (2019) analysed the association between the presence of culturally diverse children in classrooms and social-emotional development. Their findings revealed a positive association between cultural diversity in classrooms and children's social competence. The authors posit that these association may be stable even in the presence of changes in the classroom context. In a more recent study, Aral et al. (2021) conducted an analysis to explore the association between cultural diversity and positive social relations among peers. Their findings indicated that culturally diverse school contexts engaged in intercultural learning could facilitate the promotion of positive social relations among local and refugee youth in schools and society.

In addition to the social benefits, there are cognitive effects for both native students and those with a migration background. Concerning the latter, Ordaz and Mosqueda (2021) demonstrated that inclusive environments based on peer acceptance enable students from diverse backgrounds to achieve better academic outcomes. A further

study by Karataş et al. (2022) revealed that the opportunity to participate in educational and extracurricular activities is associated with improved academic achievement, as broader social inclusion is achieved, which extends beyond the classroom setting. Even for native pupils, school inclusion and the active participation of both native students and pupils with a migrant background in the same classroom context can mitigate the negative effects of disadvantageous conditions such as low family socioeconomic status (SES), with positive effects on their educational outcomes (Ordaz & Mosqueda, 2021).

1.5 The Barriers to School Inclusion

Despite the advantages of inclusion outlined above, students with stigmatised attributes (i.e., disabilities) or identities (i.e., migrant background) are at greater risk of social exclusion and discrimination, bullying and victimisation (Juvonen et al., 2019; Nota et al., 2019). It is therefore crucial to examine the barriers to inclusion to develop structured interventions that foster the appreciation and acceptance of diversity.

One of the barriers to school inclusion is the tendency to emphasise the difficulties of those with vulnerabilities. Focusing on a specific vulnerability leads to the categorisation of people, emphasising aspects considered inadequate and neglecting positive attributes as well as the inherent differences within the same class (Nota et al., 2015). This phenomenon is referred to as *labelling* and is a primary contributor to the formation of prejudices and stereotypes that impede opportunities for coexistence, increase the occurrence of discrimination and social exclusion, and are particularly prevalent in the case of children and adolescents with vulnerabilities (Chatzitheochari et al., 2022).

Labelling is a fundamental cause of social exclusion and discrimination against individuals who are perceived as having characteristics considered undesirable. This phenomenon acts throughout certain negative processes. These processes, as identified by Wright (1991) and highlighted by Matos et al. (2023), include deindividualisation, stigmatisation and social distance. *Deindividualisation,* defined as the act of placing emphasis on the stereotypical attributes associated with a particular group, can lead to individuals being judged based on their diagnostic label rather than their unique and positive characteristics. This phenomenon can be observed in the context of disability, where a student with a disability may be perceived as a single entity, defined by their diagnosis, rather than as an individual with inherent strengths and abilities (Nota et al., 2015). The process of *stigmatisation* can be understood as a result of the emphasis placed on negative aspects. The use of words such as *disabled*, *fat*, and *ugly* causes both the person in question and those around them to direct their attention towards these negative aspects, which in turn impacts the quality of social interactions. *Social distance* is the tendency to view those who have been labelled as belonging to different groups and often in opposition to everyone else (Matos et al., 2023). These processes give rise to a cycle of labelling that jeopardises young people's opportunities for social participation (Deakin et al., 2022). Certain groups of individuals who are considered vulnerable are ascribed the label *risky*, which results in discrimination (Matos et al., 2023).

The use of labels and categorisation is also reinforced by the deployment of *formal or official labels,* which educational institutions request for certification purposes, and which are also enacted in the form of legal decrees that favour the introduction of new diagnoses and differentiations in school contexts (O'Connor et al., 2022). In this regard,

policies, resources and culture can present barriers to the realisation of school inclusion (Antoninis et al., 2020). These dynamics are becoming increasingly prevalent in school contexts, hindering the initiation of social interactions with individuals perceived as different and hindering the formation of positive social relationships among all students (Chatzitheochari et al., 2022). Link & Phelan (2014) discuss the phenomenon of *interactional discrimination*, which occurs in social relationships with people who have stigmatised status. This, in turn, leads to low-status assignment and social exclusion, and this is partly because the use of labelling expressions gives rise to the development of negative attitudes towards these persons, thereby impeding the potential for the initiation of social relations and inclusive processes (Matos et al., 2023). Furthermore, this results in constrained opportunities for active participation in activities within both the school and extracurricular contexts. This is due to the need for augmented support, such as the provision of simplified tasks or the alteration of playing rules for sports, to enable the active involvement of those experiencing difficulties (Rojo-Ramos et al., 2023).

These processes have significant consequences for the quality of social interactions between children with and without stigmatised attributes or identities. For example, studies indicate that children with disabilities are less frequently involved in play and recreation activities with their typically developing peers. Furthermore, when pupils with disabilities are included, they are often invited to participate in quieter activities, such as playing video games or watching television (Ostroky et al., 2015; Woodgate et al., 2020). Similarly, research has demonstrated that students with migration status are more likely to play alone unless they are in a class with individuals of their

nationality. This phenomenon is observed not only in newly arrived pupils but also in second-generation migrant students (Cavicchiolo et al., 2020).

Moreover, the persistence of circumstances that engender discrimination and social exclusion increases the likelihood of adverse mental health outcomes, including anxiety, depression and behavioural problems (Bacioglu, 2022; Spörer et al., 2020). Indeed, several studies have demonstrated that experiencing social exclusion can lead to increased mental and physical distress (e.g., Wesselmann et al., 2023), which can result in both short-term and long-term problems, especially during childhood and adolescence. These periods are characterised by significant changes, making them more vulnerable and at risk of developing depression and experiencing negative social events (Niu et al., 2023).

It is therefore important to intervene at the earliest possible stage to promote the inclusion of all students in the classroom and to prevent the occurrence of discriminatory behaviours and social exclusion. To achieve this, it is essential to equip all students with the knowledge and abilities to effectively address and counteract such situations when they arise.

1.6 Problem Statement

It is acknowledged that the issue of inclusion and the ways of dealing with heterogeneity in school contexts are of concern to schools all over the world. In light of this, the chapter has provided a concise overview of the students that make up today's school classes, with a particular emphasis on the European and Italian contexts.

The heterogeneity of pupils in contemporary classrooms represents an opportunity to initiate interactions with peers from different cultural and personal backgrounds.

Nevertheless, this presents a significant challenge to the construction of inclusive environments. In the absence of adequate support for diversity, there is an elevated risk of social exclusion and discrimination, especially for students who are perceived as different or vulnerable. These experiences can be considered a serious violation of children's rights, with the potential to hinder their well-being and development. It is therefore vital to foster the development of an inclusive school culture that prioritises the well-being of all students, including those who may be vulnerable and at risk of social exclusion. To achieve this, it is essential to develop and implement structured preventive intervention programmes from early childhood onwards. Such programmes should promote positive social relationships between peers and prevent the occurrence of social exclusion and discrimination.

Two promising elements in this process are the knowledge of and respect for the rights associated with social inclusion and participation (MacKenzie et al., 2020), and the development of inclusive social skills (Paricio et al., 2020). While both aspects have been recognised independently in prior research, there has been a paucity of interventions that have been empirically validated across different developmental stages, and few studies that address them together. This research project responds to this gap by validating a school-based intervention programme aimed at promoting school inclusion.

1.7 Research Aim

The objective of this research project was to develop, implement and evaluate the efficacy of a school-based intervention programme designed to promote school inclusion in primary school and kindergarten children, through the integration of two theoretical approaches: the Human Rights Education (HRE; Howe & Covell, 2021) to foster

knowledge of and respect for children's rights associated with social inclusion and participation, and the Positive Youth Development (PYD; Gonzalez et al., 2020; Lerner et al., 2021) to develop inclusive social skills to promote positive peer relationships and counteract discrimination and social exclusion from early developmental stages.

The overarching research question guiding this thesis is as follows:

Does the combination of knowledge of and respect for children's rights associated with social inclusion and participation, and the development of inclusive social skills, promote school inclusion in Italian primary school and kindergarten children?

To address this overarching question, two empirical studies were conducted. Study 1 aimed to design, implement and evaluate the efficacy of the intervention programme with primary school students in fostering inclusive social skills, ability to collaborate with classmates, intention to help hypothetical classmates whose rights are violated, peer acceptance and positive social behaviours, especially towards classmates at risk of social exclusion. Study 2, a pilot study, explored the preliminary efficacy of a developmentally adapted version of the same intervention programme for kindergarten students. The programme focused on the children's ability to recognise rights violations, their inclusive social skills to assertively counteract situations of discrimination and social exclusion, and peer acceptance.

1.8 Contribution of the Research Project

The present research project is grounded in the conceptual recognition that the inclusion of all children in school is a fundamental aspect of human rights (Gordon-Gould & Hornby, 2023). Despite the emphasis placed on the importance of children's social participation and inclusion in international policies and documents, such as the CRC

(United Nations,1989), empirical research has shown that instances of social exclusion and discrimination persistently occur within school contexts, often beginning in early childhood (Juvonen et al., 2019; MacKenzie et al., 2020).

Several intervention studies have been conducted to foster school inclusion in children, with a focus on either the promotion of knowledge of and respect for human rights based on HRE (e.g., Howe & Covell, 2021; Jones & Manion, 2023) or the development of inclusive social skills based on PYD (e.g., Ginevra et al., 2020; Larsen, 2021). However, the integration of these two variables into a unified structured intervention programme is a rarity. This research project integrates for the first time the two theoretical approaches of PYD and HRE to design an intervention programme aimed at fostering inclusion in primary school and kindergarten children.

From a developmental psychology perspective, intergroup biases and social hierarchies emerge during early childhood and become more pronounced during late childhood (Babik & Gardner, 2021; Nesdale & Dalton, 2011). The research project focuses on kindergarten and primary school as developmental stages for preventive interventions. By fostering inclusive peer relationships and rights-respectful behaviours at these stages, it is possible to counteract early forms of social exclusion and discrimination before they become more consolidated. A further distinctive element of this research project is the focus on children at risk of social exclusion, identified not through specific personal characteristics such as disability or migrant background, but rather through low levels of peer acceptance and high levels of peer rejection. This broader, relational approach allows the identification of children at risk of social

exclusion, regardless of visible markers of diversity, thereby aligning with contemporary perspectives on school inclusion.

From a methodological perspective, the research aimed to address the common limitations identified in the literature, such as small sample sizes, lack of control groups, exclusive reliance on self-report measures, and failure to account for the nested structure of school-based data through appropriate statistical methods such as multilevel mixed-effects models (Raudenbush & Schwartz, 2020). Across the two studies, attention was paid to ensuring an adequate design. In Study 1, multilevel mixed models were employed to account for the nested data structure (students within classes), thereby providing robust estimates of intervention effects. Additionally, both studies incorporated control groups and both indirect and direct observation procedures. This ensured a balance between methodological rigour and the practical constraints of school-based interventions (Oates & Night, 2016).

Finally, the goal of this research project was to validate an effective and adaptable intervention programme that could be implemented in different school settings. The intervention programme was designed for implementation in kindergarten and primary school settings, considering constraints of the school environment and developmental characteristics of children. The feasibility of the intervention programme and its contextualisation in the design enhance its potential for sustainability and integration into school practices. Therefore, this thesis contributes to both the academic literature and the practical implications for fostering more inclusive school environments.

1.9 Chapter Overviews

In the following chapters, the theoretical and empirical foundations of the present research project are developed in detail. Chapter 2 critically reviews the theoretical frameworks of PYD and HRE, highlighting their contributions, limitations, and gaps, and establishing the rationale for their integration to promote school inclusion. Chapter 3 outlines the methodological design of the research project, presenting the quasi-experimental approach adopted to evaluate the efficacy of two intervention programmes. Chapter 4 reports the first study, which verified the efficacy of the intervention 'A Journey Towards Rightsland' with primary school students, providing evidence of its efficacy in enhancing inclusive social skills, ability to collaborate with others, peer acceptance, and intention to help classmates who are experiencing a rights violation. Chapter 5 presents the second study, a pilot evaluation of the adapted intervention 'A Jigsaw Puzzle of Rights' for kindergarten children, which confirmed the potential of early interventions to foster recognition of rights violations and assertive reactions to discrimination and social exclusion. Finally, Chapter 6 synthesises the findings across the two studies, discusses their theoretical and practical implications, identifies limitations, and provides recommendations for future research and practice.

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter has examined the theoretical approaches underpinning the present research project, namely Positive Youth Development (PYD) and Human Rights Education (HRE), with a particular focus on their relevance to the promotion of school inclusion. The review has highlighted the main contributions of PYD in emphasising strengths, social skills and positive peer relations, and of HRE in fostering knowledge of and respect for human rights, tolerance and acceptance of diversity. Collectively, these frameworks provide complementary perspectives that facilitate a comprehensive understanding of school inclusion, which encompasses not only the absence of social exclusion or discrimination, but also the active construction of supportive, rights-respecting school contexts.

The existing literature has also revealed several gaps. Despite the evidence from research demonstrating the potential of PYD- and HRE-based interventions, there remains limited integration of these approaches, and scarce evidence of their joint application in early childhood and primary school contexts. By documenting both the strengths and the limitations of existing studies, the chapter provides a clear rationale for the present research project. The integration of PYD and HRE provides a theoretically grounded and practically relevant approach to the promotion of school inclusion, while responding to calls for interventions that are developmentally appropriate and sustainable in schools. This critical review thus sets the stage for the empirical studies that follow, clarifying the research questions and methodological choices that guide the investigation.

2.2 Introduction

In light of the challenges and threats posed by contemporary society, the emergence of superdiversity within social contexts, and the persistent levels of discrimination and social exclusion, school inclusion can be regarded as a means for conceptualising both the present and the future. The objective of school inclusion is to promote social participation and the quality of life of children and young people (Shek et al., 2019).

In recent decades, increased attention has been paid to two frameworks: Positive Youth Development (PYD) and Human Rights Education (HRE). These have been identified as effective approaches to fostering school inclusion and preventing discrimination and social exclusion (Gonzalez et al., 2020; Salmon-Letelier & Russell, 2022). The objective PYD is to promote the health and well-being of young people, regarding social skills as essential resources for personal development and for the creation of inclusive social and school contexts (Romer & Hansen, 2021; Sancassiani et al., 2015). Interventions grounded in the PYD framework have demonstrated efficacy in enhancing social skills, including assertive communication, collaboration with others, and the capacity to initiate and maintain positive social relationships (Broekhuizen et al., 2016; Ginevra et al., 2020). On the other hand, the HRE framework aims to foster knowledge of and respect for human rights, reinforcing their implementation and protection. This objective is pursued with a view to engendering understanding, tolerance, and acceptance of heterogeneity within both social and school contexts (Dunhill, 2018; Salmon-Letelier & Russell, 2022). Research has demonstrated the efficacy of diversity interventions in enhancing abilities to initiate social relationships, fostering more positive attitudes

towards diversity, and reducing school-based violence (Collins & Paré, 2016; Howe & Covell, 2021).

From a developmental psychology perspective, children can learn to interact with other people and establish social relationships from early childhood (Karakaya & Tufan, 2018; Tomè-Fernandez et al., 2024). The primary school stage, in particular, is crucial for the development of social skills, as children learn to assume social responsibilities, address social situations and conflicts, communicate effectively with diverse peers, and adapt to school life (Tomè-Fernandez et al., 2024). Furthermore, at this stage, children begin learning about rights and responsibilities, develop the ability to participate actively in society, and gain an understanding of similarities and differences among individuals (Struthers, 2016; Yamniuk, 2017).

From a more preventive perspective, kindergarten represents the first non-family environment in which children learn to interact with peers and develop social skills that enable them to form friendships and maintain social groups (Kutnik & Colwell, 2024). Moreover, children at this stage can comprehend both their own rights and the obligations associated with respecting and protecting the right of others (Howe & Covell, 2013). However, issues may arise due to a lack of social skills and low peer acceptance, which in turn cause the low social status of certain children (Karakaya & Tufan, 2018). Therefore, kindergarten and primary schools represent key environments for promoting social skills and respect for human rights, as they represent the initial structured social contexts in which children engage daily with peers of various backgrounds (Juvonen et al., 2019; MacKenzie et al., 2020).

The present chapter aims to conduct a critical examination of the scientific literature on the PYD and HRE frameworks. This examination will focus on the key principles and concepts underpinning these frameworks, as well as the empirical evidence relating to interventions grounded in these theoretical approaches. Specifically, the discussion on PYD will focus on the development of social skills, empirical findings concerning PYD interventions aimed at developing such skills, and the efficacy of such interventions in promoting school inclusion. With respect to HRE, the focus will be on knowledge of and respect for human rights, HRE interventions aimed at fostering these outcomes, and the enhancement of behaviours that counteract rights violations associated with social exclusion and discrimination.

2.3 Positive Youth Development Approach

PYD is a psychological approach developed in the 1990s as an alternative to traditional models based on addressing behavioural problems. Rather than concentrating on what does not work or on the risks associated with youth development, PYD emphasises social skills and the building of meaningful relationships, which are essential for healthy and positive development (Lerner et al., 2021). In doing so, it also contributes to the creation of inclusive and supportive contexts, in which the strengths of every individual are recognised and promoted.

PYD scholars have acknowledged that merely reducing problematic behaviours such as substance use, delinquency, and school dropout (Melendez-Torres et al., 2016) is insufficient to ensure healthy and positive development in young people. Instead, it is necessary to provide them with growth opportunities, supporting them in developing positive resources for personal development and in building positive and meaningful

social relationships within their life contexts (Sancassiani et al., 2015). PYD views the individual as a resource capable of contributing positively to the community and of finding constructive solutions to the challenges encountered along their developmental pathway (Romer & Hansen, 2021).

PYD is based on several core principles that make it an effective approach for designing interventions aimed at improving school contexts. One central element is the involvement of young people as active agents in their own personal development (Lerner et al., 2005). Through active participation in social and school communities, PYD seeks to foster a sense of responsibility and belonging, promoting the development of self-efficacy and self-esteem (Broekhuizen et al., 2016). A key principle is the recognition of each individual's strengths (Lerner, 2005). PYD thus aims to build on personal resources, such as the ability to interact with others and to solve problems (Denham, 2006), recognising that well-being and quality of life are shaped not only by the presence or absence of difficulties but also by personal capabilities and positive aspects of one's environment that support the positive development of children and adolescents (Weare & Nind, 2011).

Among personal resources, PYD highlights the role of social and emotional skills as *positive nutrients* for psychological growth, as they enable children and adolescents to interact with others and to cope with challenges (Sancassiani et al., 2015). Social and emotional skills such as empathy, teamwork, and conflict resolution facilitate the building of meaningful social relationships. PYD aims to foster positive relationships with peers and significant adults, such as teachers, parents, and mentors, who are essential for young

people's psychological and social development and can support the creation of positive and supportive learning environments (Margas, 2023).

Finally, PYD is conceived as a model that contributes to building inclusive communities. In addition to promoting the positive development of young people and reducing the likelihood of engagement in risky behaviours such as drug use, violence, social exclusion, discrimination, and bullying (Ginevra et al., 2020; Margas, 2023), it promotes the acceptance and appreciation of diversity through the recognition of all individuals, regardless of their characteristics or vulnerabilities (e.g., disability, socio-economic disadvantage, migration background). This is particularly relevant in school contexts, where cultural, linguistic, and social diversity can present challenges but also provide opportunities for initiating and maintaining positive social relationships (Hes & Švecová, 2021).

This emphasis on fostering positive and reciprocal social relationships, rather than focusing on difficulties, is consistent with contemporary definitions of inclusion, which move beyond limited views focused on vulnerabilities to emphasise the strengths of all individuals and their capacity to contribute to inclusive contexts (Shek et al., 2019). Specifically, young people can engage in building inclusive and welcoming environments not only within their classes and schools – by developing positive relationships with peers and teachers – but also within the wider community, through active participation in local activities, influencing their social context, and building connections with the broader community (Lerner et al., 2021).

In light of these premises, PYD represents not only a preventive approach but also a robust theoretical framework for designing interventions capable of promoting social

inclusion. To better understand how these principles are operationalised in school contexts, it is useful to explore the main theoretical models developed within the PYD paradigm.

2.3.1 Positive Youth Development Models

PYD traces its roots to the early conceptualisations proposed by scholars investigating the key processes underpinning positive development (see, for example, Eccles & Goodman, 2002; Roth and Brooks-Gunn, 2003). These early contributions highlighted the need to furnish young people with the requisite support to develop a wide range of positive and inclusive internal and external assets, a necessary foundation for fostering healthy development both at the individual level and within their broader ecological contexts.

The emergence of the PYD as a theoretical framework occurred in the 1980s and 1990s, when Rick Little founded the International Youth Foundation (Lerner et al., 2021). Drawing on insights from practitioners working in youth-focused programmes worldwide, as well as from developmental scientists, Little articulated a strengths-based conceptualisation of youth, which he termed P*ositive Youth Development* (Lerner et al., 2021). Since then, several PYD models have been developed over the course of the 21st century. While these models share a common emphasis on the dynamic interplay between individual and contextual factors in shaping developmental outcomes, they differ in the specific constructs and dimensions they prioritise.

Among the most influential models in the contemporary literature are Benson's (2007) Developmental Assets Model, Catalano's (2002) Fifteen Indicators of PYD, the

5/6 Cs model proposed by Lerner et al. (2005; 2020), and the more recent Critical Positive Youth Development (CPYD) model developed by Gonzalez et al. (2020).

Benson's 40 Developmental Assets. The Developmental Assets Model (Benson, 2007) identifies a series of developmental assets necessary for positive youth development. Although this model is less utilised in research compared to the others, it has been considered a useful and practical tool for evaluating the youth work communities (Dolan, 2022).

This model identifies a series of fundamental personal and environmental developmental assets that provide support and opportunities for positive development. These assets are divided into 20 *external assets*, referring to environmental, contextual and relational characteristics of socialization systems, and 20 *internal assets*, which include abilities, competences and values (Benson et al., 2011). In collaboration with the Research Institute of Minneapolis (USA), Benson categorised these assets in eight groups: four internal and four external (Benson, 2007). The internal assets categories include personal characteristics, specifically: *commitment to learning* (e.g., achievement motivation and school engagement), *positive values* (e.g., integrity and responsibility), *social competencies* (e.g., planning and decision-making), and *positive identity* (e.g., self-esteem and sense of purpose). The external assets categories focus on social and contextual characteristics, including: *support* (e.g., family support, caring school climate), *empowerment* (e.g., value of community and perception of youth as a resource), *boundaries and expectations* (e.g., family boundaries and expectations of significant others on young people), and *constructive use of time* (e.g., in creative activities and in youth programmes). Together, these eight categories reflect developmental assets

distributed across five key developmental contexts in young people's lives: personal, social, familial, educational, and community domains (Benson, 2007).

The PYD Assets Model assumes that youth are active and interactive agents within their developmental contexts (Benson, 2007). Moreover, these assets represent a dynamic process inherent in the adaptive regulations of development during the youth period (Martin-Barrado & Gomez-Baya, 2024). These developmental regulations between the individual and their context are considered adaptive when they are "beneficial for the maintenance of positive and healthy functioning of the components of a bidirectional relationship (e.g., both the individual and the context, where the context may, of course, include other individuals)" (Lerner et al., 2016, p.178).

From this perspective, the development of internal and external assets not only fosters positive youth development but also serves as a foundation for the promotion of social inclusion and cooperation. By encouraging active engagement and social relationships within their communities, these assets contribute to the creation of inclusive social contexts where diversity is valued and relationships between the individuals and the contexts are prioritised (Martin-Barrado & Gomez-Baya, 2024).

Catalano's fifteen developmental constructs. Catalano et al. (2002) proposed an operational definition of PYD, formulated based on a review of the literature and consultations with leading researchers, programme designers, and programme evaluation staff working on PYD initiatives.

This definition introduces 15 developmental constructs as indicators of PYD, reiterated by Shek et al. (2012), including: bonding, resilience, social competence, emotional competence, cognitive competence, behavioural competence, moral

competence, self-determination, spirituality, self-efficacy, clear and positive identity, belief in the future, recognition for positive behaviour, opportunities for prosocial involvement, and fostering prosocial norms.

The promotion of *bonding* refers to the development of strong attachments and healthy relationships between the child and their peer group, family, community, and/or culture (Catalano et al., 2002). *Resilience* pertains to the capacity to adapt to life changes and stressful events in a healthy and flexible way.

Social competence is defined as a set of interpersonal skills enabling young people to achieve their social and interpersonal goals, encompassing the ability to communicate, assertiveness, conflict negotiation, and the capacity to build positive social relationships (Shek et al., 2012). *Emotional competence* refers to the ability to recognise one's own emotions and those of others and to respond appropriately. It also includes empathy and the regulation of emotions, distinguishing between internal emotional experience and external expression (Catalano et al., 2002; Shek et al., 2012).

Cognitive competence involves problem-solving, decision-making, logical thinking, and self-awareness (Catalano et al., 2002). *Behavioural competence* denotes the effective use of verbal and non-verbal strategies to enact socially acceptable behaviours during social interactions (Shek et al., 2012). *Moral competence* is the ability to evaluate and determine the ethical and moral aspects of a situations, thereby enabling the development of just and altruistic behaviours (Catalano et al., 2002; Shek et al., 2012).

Self-determination refers to the capacity to set goals and make choices in accordance with one's own reasoning. Skills fostering self-determination include awareness of one's strengths and limitations, action planning, problem-solving, decision-

making, and self-evaluation (Catalano et al., 2002; Shek et al., 2012). *Spirituality* is defined as the fostering of a sense of meaning in life (Catalano et al., 2002). S*elf-efficacy* promotes the achievement of goals through one's own efforts and is positively associated with PYD outcomes (Shek et al., 2012). C*lear and positive identity* reflects an integrated and coherent sense of self (Catalano et al., 2002). B*elief in the future* involves the internalisation of optimism and hope regarding possible future outcomes.

Recognition for positive behaviour encompasses prosocial actions or positive changes in conduct, signalling positive responses from others to derirable behaviours (Shek et al., 2012). *Opportunities for prosocial involvement* refer to events planned to encourage participate in prosocial activities and the maintenance of healthy norms. Fostering *prosocial norms* entails facilitating the development of healthy beliefs and behavioural expectations in young people (Catalano et al., 2002).

These foundations have been demonstrated to promote prosocial behaviours, such as cooperation and sharing (Shek et al., 2012). The encouragement of cooperative and prosocial practices is central to inclusion, as these inclusive skills facilitate harmonious coexistence and the cultivation of tolerance and mutual support (Amor et al., 2019; Salmon-Letelier & Russell, 2022). In this regard, the capacity to engage in constructive social interactions becomes essential, highlighting the pivotal role of social competence in sustaining inclusive and supportive environments.

The Five/Six Cs Model and its evolution in the Critical Positive Youth Development. Building on research into measures assessing social competence and functioning, Lerner et al. (2005) formalised the Five Cs model, which has become the dominant framework in the scientific literature. This model is one of the most widely

studied and applied in developmental contexts (Lerner et al., 2021) and identifies five core components of positive youth development, considered essential for the personal and social wellbeing of youth: Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, and Caring.

Competence is defined as youth's ability to acquire knowledge, skills, and positive behaviours across different domains (Lerner et al., 2009). The development of competence in youth has been shown to engender feelings of self-efficacy and confidence in their capabilities (Eccles & Goodman, 2002). *Confidence* is defined as an internal sense of overall positive self-worth and self-efficacy (Lerner et al., 2009). *Connection* pertains to the formation of positive relationships with individuals and institutions, manifesting in reciprocal and meaningful interactions between the individual and peers, family, school, and the broader community. The establishment of such profound connections has been demonstrated to provide essential emotional and social support. *Character* is defined by moral and ethical qualities, including integrity, responsibility, and a sense of right and wrong. Finally, *Caring* encompasses a sense of sympathy and empathy for others, thereby fostering the development of social and community responsibility in young people (Lerner et al., 2009; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003).

Subsequently, Lerner et al. (2015) proposed the addition of a sixth C, *Contribution*, which refers to engaging young people in meaningful activities that allow them to make a positive impact on their communities. The authors posit that when the initial Five Cs are expressed synergistically in youth, they are more likely to follow developmental trajectories that benefit families, communities, and society at large, thereby fostering Contribution. In other words, positive developmental trajectories emerge from reciprocal relationships between the individual and contextual

characteristics that support and enhance growth for both the person and their social environment.

More recently, this model has been extended by Gonzalez et al. (2020), who introduced a further component of PYD: *Critical Consciousness*, defined as the capacity to recognise and address social injustice. This construct encompasses critical reflection, action, and political efficacy to confront oppressive social conditions (Heberle et al., 2020). The resulting model, Critical Positive Youth Development (CPYD), combines critical theory, which challenges the systems that produce and maintain social inequalities (Gonzalez et al., 2020), with the Six Cs framework (Lerner et al., 2015). Furthermore, CPYD expands the Five/Six Cs model by incorporating the socio-cultural context as a crucial factor in the personal and social development of youth. It emphasises the significant influence of privilege and oppression dynamics on youth development and life experiences (Gonzalez et al., 2020).

The historical evolution of PYD theories reveals a progression of conceptual models that capture various constructs underpinning youth–context relations (Lerner et al., 2015). Moreover, the constructs operationalised in these theoretical models appear to align with the principles underpinning inclusive education. As stated by Lerner et al. (2020), the different theoretical frameworks under consideration place significant emphasis on the promotion of positive nutrients for both the individual and the community. This promotion is particularly salient in the context of cultivating social skills, which are considered as key components in the construction of equitable and inclusive societies.

2.3.2 A Positive Youth Development Model for School Inclusion

The school environment is of crucial significance in the promotion of inclusive interventions, as it provides a structured setting to which all youth have access from early childhood. In this setting, since its earliest formulations (e.g., Benson, 1990; Eccles & Goodman, 2002), PYD has established itself as a theoretical and practical approach capable of fostering youth's positive development through the enhancement of both internal and external resources, including social skills for inclusion.

First and foremost, PYD emphasises the necessity of providing all students, regardless of their abilities or backgrounds, with the opportunity to actively participate in the positive development of both themselves and their life contexts (Sancassiani et al., 2015). This is because the well-being and quality of life of youth are not influenced by the mere presence or absence of problems and concerns; rather, they are influenced by individual capabilities and the positive factors within the environments they inhabit (Catalano et al., 2002). Therefore, this framework aligns with the most recent definition of inclusion, which emphasises the valorisation of individual differences and the assurance of equal opportunities for social participation for all (Romer & Hansen, 2021). Interventions based on PYD have been shown to be effective in helping to overcome limiting views that focus solely on vulnerabilities and difficulties in social contexts. Instead, these interventions emphasise people's strengths, that is, each individual's capacity to contribute to the construction of inclusive contexts (Shek et al., 2019).

In the field of school inclusion, the Five/Six Cs model (Lerner et al., 2015) and its subsequent evolution into the CPYD model (Gonzalez et al., 2020) have emerged as the most prevalent theoretical frameworks. These models have demonstrated efficacy in

integrating the fundamental components of positive development (i.e., competence, confidence, connection, character, caring) with the principles of inclusion across all developmental stages, from early childhood through adolescence (Shek et al., 2019).

For instance, *Competence* (i.e., a set of social, cognitive, and practical abilities) has been shown to significantly contribute to improving school success and classroom inclusion by fostering the development of various skills, including inclusive social skills (Sancassiani et al., 2015). *Confidence* (i.e., a sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy) has been shown to facilitate feelings of confidence in youth's abilities and motivate active engagement in school life (Lerner et al., 2015), while concomitantly reducing aggressive and discriminatory behaviours towards others (Zareei Mahmoodabadi et al., 2023). Furthermore, the development of *Connection* (i.e., the establishment of meaningful relationships) is essential for the cultivation of an inclusive school environment, in conjunction with *Character* (i.e., the internalisation of ethical values such as social responsibility, respect, and justice) and *Caring* (i.e., empathy and sensitivity towards others). These components support the development of respect for individual differences and promote the establishment of a climate of tolerance and equity for all (Lerner et al., 2021). Finally, *Contribution* (i.e., the ability to contribute to the well-being of one's community) and *Critical Consciousness* (i.e., the ability to recognise and critically analyse social injustices) enable the building of a school culture grounded in inclusion and respect for diversity (Shek et al., 2019; Gonzalez et al., 2020). The Critical Consciousness component is particularly noteworthy in this regard, as it fosters a reduction in prejudice towards others and promotes the development of relationships based on social justice and mutual respect (Gonzalez et al., 2020).

School programmes that implement PYD within the curriculum have shown that highlighting students' strengths, such as the acquisition of social and emotional skills, promotes greater acceptance of diversity among children (Ginevra et al., 2020; Sancassiani et al., 2015; Wachs et al., 2023). Furthermore, these studies have also shown that the promotion of positive nutrients (e.g., social skills, a supportive school climate) facilitates the development of positive social relationships, which are among the most crucial elements for building inclusive social and school contexts (Wehmeyer et al., 2021).

The role of social skills. One of the primary contributions of the PYD framework to school inclusion is the development of social skills, which have been shown to exert a long-term positive impact on youth well-being (Taylor et al., 2017). Specifically, these skills enable youth to build positive relationships, manage conflictual situations, and contribute to the creation of welcoming and supportive environments.

Within the PYD framework, social skills can be considered an operationalisation of personal assets (Catalano et al., 2002; Wachs et al., 2023). These assets enable children and adolescents to interact with one another and build meaningful relationships and include the ability to communicate verbally and non-verbally through gestures, body language, and personal appearance. Among these skills, some have been identified as particularly relevant for promoting positive development and school inclusion (Wachs et al., 2023): perspective-taking, the ability to collaborate with others, and assertiveness. *Perspective-taking* refers to the ability to understand and interpret situations from different points of view, and to recognise others' beliefs or emotions when they have a different perspective (Davis, 1983). The *ability to collaborate with others* involves the

consideration of others' perspectives, evidenced by prosocial behaviours that entail reciprocal support (Wachs et al., 2023). *Prosocial behaviour* is defined as any voluntary action intended to help others, thereby contributing to the creation of a supportive environment (Eisenberg et al., 2015). Finally, assertiveness refers to the ability to initiate conversations, stand up for oneself or others in conflict situations, and express one's own point of view without being aggressive (Lange & Jakubowski, 1976).

These social skills are closely interrelated and, together, they contribute to fostering positive development and creating inclusive school settings. Assertive communication has been shown to enable children to express their opinions with confidence, thereby reducing peer conflicts and encouraging helping behaviours towards peers encountering difficulties and experiencing conflict (Wachs et al., 2023). Moreover, assertive youth have been shown to reach a higher level of social acceptance among their peers, as well as to receive greater social support from their classmates (Wachs et al., 2023). In addition, they have been found to demonstrate higher levels of conflict resolution skills compared to their less assertive peers (Wachs et al., 2023). Furthermore, children who can communicate in an assertive manner are more likely to request assistance when needed, actively participate in group discussions, and adhere to turn-taking in verbal interactions (Broekhuizen et al., 2016).

Social skills facilitate not only the understanding of one's own and others' emotions but also encourage the enactment of prosocial and defensive behaviours in conflict situations (Vezzali et al., 2020). In addition, the ability to collaborate with others has been demonstrated to foster reciprocal helping behaviours, thereby strengthening a sense of belonging and building an inclusive classroom climate (Sancassiani et al., 2015;

Wachs et al., 2023). Furthermore, the ability to collaborate is predicated on the consideration of others' perspectives, the promotion of positive attitudes and the construction of stronger peer relationships (Romer & Hansen, 2021). For instance, assertive communication from an early age has been shown to foster children's ability to confidently express their opinions (Wachs et al., 2023).

The CPYD model (Gonzalez et al., 2020) provides a conceptual foundation for the development of social skills, supporting individual well-being while also generating a positive impact on the broader environment and community. As shown in the extant literature (Salari et al., 2024; Paricio et al., 2020), a significant correlation exists between the core components of PYD and the development of social skills. Specifically, the *Competence* and *Contribution* components have been found to be associated with higher levels of social skills (Salari et al., 2024). Regarding *Competence*, the possession of social skills, such as the ability to interact with others, assertiveness, and conflict resolution have been shown to facilitate youth engagement with both peers and significant adults, thereby facilitating the development of positive social relationships (Paricio et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the development of such social competencies has been shown to motivate youth to actively participate in their social contexts, thereby promoting *Contribution*, defined as their engagement in collective initiatives and projects (Taylor et al., 2017). The social skills associated with *Contribution* include the ability to collaborate with others and express one's opinions assertively (Salari et al., 2024), thereby supporting the creation of a positive school climate and encouraging the intention to counter discriminatory behaviours (e.g., hate speech; Wachs et al., 2023). It is imperative to emphasise that the promotion of social skills is not only instrumental in fostering

Competence but also in stimulating *Contribution* within school settings. The development of such skills encourages youth to engage in collective actions, such as school projects, volunteering, and community support initiatives (Taylor et al., 2017).

Another key component of the CPYD model is *Critical Consciousness* (Gonzalez et al., 2020), which has specific utility in school contexts marked by high diversity, where differences in cultural and social backgrounds may lead to social exclusion and discrimination (Hes & Švecová, 2021). In this context, the development of critical consciousness has been shown to support children and adolescents in recognising and challenging biases and inequalities, encouraging reflection on their actions and their impact on others' well-being (Heberle et al., 2020). Furthermore, *Critical Consciousness* is closely associated with the ability to collaborate with individuals from diverse sociocultural backgrounds (Gonzalez et al., 2020), thereby fostering the construction of social relationships founded on mutual respect and social justice (Lerner et al., 2021), which are essential for the development of inclusive school contexts.

In summary, the PYD framework provides a solid theoretical foundation for designing interventions that support school inclusion. The promotion of active participation, the development of social skills, and the establishment of positive relationships have been identified as effective approaches for the promoting inclusive school settings that respect and celebrate differences (Damon, 2004; Shek et al., 2019).

2.3.3 Interventions Based on Positive Youth Development for the Development of Social Skills

PYD interventions, with the objective of promoting school inclusion, focus on the development of inclusive social skills. Activities such as cooperative learning, role-play,

and school-based programmes have been shown to facilitate students' collaborative efforts, encourage respect for others' viewpoints, and nurture the development of positive social relationships (Taylor et al., 2017).

Although the PYD framework was originally developed in response to behavioural issues in adolescents and to promote their positive development, its constructs are also applicable to other developmental stages starting from childhood (Tolan et al., 2016). Indeed, in the last decade, several studies have designed and tested the efficacy of PYD interventions targeting kindergarten and primary school children. The majority of these are grounded in the Five/Six Cs model proposed by Lerner et al. (2009; 2015), which conceptualises PYD interventions as resources for fostering youth strengths and successfully integrates crucial components of positive development with principles of inclusion (Shek et al., 2019).

While much of the available evidence originates from Western educational contexts, cross-cultural research demonstrates the universal applicability of PYD principles. A multi-national study across 32 countries found that positive developmental contexts consistently promote positive youth outcomes across diverse cultural settings (Koller & Verma, 2017). Additionally, several non-Western studies have confirmed similar mechanisms (e.g., Zareei Mahmoodabadi et al., 2023; Kaniušonytė & Truskauskaitė-Kunevičienė, 2021). Overall, evidence from multiple cultural contexts indicates that PYD interventions can effectively enhance inclusive social skills across diverse educational systems. These interventions have been demonstrated to foster the acquisition of social skills as well as a sense of belonging and collaboration within school settings (Shek et al., 2019). Moreover, the outcomes of PYD interventions are frequently

evaluated in terms of increased participation in youth activities, improved social skills, more positive and satisfying relationships, and decreased involvement in delinquent behaviours, violence, and substance use (Lerner et al., 2005; Tolan et al., 2016). These outcomes have been observed in countries with varying socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, suggesting the approach's adaptability. Within the school context, these interventions can be tailored to align with the developmental needs of children across various age groups and personal characteristics, with a focus on fostering the acquisition of social skills for inclusion.

The present paragraph aims to undertake a critical analysis of studies that have examined the efficacy of such interventions, focusing on empirical evidence related to PYD interventions for developing social skills and their efficacy in promoting school inclusion. It is noteworthy that the PYD programmes examined in the extant scientific literature vary with respect to their promoters (researchers, educators, adults, or the youth themselves), the settings in which they are implemented, and the specific variables targeted (Ferrer-Wreder, 2021). Despite this heterogeneity, there is a common focus on enhancing youth personal and social resources by strengthening competencies, positive attitudes, and supportive relationships, which in turn promote social inclusion across various life contexts (Taylor et al., 2017; Larsen et al., 2021).

Roth and Brooks-Gunn (2016) proposed a set of guidelines for the design and evaluation of PYD programmes, emphasising the importance of developing the Five Cs through activities that provide concrete opportunities to practise new skills in a positive environment enriched by meaningful relationships with peers and adults. Consequently, an effective PYD programme should offer experiential learning opportunities across

multiple life contexts, including school, family, and community, thereby creating a favourable environment for establishing significant relationships (Catalano et al., 2002). Furthermore, such interventions must foster a positive relational climate in which youth can establish bonds with adults and peers involved in the programme (Ciocanel et al., 2017). Other crucial operational elements of these programmes encompass the active participation of youth in structured activities, the reduction of risk factors such as aggressive behaviours, social isolation and limited future aspirations, and the promotion of protective factors including social, emotional, cognitive, behavioural, and moral competencies (Catalano et al., 2002). Among these, social skills are of particular importance, as they serve as fundamental mediators for behavioural change and help guide youth along healthier and more positive developmental paths (Taylor et al., 2017).

In accordance with the guidelines of Roth and Brooks-Gunn (2016), numerous studies have confirmed that PYD interventions can effectively enhance social skills in youth, thereby improving not only personal development but also establishing positive interpersonal relationships. Specifically, various meta-analyses and systematic reviews (Catalano et al., 2002; Ciocanel et al., 2017; Durlak et al., 2007; Taylor et al., 2017) have demonstrated the efficacy of such programmes in reducing antisocial behaviours and enhancing social skills and social relationships.

One of the earliest meta-analyses, conducted by Catalano et al. (2002), examined 19 PYD programmes and found positive changes in youth behaviours, including improvements in interpersonal skills, relationships with peers and adults, self-control, problem-solving, cognitive competencies, and self-efficacy. These interventions have also been demonstrated to reduce problematic behaviours, including substance use and

aggression. A common feature of these programmes was the reinforcement of social, emotional, behavioural, cognitive, and moral skills, the development of self-efficacy, and the strengthening of connections with adults and peers, along with the creation of opportunities for youth to engage in positive behaviours. Although approximately one-third of the programmes focused on a single context (school, family, or community), the combination of resources across these settings yielded optimal results.

In another meta-analysis, Durlak et al. (2007) confirmed the efficacy of PYD interventions in enhancing social skills, whilst concomitantly reducing negative behaviours such as bullying, violence, and conduct problems. The authors also found positive effects on self-control, prosocial behaviour, academic performance, and students' overall well-being. Their research highlighted the importance of systematic and well-structured implementation, which should be combined with consistent support from teachers, families, and communities to maximise long-term benefits.

While PYD interventions can involve a variety of contexts, it is important to acknowledge that schools remain the predominant location for youth engagement (Paricio et al., 2020). As Elias et al. (2015) demonstrated, schools provide numerous opportunities to promote personal, relational, and social skills. Moreover, they facilitate the development of the skills and attitudes that support personal development, positive social relationships, and ethical behaviour. As a structured environment in which youth spend a significant portion of their time, many school-based programmes have focused on enhancing social skills and peer relationships, encouraging collaboration and mutual respect, and contributing to the development of inclusive and positive environments that support positive development (Larsen, 2021).

Taylor et al. (2017) conducted a meta-analysis involving 97000 students and demonstrated the efficacy of school-based interventions. The findings indicated that PYD programmes focusing on teaching and applying social skills are effective in improving social and academic adjustment and reducing problematic behaviours. Subsequent follow-up results after a period of six months or more showed significant improvements in social and emotional skills, positive attitudes, and well-being. Notably, these improvements were particularly pronounced in skills such as self-control, conflict resolution, and responsible decision-making.

A quasi-experimental study by Zareei Mahmoodabadi et al. (2023) aligns with this perspective, evaluating the efficacy of a PYD programme in reducing aggression among high school girls in Iran. The authors involved 30 girls (average age 15), who were randomly assigned to either an experimental or a control group. The programme consisted of eight weekly 90-minute sessions conducted over a period of two months. Each session addressed different aspects of positive development, including anger and emotion management, identity building, assertive communication, and the promotion of positive values. The results indicated a significant decrease in verbal aggression in the experimental group compared to the control group. This study highlights the potential feasibility of PYD in societies where gender norms or inclusion policies differ markedly from those in Western Europe.

A meta-analysis by Ciocanel et al. (2017) confirmed that the integration of social skills into school life has a dual impact: on the one hand, it enhances students' individual well-being, and on the other, it contributes to the creation of a more positive and supportive school environment. Within this perspective lies the 'Try Volunteering'

programme (Kaniušonytė & Truskauskaitė-Kunevičienė, 2021), a school-based intervention lasting eight weeks, with weekly 45-minute sessions. Each session is designed to foster the development of the Five Cs through experiential and reflective activities, including problem-solving games, role-playing, discussions, reflective writing, and moments of sharing in pairs or small groups. Furthermore, students are involved in small challenges that push them out of their comfort zones, encouraging self-reflection and community engagement. A distinctive feature of the programme is its emphasis on creating a positive relational climate. Facilitators are selected for their positive attitudes towards youth and trained to recognise and value each participant's strengths. The programme's efficacy was evaluated through a quasi-experimental study (Kaniušonytė & Truskauskaitė-Kunevičienė, 2021) involving 605 students (average age 15.26 years), divided into experimental and control groups, with pre- and post-intervention assessments and follow-ups at 4 and 16 months. The findings showed a significantly higher prevalence of positive developmental trajectories within the experimental group, thereby confirming the efficacy of the proposed intervention. These results provide a solid foundation for the implementation of evidence-based programmes in school settings, capable of supporting inclusion, well-being, and personal growth in youth through the development of social skills.

The importance of early intervention cannot be overstated. Indeed, recent studies have highlighted the importance of developing social skills for promoting inclusion from early childhood onwards. Among the PYD-based school interventions is the 'My Friends' programme (Barrett, 2005; Kozina, 2021), which focuses on promoting social skills from a preventive perspective, starting in childhood. The programme consists of ten core

sessions and two follow-up sessions and is designed for children between the ages of 8 and 15. It is grounded in cognitive, behavioural, and relational activities designed to strengthen resilience, emotional regulation, coping skills, and self-efficacy. The sessions are conducted in groups and include role-playing, drawings, discussions, and homework, with active involvement from families. Its efficacy has been demonstrated in various cultural contexts, with positive results in enhancing social and relational skills (Kozina, 2021).

Another intervention is the 'Dream School' (Larsen, 2021), which was introduced in 42 upper secondary schools in Norway. The aim of this programme is to improve the psychosocial learning environment and to promote mental health by increasing student engagement and building an inclusive school culture. The activities of the 'Dream School' programme mainly occur within classrooms and involve peer mentors, who are typically older students who have undergone training to facilitate the programme. Peer mentors collaborate with teachers and a support resource group to promote peer interaction, plan school events, and strengthen students' sense of belonging. Furthermore, they are trained to recognise classmates at risk of social exclusion, especially during informal moments such as breaks, and to foster their inclusion. The programme has been developed to enhance social skills, self-efficacy, and leadership, both in mentors and other students, thereby contributing to collective well-being. It has been reported that peer mentors experienced positive feelings from providing assistance to others and acquire transversal skills that are useful in a variety of settings beyond the school context.

Finally, the study by Ginevra et al. (2020) highlighted the crucial role of early childhood experiences in facilitating healthy and positive development, as well as the

establishment of meaningful and inclusive peer relationships, including with vulnerable children (e.g., those with disabilities). The authors developed ‘The Good Actions’, a preventive intervention programme consisting of ten weekly sessions targeting children aged 3 to 6, with the goal of promoting social skills such as turn-taking, expressing gratitude, and helping behaviours. These skills are fundamental to fostering positive and inclusive relationships in educational settings, particularly benefiting children with developmental disorders, who are frequently at risk of social exclusion. Furthermore, the intervention sought to highlight the positive characteristics of each child, thereby promoting a relational climate that recognises and respects diversity. Activities were conducted in small groups by developmental psychologists, who employed a range of techniques, including role-playing, modelling (with videos from cartoons familiar to the children), social reinforcement, and informative feedback. The results showed significant improvements in the experimental group in comparison to the control group, including an increase in peer preferences (positive sociometric nominations) and a decrease in peer rejections (negative sociometric nominations), as well as an increase in assertive responses in social situations. Children with developmental disorders in the experimental classes demonstrated greater acceptance from their peers, as well as more frequent positive peer interactions. Although conducted in Italy, the results may translate differently in societies with limited institutional support for inclusion.

The ‘Dream School’ programme and ‘The Good Actions’ intervention are two notable illustrations of how promoting social skills can facilitate inclusion. The ‘Dream School’ programme’s distinctive features, including its adaptable structure and focus on student participation, position it as a promising model for application in other educational

contexts. Similarly, the results of the 'The Good Actions' intervention underscore the significance of targeted programmes initiated in early childhood. These programmes have the potential to foster social skills and nurture supportive relationships, thereby contributing to the creation of truly inclusive educational environments.

Despite cultural diversity, these meta-analyses and studies consistently highlight similar developmental outcomes. Most programmes were conducted in Western countries, limiting generalisability to societies with lower institutional support for school inclusion. However, the efficacy and implementation strategies of PYD interventions may differ across school systems with lower levels of inclusion, which are underrepresented in the literature. Across the reviewed studies, the cultural context shapes how social skills are enacted, which must be considered when translating PYD to low-inclusion settings.

Overall, PYD interventions, which emphasise the development of social skills, active participant engagement, and the establishment of positive social relationships, can serve as effective strategies to promote school inclusion and positive development from early childhood.

2.3.4 Future Directions in Positive Youth Development Theory and Research

The PYD framework has been demonstrated to be efficacious and versatile in designing school-based interventions intended to promote social inclusion. PYD interventions can be tailored to the specific needs of children and the educational contexts in which they are situated, with the active involvement of all students. The practical applications of this approach have shown its potential to enhance not only individual competencies but also to foster a positive school climate through the development and

maintenance of supportive peer relationships, which are fundamental for equitable and inclusive learning environments (Larsen, 2021).

Despite these promising results, important directions for further theoretical and empirical development remain. First, although PYD has consistently been associated with improvements in social skills, positive social behaviours, and peer acceptance (Ginevra et al., 2020; Larsen, 2021; Taylor et al., 2017), there has been limited attention to embedding these outcomes within a social justice perspective. Recent scholarship has emphasised the need to expand PYD beyond its focus on individual strengths and relational skills to explicitly address broader structural and relational inequalities (Gonzalez et al., 2020; Lerner et al., 2021). From this standpoint, social skills for inclusion cannot be understood solely as interpersonal abilities but as capacities that also enable children to recognise and counteract unjust behaviours and dynamics within their social contexts.

Future PYD research should also systematically examine how cultural and structural factors shape intervention efficacy. This is particularly relevant in contexts where structural inequality is more pronounced, and where opportunities for participation and inclusion are constrained by broader socio-economic conditions. Furthermore, future research should examine the cultural adaptability of PYD interventions, particularly in contexts where resources are limited or where cultural norms around child development and social relationships differ from Western frameworks (Shek et al., 2019). Understanding how core PYD principles can be meaningfully implemented across diverse socio-economic and cultural contexts remains an important research direction for the field.

Moreover, while much of the literature has documented the role of PYD interventions in fostering cooperation, empathy, and tolerance of diversity, recent studies (e.g., Blaisdell et al., 2021; MacKenzie et al., 2020) highlight the transformative potential of human rights for promoting social participation and positive development in support of inclusion. Integrating social skills for inclusion with a knowledge of human rights represents a promising theoretical advancement for strengthening school inclusion (MacKenzie et al., 2020). This integrated approach has the potential to further enhance the efficacy of PYD interventions, thereby making them a more powerful tool for addressing the challenges associated with both inclusion and social justice. Such integration could empower children to understand and claim their rights, while also respecting and promoting the rights of their peers, thereby reinforcing a culture of inclusion and human rights within schools (MacKenzie et al., 2020; Blaisdell et al., 2021).

Finally, a further gap lies in the promotion of behaviours that actively counter discrimination and social exclusion. Although PYD interventions often enhance the ability to collaborate with others and promote prosocial behaviours (Durlak et al., 2007; Ciocanel et al., 2017), the literature has rarely examined whether such programmes translate into concrete actions that challenge rights violations or advocate for peers who experience social exclusion and discrimination. Reframing discrimination and social exclusion not merely as interpersonal conflicts but as violations of rights associated with social participation could allow for stronger theoretical alignment between PYD and children's rights education (Blaisdell et al., 2021). This perspective highlights the potential for interventions to cultivate assertive responses and solidarity behaviours,

positioning children as active agents in defending inclusive practices and combating social injustice within their communities (MacKenzie et al., 2020).

Taken together, these directions suggest that the next step for PYD theory and research lies in moving beyond the promotion of inclusive social skills per se, towards a more comprehensive framework that combines the strengths-based focus of PYD with a social justice lens and a rights-based orientation (Lerner et al., 2021; MacKenzie et al., 2020). Such an approach would not only consolidate the established benefits of PYD in enhancing social skills and peer acceptance but also extend its transformative potential by equipping children with the knowledge and agency to promote and defend inclusion as a matter of justice and rights.

2.4 Human Rights Education Approach

In recent decades, several scholars have argued for the importance of educating children about their rights (Howe & Covell, 2021; Stavrou et al., 2024). These scholars contend that knowledge of one's own and others' rights, and the development of the skills necessary to ensure their respect, are inextricably linked to the cultivation of inclusive attitudes, values and behaviours, particularly within the context of schools.

This approach is also intended to prevent situations of rights violations, such as bullying and social exclusion (Howe & Covell, 2021). Within the CRC (United Nations, 1989), the concept of inclusion is predicated on the premise that every child, irrespective of any distinctions and with full recognition of their uniqueness, is entitled to all the fundamental rights and freedoms contained in the Convention.

It has been posited by certain scholars (see Fairhall & Woods, 2021; Theron et al., 2014) that developmental psychologists and school communities require practices

that can support positive youth development with methodologies that place children's rights at the centre. Furthermore, schools represent an appropriate context for implementing the participation rights contained in the CRC (United Nations, 1989) for all children, including those with vulnerabilities (Huić, 2022; Yilmaz & Yigit, 2024). Indeed, the provision of opportunities for children to exercise their rights has been demonstrated to be associated with positive developmental outcomes, as well as the prevention of violence and social exclusion in educational settings (Collins & Parè, 2016; Huić, 2022). Consequently, the education of children as individuals cognisant of their rights, commencing from early childhood, should be regarded as imperative for cultivating a school culture that is attentive to rights and inclusion (Howe & Covell, 2021; MacKenzie et al., 2020).

A paucity of studies has been demonstrated in the field of interventions designed to enhance children's knowledge of their rights, except for those that have been shown to engender favourable outcomes in terms of the promotion of knowledge, understanding and support of human rights (Dunhill, 2018; Howe & Covell, 2021). Most of these programmes are grounded in the principles of HRE, with the objective of facilitating the acquisition of knowledge in the field of human rights. This theoretical approach has been demonstrated to be efficacious in promoting not only knowledge of human rights among children but also cultivating a sense of responsibility to uphold these principles and to act as a counteragent to their violations (Covell & Howe, 2005; Howe & Covell, 2021).

2.4.1 Human Rights Education Principles

In recent literature, some researchers (Blaisdell et al., 2021; Jones & Manion, 2023) have emphasised the need to promote knowledge of the rights contained in international laws, policies and commitments. From this standpoint, HRE has gained international recognition as a theoretical framework, particularly following the adoption of the United Nations Decade for Rights Education (1994) by the General Assembly.

The United Nations has defined HRE as an approach that aims to promote the development and consolidation of a universal culture of human rights (United Nations General Assembly, 2011). This objective can undoubtedly be accomplished through the dissemination of knowledge, as well as the cultivation of values and actions that are aligned with human rights (Howe & Covell, 2021). In this sense, schools can make a significant contribution, providing an appropriate environment for the development of human rights values (Huić, 2022), as they are the place where most children can be reached and constitute the primary setting for socialisation and the transmission of beliefs and values (Howe & Covell, 2021). Furthermore, school contexts represent the primary environment through which children can become acquainted with their rights (Yilmaz & Yigit, 2024).

HRE is comprised of three distinct dimensions or components, namely education *about, through,* and *for* human rights (Howe & Covell, 2021; Struthers, 2016). Education *about* human rights has been defined as the cognitive component of HRE (Howe & Covell, 2021). It consists of imparting knowledge about rights to promote understanding, as well as about the tools for their realisation and the underlying values, such as equality and inclusion. It also covers possible situations that threaten respect for

rights, such as discrimination and social exclusion. Research has demonstrated that a mere knowledge of rights is inadequate for the promotion of rights-conscious and inclusive environments (Parker, 2018; Quennerstedt, 2020). Therefore, it is important to combine this cognitive component with the process dimension, namely education *through* human rights, which involves learning skills and behaviours that are useful for building environments that respect everyone's rights. These skills can be promoted using participatory teaching strategies, such as modelling, role-play and group discussions (Howe & Covell, 2021). The third component of education *for* human rights is the action dimension, which refers to promoting the intention to express oneself and act in accordance with human rights, even in the face of violations of those rights. This component includes the acquisition of attitudes, values, and behaviours aimed at countering situations of rights violations, to promote the construction of social contexts characterised by a culture of human rights (Struthers, 2016).

Right-based framework: international conventions and declarations.

International organisations such as UNESCO (see Quennestedt, 2022) and the United Nations World Programme for Human Rights Education National Action Plan (2005-2007; see Howe & Covell, 2020) support the implementation of HRE practices in schools using tools such as United Nations declarations and conventions, including the CRC (United Nations, 1989), and the Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training (United Nations General Assembly, 2011).

The United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training (United Nations General Assembly, 2011) delineates HRE as a right, as articulated in Article 1 of the declaration. This assertion stipulates that all individuals possess the right

to acquire, seek and receive information pertaining to all human rights and fundamental freedoms, and should have access to human rights education and training. In light of these developments, a number of scholars have posited that conventions and declarations on rights can be regarded as a framework and instrument for the implementation of HRE, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR; UN, 1948), and associated human rights conventions, including the CRC (United Nations, 1989) in school contexts (Collins & Parè, 2016; Howe & Covell, 2021).

The CRC (United Nations, 1989) is widely regarded as a foundational framework and instrument for promoting knowledge of the rights enshrined therein (Jones & Manion, 2023) and for ensuring their respect, with children being recognised as the primary beneficiaries of these rights (Collins & Paré, 2016). The CRC (United Nations, 1989) encompasses a range of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights that are extended to all children and young people under the age of 18. These rights can be categorised into three overarching principles, the 3Ps (Heimer et al., 2018), relating to the well-being of the child (Yilmaz & Yigit, 2024): provision rights (e.g., the right to life), protection rights, (e.g., the right to be protected from all forms of abuse), and participation rights (e.g., the right to express one's opinion and to be heard).

The Convention is also based on four general principles (af Ursin & Haanpää, 2018; Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009; Woods & Bond, 2014): participation and children's voice, including their right to express their views and have them taken seriously (Art. 12); the right to non-discrimination (Art. 2); the right to life, survival and development (Art. 6); and the primary consideration of the best interests of the child (Art. 3). These principles provide a universal normative framework and constitute a

crucial foundation for promoting the active participation of children in society, particularly in educational settings. They recognise children as legitimate and capable agents in decision-making processes that affect their lives (Collins & Parè, 2016).

2.4.2 Human Rights Education for School Inclusion: Participation Rights

School inclusion refers to the creation of school environments in which all children, regardless of their characteristics or background, can participate fully, feel valued and have their rights respected (Bellacicco et al., 2022). HRE could serve as a powerful means of strengthening children's knowledge of their rights, enhancing their capacity to engage in respectful social interactions, and cultivating a culture of social participation and mutual respect within schools (MacKenzie et al., 2020).

While the term *participation* does not appear explicitly in the CRC (United Nations, 1989), Article 12 has inspired extensive theoretical discussion, as well as numerous legislative and educational initiatives (Blaisdell et al., 2021). These have expanded its interpretation, emphasising the active role of children in shaping decisions that influence their well-being, and in building inclusive, rights-respecting school environments. Furthermore, the Committee on the Rights of the Child (2003) defined participation as "ongoing processes which include information sharing ... based on mutual respect, and in which children can learn how their views ... are taken into account and shape the outcome of such processes" (p. 3). In addition, within the framework of the Plan of Action for the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education (1995–2004), HRE aims to improve social relations among peers and increase acceptance and understanding across diverse groups (Salmon-Lelelier & Russell, 2022). These elements are crucial for promoting school inclusion.

Collins and Paré (2016) propose a perspective for combating school violence that focuses on children's rights and participation. They argue that a human rights-based approach must be adopted in schools, and that the CRC (United Nations, 1989) provides a binding regulatory framework that recognises children as rights holders, not merely objects of protection. In particular, the right of children to express their views and have them taken seriously (Article 12) is a *fundamental value* of the CRC (1989) and one of its general principles, together with the right to non-discrimination (Article 2) (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2003). Furthermore, Article 12 can be grouped with other civil and political rights and freedoms, such as Article 13 (freedom of expression), Article 14 (freedom of thought, conscience and religion), Article 15 (freedom of association), and Article 17 (right to information). These rights constitute the participation rights contained within the Convention and can be considered a tool for promoting inclusive school environments (MacKenzie et al., 2020). Participation rights have been recognised within the Convention as crucial for designing intervention programmes that foster school inclusion and prevent violence (Blaisdell et al., 2021; Collins & Parè, 2016).

Several scholars (Jones & Manion, 2023; Lundy & O'Lynn, 2019) have argued that the rights to social participation and to express one's opinions and be heard are particularly relevant to establishing positive and meaningful social relationships. This is because they imply a sense of responsibility for ensuring that these rights are respected both for oneself and for others. Some scholars (Blaisdell et al., 2021; Moosa-Mitha, 2005) therefore affirm the relational nature of participation rights, which children experience differently based on their social relationships. Depending on their daily

experiences, children can develop different concepts of rights and respect for them (e.g., Kosher & Ben-Arieh, 2017; af Ursin & Haanpää, 2018). From this perspective, HRE is a tool that can be used to promote more inclusive school contexts characterised by meaningful, rights-respecting peer relationships. Therefore, the knowledge of participation rights is central to preventing social exclusion and school violence, and to building a school culture based on respect for everyone's rights (Blaisdell et al., 2021).

For participation rights to be effectively exercised and respected in school contexts, children must be made aware of their rights. Acquiring this knowledge from an early age is essential for developing positive attitudes towards diversity and creating school environments that promote respect for rights and social justice (Salmon-Letelier & Russell, 2022).

The role of knowledge of and respect for human rights. The development of children's knowledge of their rights constitutes a significant, multidimensional process from a very early age, as it pertains to social needs relating to the establishment and maintenance of social relationships (Hareket & Yel, 2017; Moosa-Mitha, 2005). Consequently, it is essential to investigate children’s knowledge of their rights when designing interventions aimed at promoting rights-respecting school contexts.

Recent literature has examined children's knowledge of their rights from the perspective of their views and perceptions. This finding indicates that when children consider their rights, their primary focus is on basic or developmental needs, such as playing, respect, love and happiness (Fairhall & Woods, 2021). Another category frequently mentioned by children concerns certain civil rights, including the prohibition of physical abuse, the recognition of their value as individuals, and the assurance of

equitable treatment (Quennerstedt, 2020). Furthermore, Harakat and Yel (2017) conducted a study to ascertain the perceptions and views of primary school students about children's rights. The right to know and defend one's rights was identified as one of the rights strongly claimed by children. In addition to this category of rights, the authors identified four other recurring themes in the children's responses. These were: basic life needs and developmental needs, such as the right to play and to be respected by others; freedoms and personal qualities, such as the freedom to express one's opinions; personal development and social life, including the right to participate in social activities, to have fun, and spend free time with friends; and responsibilities, such as studying and doing homework, which are perceived as both duties and responsibilities. In a recent study, Yilmaz and Yigit (2024) explored the views of fifth-grade middle school students on children's rights. Most students expressed a preference for the rights related to provision and protection over those related to participation, according to the findings of the study.

One factor that could influence children's views on their rights is the cultural model of reference, which can lead to cross-national differences in how rights are conceived, partly due to different experiences of respect for rights in social life (Kosher & Ben-Arieh, 2017). Indeed, as af Ursin & Haanpää (2018) demonstrated in their analysis, a survey of 8-year-olds in 16 countries revealed that only a minority demonstrated knowledge of children's rights and were familiar with their own rights. The possession of knowledge pertaining to rights has been demonstrated to engender a heightened sense of responsibility, which in turn fosters the intention to act to counteract rights violations (Howe & Covell, 2010). The ability of children to assume responsibility is subject to variation according to their age and stage of development and is a key factor

in encouraging their active participation in respecting human rights (Howe & Covell, 2010). Consequently, it is imperative to motivate children to respect their own and others' rights, thereby fostering a personal interest in respecting rights in general (Covell & Howe, 2005).

A more recent study (Jones & Manion, 2023) found that children are more likely to engage with the critical exploration of rights and responsibilities when these concepts are presented in ways that reflect their real lives, culture and language. This pedagogical approach fosters creativity and expression through a variety of modes, including images, play, writing and the spoken word. It has been demonstrated that a positive correlation exists between knowledge of and respect for these rights and the subsequent positive impact on children's development (Covell et al., 2010; Dunhill, 2018). This has been shown to promote a deep understanding of their personal and school experiences as rights holders. In addition, the evidence suggests a correlation with an increased intention to establish social relationships, more positive attitudes towards diversity, and a reduction in bullying behaviour (Salmon-Letelier & Russell, 2022; Sebba & Robinson, 2010). In this regard, Dunhill (2018) explored the perspectives of children attending a rights education programme and found that children who know and experience their rights tend to recognise that these rights are fundamental to themselves and others. It has been demonstrated that children who are taught about their rights and encouraged to participate in school life perceive themselves as rights holders and recognise that rights guarantee the fulfilment of their needs. In contrast, children who do not participate in rights education programmes tend to conceptualise rights in terms of *wants* (Covell et al., 2010). As Dunhill (2018) also established, children who are made aware of their rights are

inclined to advocate for the respect of all children. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that even in the absence of formal rights education, children are able to recognise their own value and importance (Hareket & Yel, 2017). Moreover, they hold the conviction that all children should be acquainted with, comprehend, and advocate for their own and others' rights (Fairhall & Woods, 2021). Indeed, irrespective of their personal experience of rights in their own lives (e.g., school, family and community), children appear to value, want to know and learn about their rights (Dunhill, 2018; Hareket & Yel, 2017).

However, it has been demonstrated that children who are raised in environments that respect their rights are more likely to support the rights of all children (Dunhill, 2018). Research indicates that a grasp of the rights intrinsic to social participation and the articulation of one's perspective is associated with a sense of responsibility to ensure the preservation of these rights, both for oneself and for others (Jones & Manion, 2023; Lundy & O'Lynn, 2019). The acquisition of knowledge regarding these rights empowers children to engage in sharing, attentive listening, and developing deeper understanding of others. This process enables them to develop an awareness of different perspectives and experiences, to reflect on the world, and to recognise and act against rights violations (Jones & Manion, 2023; Perry-Hazan, 2021).

In summary, the extant literature highlights the importance of children's knowledge of rights in promoting a rights-respectful school context. This involves demonstrating their interest in and ability to understand their rights, and their motivation to uphold respect for themselves and others (Dunhill, 2018; Howe & Covell, 2021). It is therefore vital to promote school-based interventions that are designed to cultivate children's knowledge of and respect for human rights, in addition to nurturing their

capacity to recognise and counteract violations (Collins & Parè; Hareket & Yel, 2017). Interventions of this nature have the capacity to contribute to the cultivation of citizens who are aware, empathetic, and actively engaged in the construction of inclusive, rights-respecting social contexts.

2.4.3 Interventions based on Human Rights Education to Promote Knowledge of and Respect for Human Rights

The implementation of a rights-based approach necessitates a substantial cultural transformation within educational systems. As argued by Collins and Parè (2016), this process involves cultivating a human rights culture from early childhood. This should be achieved through actions that are inclusive of the rights of every child without discrimination, and the adoption of measures that are sensitive to their developmental stage and needs.

HRE interventions differ widely in scope and penetration across cultural contexts, depending on national policies, socio-political histories, and collective values (Howe & Covell, 2021). A substantial body of research has demonstrated the efficacy of HRE interventions with children in enhancing support for human rights principles, including non-discrimination, acceptance of diversity, and stronger intentions to engage in prosocial helping behaviours (see Dunhill, 2018; Howe & Covell, 2021; Quennerstedt & Moody, 2020; Sebba & Robinson, 2010). A significant proportion of these studies has implemented HRE within individual classrooms or schools, without ensuring its sustained integration into the broader curriculum. While the outcomes are encouraging, the most positive results are achieved when HRE is supported over time and involves the whole school (Howe & Covell, 2021). In this respect, Park et al. (2021) and Jerome et al. (2015)

emphasise that the efficacy of HRE interventions is significantly enhanced when a whole-school approach is maintained longitudinally and integrated into the curriculum. Conversely, a lack of continuity risks reducing the scope of both behavioural and attitudinal changes in children.

A particularly well-documented example is the 'Rights, Respect and Responsibility' (RRR) programme (Covell, 2007). This programme has been implemented in a range of schools, primarily in high-income, inclusion-supportive contexts. The programme involved children aged 4 to 14 years and is grounded in HRE principles, addressing its three dimensions (Howe & Covell, 2021): education *about, through*, and *for* human rights. Education *about* human rights was promoted through three primary channels: firstly, the articles of the CRC (United Nations, 1989) were incorporated into the school curriculum (for example, the right to clean water and its relevance to health are discussed during science lessons); secondly, posters were displayed around the school to explain rights (for example, a poster in the playground elucidatedw the right to play and leisure); thirdly, the CRC (United Nations, 1989) was utilised as a guide to support students in developing and sharing *rights charters* and corresponding responsibilities to guide behaviour (e.g., including statements such as "We have the right to be treated fairly and the responsibility to treat others fairly") (Howe & Covell, 2013). Education *through* human rights has been implemented by providing opportunities for active participation in the classroom and across the school, such as cooperative learning, group discussions on social issues, and role-play activities (Howe & Covell, 2021). Education *for* human rights centred on cultivating rights-respecting conduct among children by conceptualising problematic behaviours as rights violations

and underscoring the significance of respecting the rights of others (Howe & Covell, 2021). To raise awareness of the effects of rights violations, role-play was used in conjunction with peer-support initiatives such as tutoring for classmates in need and befriending new students (Covell & Howe, 2007).

The RRR initiative has been in place in schools across England for over a decade, during which time its implementation and outcomes have been evaluated in multiple independent studies (e.g., Covell, 2010; Covell et al., 2011; Covell et al., 2008; Howe & Covell, 2021). Overall, schools have reported the programme's success in transforming them into rights-respecting communities (e.g., Covell & Howe, 2005; Covell et al., 2010; Howe & Covell, 2020; 2013). Specifically, educational activities designed to promote an understanding of human rights have been shown to enhance children's comprehension of human rights, their associated responsibilities, and their significance (Covell et al., 2010). Across diverse age groups, children appear to comprehend, after programme engagement, that all individuals possess equal rights and that these rights are essential for cultivating and enhancing interpersonal relationships (Howe & Covell, 2020). Furthermore, children have expressed appreciation for the importance of rights and supported principles such as non-discrimination, equality, and tolerance (Howe & Covell, 2021). Activities aimed at fostering active involvement and participation (educating *through* human rights) have been shown to strengthen children's problem-solving, decision-making, collaborative learning, and critical thinking skills, alongside improvements in self-regulation and self-confidence (Howe & Covell, 2013). Furthermore, educational initiatives focused on human rights has been demonstrated to engender several notable outcomes in children, including enhanced cooperative attitudes, elevated sensitivity towards the challenges

encountered by their peers, and increased respect towards others (Howe & Covell, 2021). Additionally, incidents of teasing, bullying, and other discriminatory behaviours have been shown to decrease significantly, and in some schools, to be eliminated, thus contributing to the development of a respectful, equitable, and safe school climate (Howe & Covell, 2020). The programme has also been found to promote ability to collaborate with others and the willingness to engage actively in school activities (Howe & Covell, 2021). These elements are all crucial for promoting school inclusion.

Among other HRE programmes, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2014) aims to promote, through teaching the CRC (United Nations, 1989), children's engagement in actions to ensure the respect of their rights in a range of settings, from the family to the school and community. The 'Rights Respecting Schools Award' (RRSA) is grounded in the human rights principles articulated in the CRC (United Nations, 1989). This award is designed to encourage educational institutions to promote an understanding of children's rights and to facilitate opportunities for children to experience themselves as rights-holders. Institutions adhering to this programme are expected to integrate CRC principles into the school ethos and culture, with the objective of actively engaging children, teaching staff, and parents (Quennerstedt, 2022). It is important to note, however, that the interpretation of rights and associated obligations is not culturally uniform. Conceptions of children's agency, autonomy, and participation vary widely across societies, influencing how rights-based initiatives are understood, enacted, and supported within schools (UNICEF, 2014). As a result, programmes such as the RRSA may be implemented differently depending on cultural norms, institutional structures, and societal expectations surrounding the role of children and adults. Educational institutions

can apply for this UNICEF award. Following the adoption of a rights-based approach, the institutions are recognised as Rights Respecting Schools. Several studies have indicated that, in educational institutions implementing UNICEF's guidance, children exhibit enhanced comprehension of their own rights and those of their peers, whilst concurrently demonstrating improvements in peer relationships and adopting more positive attitudes towards diversity (Covell et al., 2010; Dunhill, 2018; Sebba & Robinson, 2010). In primary school, the teaching and support of rights have been shown to encourage students to practise, protect, and promote the rights of others not only within the school environment but also in the wider community (Dunhill, 2018).

The ‘Child Thrive Programme’, developed by the International Institute for Child Rights and Development, has been implemented in primary schools in Canada and Uganda (Jones & Manion, 2023). Notably, the implementation in Uganda provides an important example of a low-inclusion context, where structural barriers and limited institutional support make rights-based educational approaches particularly challenging yet highly valuable. The objective of the programme was to facilitate children's engagement in an educational process that would enable them to comprehend their rights and responsibilities. This was achieved through the implementation of workshops incorporating interactive, laboratory activities, thereby allowing children to explore the concept of children's rights and how these rights influence and protect them. The results demonstrated that children were able to develop a critical understanding of rights and responsibilities through various learning modalities, including images, play, words, and writing. Furthermore, increasingly complex discourses on rights were initiated, thereby creating opportunities for deep reflection on rights (Manion & Jones, 2020). At the

conclusion of the programme, children exhibited enhanced capacity to critically evaluate their own environment and identify the resources available to support their needs (Jones & Manion, 2023).

The children involved in the aforementioned studies belong to different developmental stages and have implemented HRE programmes across various educational institutions at an international level. Research starting from early childhood education (e.g., Sakka & Gouscos, 2023; Park et al., 2021; Jerome et al., 2015; Sounoglou & Michalopoulou, 2017) has shown that introducing the principles contained in the CRC (United Nations, 1989) from an early age supports children's understanding of their right to fair treatment and mutual respect. It also helps them to view rights as fundamental principles of social coexistence rather than as privileges or rewards. For example, Sakka and Gouscos (2023) showed that introducing topics such as the right to survival, development, non-discrimination, and protection to kindergarten students through digital games increased children's awareness of their rights, improved their ethical reasoning regarding the reciprocity of social rules, and enhanced their ability to link rights to improvements in quality of life.

In summary, models of HRE interventions have proven efficacious in promoting knowledge of and respect for human rights. While HRE may not solve all problems, it is a valid approach to building rights-respecting cultures (Howe & Covell, 2021). This literature review demonstrates that HRE interventions have both short-term and long-term effects. In the short term, they reduce incidents of bullying and social exclusion at school. HRE interventions promote positive peer interaction and a positive school environment, thereby reducing negative social behaviours (Howe & Covell, 2021; Huić, 2022). In the

long term, HRE interventions appear to foster values associated with respect for human rights and a culture that respects rights (Howe & Covell, 2021).

2.4.4 Future Directions in Human Rights Education Theory and Research

The positive outcomes of HRE interventions, such as increased tolerance and acceptance of diversity, more positive attitudes towards others, and stronger intentions to respect peers' rights, suggest that these programmes have the potential to foster school inclusion (Salmon-Letelier & Russell, 2022). However, the current literature highlights several gaps and challenges that could inform future research and practice.

Firstly, while existing studies provide encouraging evidence of the benefits of HRE, most do not emphasise inclusion and social participation specifically, nor do they address participation rights as defined in the CRC (United Nations, 1989) explicitly. Researchers such as Blaisdell et al. (2021) and MacKenzie et al. (2020) have emphasised the importance of focusing on participation rights to promote positive youth development and inclusion in schools. However, no study has yet evaluated the efficacy of HRE programmes in advancing inclusion and social participation from this perspective. In this respect, future research could contribute to developing concrete tools, guidelines, and good practices to support schools in fostering both knowledge of and respect for children's rights, especially participation rights, as suggested by Collins and Parè (2016) and MacKenzie et al. (2020).

Secondly, while programmes based on HRE have been shown to increase intentions to collaborate and promote positive attitudes towards others (Dunhill, 2018; Howe & Covell, 2021; Jones & Manion, 2023), their impact on action appears more limited. Specifically, these interventions often neither directly assess nor provide

evidence of concrete prosocial actions, such as helping peers or actively opposing rights violations. While positive attitudes and intentions are valuable indicators of peer acceptance and precursors to positive social relationships (Hes & Švecová, 2021), the lack of evidence regarding assertive communication, prosocial behaviour, and the active defence of rights suggests that current interventions may be insufficient in equipping children to combat discrimination and social exclusion in practice. Importantly, what counts as prosocial or rights-defending behaviour may vary across cultural contexts, as norms surrounding cooperation, authority, and children's agency differ considerably (Jerome et al., 2015). This raises the need for cross-cultural research that examines how HRE programmes can recognise and support culturally situated expressions of prosocial action. A valuable direction for future studies would therefore be to investigate whether exposure to rights-based education translates into long-term protective behaviours against social exclusion and discrimination, and to assess the sustainability of these outcomes starting from kindergarten and primary school.

Thirdly, the current body of HRE research is subject to significant methodological limitations. Many studies lack control groups, have small sample sizes, or rely on qualitative measures only (e.g., Covell & Howe, 2005; Jones & Manion, 2023; Park et al., 2021). Furthermore, few studies employ rigorous methodologies to investigate children's knowledge of and respect for human rights (Fairhall & Woods, 2021), including the use of appropriate statistical techniques (e.g., multilevel mixed models) to account for the hierarchical structure of school-based data. It is crucial to address these limitations to capture not only changes in self-report measures, but also behavioural outcomes, and to understand how children at different developmental stages conceptualise and enact their

rights (Sounoglou & Michalopoulou, 2017; Struthers, 2016). Developmental psychologists can play a key role in this endeavour by supporting schools to interpret children's perspectives and by ensuring that rights are realised in practice, not just taught.

Additionally, given that most HRE research has been conducted in high-income countries with established rights frameworks, future studies should explore the implementation and effectiveness of HRE approaches in contexts where human rights education may face greater structural, political, or cultural barriers (Jerome et al., 2015; Struthers, 2016). This includes examining how participation rights can be promoted in settings with limited resources or where cultural values may differ regarding children's agency and voice.

Further advances could also be made by re-conceptualising social exclusion and discrimination as violations of participation rights, rather viewing them merely as interpersonal conflicts or individual skill deficits. As argued by Howe and Covell (2021), this perspective shifts the focus from individual responsibility to collective social responsibility, emphasising the duty of all members of the school community to respect and uphold their own and others' rights. From this viewpoint, school inclusion can be promoted not only through acquiring knowledge about rights, but also through developing social skills that enable children to experience positive social relationships based on respect for rights. Skills such as collaboration, empathy, and assertive responses to rights violations contribute to creating inclusive school environments, yet they are often underrepresented in existing programmes (Howe & Covell, 2021; Struthers, 2016).

Finally, the long-term implications of HRE interventions remain under-explored. Howe and Covell (2021) contend that children raised in rights-respecting environments

are more likely to carry these values into adulthood, whether as educators, policymakers, or community members. Therefore, embedding a culture of rights and inclusion during schooling could have transformative societal effects by fostering future generations committed to counteracting discrimination and social exclusion, particularly regarding participation rights (MacKenzie et al., 2020). However, the long-term transmission of rights-based values is likely to differ across countries depending on their political systems, civic traditions, and institutional commitments to human rights (Jerome et al., 2015). This underscores the importance of analysing how HRE outcomes evolve within diverse socio-political environments.

In summary, future HRE research should explicitly address inclusion and participation rights, strengthen the action dimension by promoting inclusive behaviours and skills to counter discrimination and social exclusion, and adopt more rigorous methodologies to assess outcomes across developmental stages.

2.5 Integrating Positive Youth Development and Human Rights Education to Foster School Inclusion

Children's school inclusion could be fostered by the effectively integrating two approaches: PYD for developing social skills and HRE for developing knowledge of and respect for human rights. Integrating the two approaches may be particularly beneficial for societies with low levels of inclusion, where structural barriers persist.

The literature has examined PYD and HRE interventions as two separate approaches. PYD interventions have primarily aimed at developing social skills and strengthening positive peer relationships (e.g., Broekhuizen et al., 2016; Ginevra et al., 2020; Melendez-Torres et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2017), while HRE interventions have

focused on fostering children's knowledge of human rights and promoting supportive, rights-respecting behaviours (e.g., Covell & Howe, 2005; Howe & Covell, 2021; Jones & Manion, 2023). While both strands of research provide valuable insights into the efficacy of these approaches in promoting school inclusion, their methodological rigour has been limited in important respects. In particular, HRE studies have often relied on relatively small samples (e.g., Jones & Manion, 2023) and lacked control groups (e.g., Covell & Howe, 2005), thereby constraining the strength of their conclusions. Across both PYD and HRE interventions, a predominant reliance on self-report instruments (e.g., Taylor et al., 2017; Jones & Manion, 2023) further limits the validity and generalisability of findings. Moreover, while some PYD intervention studies (Ciocanel et al., 2017; Taylor et al., 2017) employed cluster randomised designs acknowledging the nested structure of school-based data (students clustered within classes), multilevel mixed models were not applied in statistical analyses, potentially leading to biased intervention effect estimates (Raudenbush & Schwartz, 2020). Similarly, HRE intervention studies have employed neither such analytical approaches nor cluster randomised designs. These shortcomings highlight the need for more robust and integrated evaluations of approaches to fostering school inclusion. Overall, the limitations of previous research underscore both the need for more methodologically robust evaluations and for approaches that bridge the divide between PYD and HRE.

In line with recent calls for schools to play an active role in reducing discrimination, fostering peer acceptance, and ensuring school inclusion (Losinski et al., 2019), this research project aimed to develop, implement, and evaluate the efficacy of an intervention programme to promote inclusion in primary and kindergarten students. For

the first time, this intervention programme integrates the two approaches of PYD and HRE. As scholars in the field of school inclusion have suggested (Juvonen et al., 2019; Li et al., 2024; Kart & Kart, 2021), the focus is on primary school children aged 8–10 and kindergarten children aged 5 to adopt a preventive perspective.

Research in developmental psychology suggests that children begin to integrate into society and to establish themselves as members of social groups during childhood (Babik & Gardner, 2021). Therefore, the early stages of development are crucial for promoting inclusive skills and initiating positive social relationships based on respect for human rights. Specifically, children aged 8–10 are at the concrete operational stage of cognitive development (Babik & Gardner, 2021). They have reached an age where they are able to think logically and to understand complex issues such as human rights violations. They are also more capable of analysing situational contexts (e.g., situations involving discrimination or conflict) from multiple perspectives (Babik & Gardner, 2021; Killen & Rutland, 2011; Struthers, 2016). However, this developmental stage is also associated with an increase in intergroup biases and stronger negativity towards outgroups (e.g., peers with disabilities or immigrants), highlighting the importance of effective school programmes that reduce intergroup biases and promote social inclusion (Babik & Gardner, 2021; Nesdale & Dalton, 2011). Kindergarten children are in the preoperational stage of cognitive development (Babik & Gardner, 2021) and appear capable of understanding the concept of human rights. They recognise their participation in school as a right and acknowledge that their rights are fundamental to their quality of life (Sounoglou & Michalopoulou, 2017). Furthermore, they tend to prefer individuals who are perceived as belonging to their familiar in-group, evaluating them more positively

than unfamiliar individuals such as racial minorities, immigrants, or peers with disabilities (Babik & Gardner, 2021). Specifically, five-year-old children often rely on salient, visible features that can negatively influence their perceptions and trigger the development of prejudices (Babik & Gardner, 2021; Hilliard & Liben, 2010). This underscores the importance of implementing early intervention programmes that aim to reduce intergroup biases and promote social inclusion from the outset of education (Kart & Kart, 2021).

Taken together, these considerations emphasise the importance of school-based interventions that are sensitive to children's developmental needs and address the social, emotional, and civic aspects of their growth. The present study combines PYD and HRE within the same programme with the aim of fostering inclusive skills and peer acceptance, reducing peer rejection, and contributing to the creation of more inclusive school environments where diversity is valued and respected.

3 General Methodology

3.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter describes the design and methodological framework of the research project, which aimed to develop, implement, and evaluate an intervention programme fostering school inclusion among primary school and kindergarten children. Two empirical studies were conducted to address the central research question: whether the combination of knowledge of and respect for participation rights and the development of inclusive social skills can effectively foster school inclusion. Study 1 validated the intervention with primary school students in the 4th and 5th grades, while Study 2 was a pilot study designed to adapt the intervention and conduct a preliminary evaluation with kindergarten children.

Both studies employed a quasi-experimental design, with classrooms randomly assigned to experimental and control groups and following the same structure of pre-test, intervention, and post-test sessions. Methodological considerations, such as assessment timing and classroom randomisation, were carefully addressed. These choices ensured alignment with both scientific rigour and the practical constraints of school settings.

3.2 General Research Goal

The aim of this research project was to develop, implement and evaluate the efficacy of an intervention programme to foster school inclusion in primary school and kindergarten students.

The intervention specifically aimed to promote the knowledge of and respect for participation rights in all students. The objective was to encourage the recognition of

situations of discrimination and violations of rights. Additionally, the programme sought to enhance inclusive social skills, with a particular focus on fostering the ability to address situations of discrimination and conflict in an assertive manner. The intervention also aimed to initiate meaningful and positive social relationships with all students, including those who may be subject to stigmatised attributes or identities.

From the perspective of school inclusion, as suggested by Juvonen et al. (2019), the intervention programme does not focus on a specific category of students (e.g., with disabilities, migration status, low socio-economic status, etc.). Instead, it is grounded in the notion that all children should be equipped with the capacity to recognise and react assertively to violations of their participation rights. These violations may be experienced to a greater extent by students who possess stigmatised attributes or identities. Moreover, in a preventive perspective, children of kindergarten and primary school were included, as it is during these formative years that children become integrated into society and establish membership of social groups (Babik & Gardner, 2021). It is therefore crucial to emphasise the significance of the early developmental stages in promoting inclusive skills and fostering positive social relationships, founded upon the principles of human rights.

The present research project seeks to investigate the hypothesis that the combination of knowledge of and respect for participation rights and the development of inclusive social skills promote school inclusion in Italian primary school and kindergarten children. In order to address this question, two empirical studies were conducted with two main objectives: (1) to validate an intervention targeting primary school students, with the aim of enhancing inclusive social skills and the respect for participation rights (Study 1); (2) to conduct a pilot study for the preliminary validation of a similar intervention

adapted for kindergarten children (Study 2). Study 1 was conducted to develop, implement and evaluate the efficacy of an intervention programme in fostering inclusion in primary school students in the 4th and 5th grades of primary school (8-10 years old). Study 2 was a pilot study conducted to evaluate an adapted version of the programme for kindergarten children in their final year of kindergarten (aged 5-6 years). The specific goals and hypotheses for each study will be detailed in the dedicated section (see Chapter 4 and Chapter 5).

3.3 Research Design

To evaluate the efficacy of the intervention programmes, and to address the methodological limitations of previous literature, a quasi-experimental design was adopted. In both studies, classrooms were randomly assigned to either the experimental or control groups. The experimental group participated in the intervention programme, while the control group continued with regular school activities. Each study was conducted in three phases: (1) a pre-testing phase, conducted two weeks prior to the intervention programme; (2) the intervention programme phase, structured in weekly sessions; (3) a post-testing phase, conducted two weeks after the intervention programme. Regarding the timing of pre-test and post-test, it has been recommended that the measures should be administered a minimum of one week before the intervention (Rogers & Révész, 2020). The purpose of this procedure is to reduce the potential for confounding effects on the results caused by post-intervention testing effects. Consequently, the decision was taken to designate two weeks, one prior to and one after the programme, to align the practical constraints of the school setting. This approach is predicated on the premise that assessments are conducted within a timeframe that is sufficiently constrained

to minimise disruptions to regular school activities, while maintaining consistency with measurement conditions.

A plethora of studies and meta-analyses addressing school-based intervention programmes for enhancing school inclusion (e.g., Chae et al., 2019; Freer, 2023) have underscored the relevance of the number of sessions and the duration of the intervention. Considering the extant literature and the constraints imposed by the school (Oates & Nighet, 2016), the intervention programme consisted of five sessions in primary schools (Study 1), with a total of 450 minutes (90 minutes for each session). This design was adopted to ensure the efficacy of the intervention while respecting the time pressures of primary schools (Oates & Nighet, 2016). In the context of preschools (Study 2), the programme was adapted to a total of ten 40-minute sessions, as these educational stages permitted more concise sessions due to the less structured teaching schedules observed (Li et al., 2024). This extension of sessions also guarantees a positive dose-response effect, especially at the kindergarten developmental stage (Chae et al., 2019). Furthermore, supplementary generalisation activities were implemented between sessions, with the purpose of guaranteeing and reinforcing the effects of the intervention programme.

Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 present the participant characteristics, instruments, and procedures, together with the statistical analysis, results, and discussion for each study.

4 Study 1: The ‘A Journey Towards Rightsland’ Intervention Programme to Foster Inclusion in Primary School Children

4.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter presents the first study in this thesis. The intervention programme, entitled ‘A Journey Towards Rightsland’, was developed to promote the knowledge of and respect for participation rights, social skills, and positive social relationships with all students. A total of ten classes (167 children, aged between 8 and 10 years old) were randomly assigned to either an experimental group or a control group. The administration of all measures occurred two weeks prior to and two weeks following the intervention. The mixed-effects models demonstrated significant improvements in the experimental group, including higher levels of positive peer nominations, enhanced social skills, greater ability to collaborate with others, and stronger intention to help classmates whose rights were violated. Wilcoxon tests revealed that children at risk of social exclusion in the experimental group received significantly more positive behaviours from their classmates following the intervention. The chapter concludes with a discussion of its limitations and directions for future research. This study was published as an open access article in the Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology.

4.2 Specific Research Goal

The aim of this study was to develop, implement and evaluate the efficacy of ‘A Journey Towards Rightsland’, an intervention programme designed to enhance inclusive social skills and the respect for participation rights.

The outcome variables comprised both indirect and direct observation procedures. In the former case, validated self-report questionnaires assessed social skills, ability to collaborate with classmates, and intention to help hypothetical classmates whose rights are violated. In the latter case, peer sociometric nominations, a technique widely employed internationally as a direct measure of peer acceptance and friendship in primary school students (Cillessen & Marks, 2017; Hassani & Yel, 2021), was utilised. Furthermore, following Owen-DeSchryver et al.'s (2008) recommendations regarding the necessity of measuring intervention efficacy through naturalistic observations of social interactions among primary school students, the alterations in social behaviours (i.e., positive and negative relational behaviours) were analysed between children and their classmates who outlined low sociometric status and low acceptance levels within their classes and were at risk of social exclusion.

The effects of Time (Pre-test *vs.* Post-test) and Condition (experimental group *vs.* control group) were examined on primary school students' positive and negative peer nominations, social skills, ability to collaborate with classmates, and intention to help hypothetical classmates whose rights are violated was examined. A significant Condition × Time interaction was hypothesised for the these variables, specifically that, at the post-test, children who participated in the intervention (experimental group) would demonstrate (a) an increase in positive peer nominations and a decrease in negative peer nominations, as well as an enhancement in (b) general social skills, (c) the ability to collaborate with classmates; and (d) the intention to help hypothetical classmates whose rights are violated, in comparison to peers who did not participate in the intervention (control group).

Furthermore, considering the students who outlined a low sociometric status and who were at risk of social exclusion at pre-test, the effects of Time (Pre-test *vs.* Post-test) and Condition (experimental group *vs.* control group) were examined on the positive and negative relational behaviours provided to and received from classmates. It was hypothesised that, at the post-test, students at risk of social exclusion in the experimental group would receive more positive and fewer negative behaviours from their classmates and would provide more positive and fewer negative behaviours towards classmates in comparison to peers in the control group.

4.3 Method

4.3.1 Participants and Procedure

Following Shadish et al. (2002), the study employed a quasi-experimental design with two repeated measures in experimental and control groups. Public primary schools were selected based on the following criteria: (a) a minimum of two classes of either 4th-grade or 5th-grade primary school students; (b) maximum twenty pupils per class; (c) heterogeneous classes in terms of gender, ethnicity, and vulnerability.

An a priori power analysis indicated that approximately 160 participants would provide adequate power ($1-\beta = .80$) to detect a small-to-medium effect ($d = 0.35$) at $\alpha = .05$, although this analysis did not account for the nested structure of school-based data. Given practical constraints in school-based research (i.e., limited school availability, time issues), pairs of classes with similar characteristics (gender distribution, age, school grade and school affiliation) were identified and randomly assigned to experimental or control

groups to ensure balance and comparability and to enhance the precision of the study (Raudenbush & Schwartz, 2020).

The total sample comprised four schools, encompassing a total of 10 classes randomly assigned to the experimental group (four 4th grade and one 5th grade) and the control group (four of 4th grade and one of 5th grade). The study included 167 children (85 boys and 82 girls) with a mean age of 9.11 years (*SD* = .90): 85 in the experimental group (M_{age} = 9.08; *SD* = .91) and 82 in the control group (M_{age} = 9.13; *SD* = .87). The ten classes ranged from 11 to 20 students (M = 16.7), with girls representing between 30% and 65% of each class. Both groups completed all direct and indirect measures at pre- and post-test, with only the experimental group participating in the intervention programme. The characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Following the procedure suggested by Soresi and Nota (2007), the child who received the fewest positive nominations (i.e., those who were chosen) and the most negative nominations (i.e., those who were rejected) in each class was identified as having low sociometric status and low acceptance levels. For each class involved, the means of preferences and rejections provided and received by children were considered. Classification was based on relative rather than absolute sociometric scores within each group (Maassen et al., 2005). For each class, only the child most at risk in terms of low sociometric status and low levels of acceptance was involved in subsequent direct observation of positive and negative social behaviour provided to and received by classmates. A total of ten children were identified: 3 boys and 2 girls attended classes from the experimental group (M_{age} = 9.40, *SD* = .89), and 4 boys and 1 girl from the control group (M_{age} = 8.80, *SD* = .84).

Table 1

Characteristics of participants in Study 1

	EG		CG	
	N	%	*N*	%
Gender				
Boys	46	54.12	39	47.56
Girls	39	45.88	43	52.44
School grade level				
4th grade	67	78.82	62	75.61
5th grade	18	21.18	20	24.39
Citizenship				
Italian	71	83.53	64	78.05
No-Italian	14	16.47	18	21.95
Learning disabilities	3	3.53	2	2.44

Note. EG = Experimental Group, CG = Control Group.

Ethical considerations. All phases of this study were developed and implemented in accordance with the code of ethics of the Italian Association of Psychology (2015/2022), which draws inspiration from the Declaration of Helsinki (1964/2013). Prior to the commencement of the study, the parents of all participating students received a letter outlining the study's purpose and requesting their consent for their child to participate in the intervention programme (active parental consent; Priest et al., 2012). All parents provided written consent, thereby ensuring the participation of all children in the study. The aims and purpose of the research project were explained to school heads and teachers. The protocol of the present study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education and Applied Psychology (University of Padova, Project identification code: 465-b).

4.3.2 Measures

Two weeks prior to and two weeks following the intervention programme, the researcher administered the following measures.

Peer sociometric nominations. Sociometric procedures represent a well-established approach for assessing social status within groups, with extensive use in school contexts to evaluate the peer relationships as they capture the perspective of multiple informants (i.e., classmates) rather than relying solely on self-report or teacher ratings (Cillessen & Marks, 2017). In this study, participants were individually administered a sociometric peer procedure developed by Soresi and Nota (2007). The following instructions were read by the participants: “In a few days, we might organize a school trip, and I would like to take your opinion into account, as much as possible, when assigning seats on the bus”. This scenario was selected to provide a concrete, age-appropriate context that minimizes abstract thinking demands while maintaining relevance to children’s daily social experiences (Soresi & Nota, 2007). Following these instructions, participants were invited to nominate classmates they wanted to sit next to during the school trip (positive nominations) and those they did not want to sit next to during the school trip (negative nominations). The class constituted the reference group, permitting both same-sex and other-sex choices, and unlimited nominations, as this allows for more accurate reflection of the full range of social preferences and reduces artificial constraints on children’s responses (Cillessen & Marks, 2017). Children could nominate any classmate, including none, though they were not permitted to nominate themselves.

Four indices were calculated for each child (Soresi & Nota, 2007): Positive peer sociometric nominations provided, referred to the number of positive nominations provided by each child for their classmates in response to the first question; Negative peer sociometric nominations provided, concerning the number of negative nominations provided by each child for their classmates in response to the second question; Positive peer sociometric nominations received, pertained to the number of positive nominations that the child received from classmates in response to the first question; Negative peer sociometric nominations received, related to the number of negative nominations that the child received from classmates in response to the second question. These indices can be used to derive social status classifications (e.g., popular, rejected, neglected, controversial, average) following established taxonomies (Cillessen & Marks, 2017), though the present study focused on the raw nomination counts as continuous variables.

This procedure has demonstrated adequate psychometric properties, including reliability and face validity, in Italian school contexts (Soresi & Nota, 2007). It has been employed in several intervention studies within Italian primary schools (Ginevra et al., 2025; Nota et al., 2019), demonstrating its utility in evaluating social relationships and measuring intervention efficacy and in identifying children at risk of social exclusion. These studies found significant improvements in positive nominations received following social inclusion interventions, demonstrating the procedure's sensitivity in detecting changes in peer relationship dynamics. In. the present study, children's engagement with the task and their ability to understand the instructions supported the face validity of the procedure, consistent with previous applications with Italian primary school students (Nota et al., 2019; Soresi & Nota, 2007). Children showing low sociometric status (i.e.,

low positive nominations and/or high negative nominations) were identified as at risk of social exclusion and included in subsequent behavioural observations.

How do I behave with others? The instrument developed by Soresi and Nota (2007) was used to evaluate social skills. This instrument was designed to measure children's perceived competence in social interaction domains that are fundamental for establishing and maintaining positive peer relationships and social inclusion within school contexts (Soresi & Nota, 2007). The questionnaire comprises 27 items, which are divided into four subscales:

- Ability to accept and make comments (9 items): This subscale assesses children's capacity to engage in constructive communication, including giving and receiving feedback assertively. An example item is: "Do you apologise to your classmates if you realise that what you said was wrong?";
- Ability to express emotions and wishes (7 items): This subscale measures children's capacity to communicate their emotional states and desires in social interactions. An example item is: "Do you tell your classmates what you feel?";
- Ability to establish friendships with peers (5 items): This subscale evaluates children's initiative and capacity to form new peer relationships. An example item is: "Do you go near your classmates during the break?";
- Ability to establish positive relations (6 items): This subscale assesses children's general interpersonal competence in maintaining constructive relationships with peers and adults. An example item is: "Do you look at teachers in the eyes when you talk with them?".

The respondents are invited to indicate the frequency with which they engage in the social behaviours described on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*Never*) to 5 (*Always*). The questionnaire yields both subscale scores for each of the four dimensions and a total score, calculated as the sum of all items. In this study, a total score was calculated. Higher scores indicate greater self-reported social skills.

The "*How do I behave with others?"* questionnaire has demonstrated robust psychometric properties (i.e., internal consistency reliability, content and construct validity) in Italian school contexts (Soresi & Nota, 2007). The questionnaire has been employed in an intervention study with Italian primary school students (Nota et al., 2019), which utilised this measure to evaluate the efficacy of a school intervention for inclusion, finding significant improvements in social skills following the intervention.

For the present study, the instrument demonstrated good internal consistency, with McDonald's Ω value of .84 for the total score, at the pre-test. This value is consistent with those reported in previous studies (Nota et al., 2019; Soresi & Nota, 2007), supporting the reliability of the measure in the present sample. As reported in the preliminary correlational analyses (see Section 4.4.2), the total social skills score was positively correlated with ability to collaborate with classmates, providing evidence of construct validity in the present sample.

Collaboration questionnaire. The Collaboration questionnaire (Soresi & Nota, 2007) comprises 18 items and was used to assess the ability to collaborate with classmates. Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they believed they behaved in the indicated manner (e.g., "Behaving with others in a friendly manner") on a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all*; 5 = *very much*). A total score is calculated by summing all

items, with higher scores indicating greater self-reported ability to collaborate with classmates. The study conducted by Soresi and Nota (2007) demonstrated that the questionnaire exhibits satisfactory psychometric properties, including good internal consistency reliability, and evidence of content and construct validity. In addition, it has been established as a reliable instrument for measuring the ability to collaborate with classmates in children. In the present study, the questionnaire demonstrated good internal consistency at pre-test, with a McDonald's Ω value of .87. As reported in the preliminary correlational analyses (see Section 4.4.2), the ability to collaborate with classmates was strongly positively correlated with social skills and positively correlated with positive peer nominations received, providing evidence of construct validity in the present sample.

How do I behave with my classmates in difficulty? The present questionnaire was developed by Soresi and Nota (2007) for the purpose of assessing the intention to help hypothetical classmates whose rights are violated. The questionnaire presents three hypothetical scenarios in which same-age peers experiences violations of their rights to social participation and inclusion, as outlined in the CRC (United Nations, 1989). Each scenario describes a child who is socially excluded or discriminated against in the school context. For example: "During school breaks, Marco, a child of your age, is often left alone to draw while his classmates have fun together. Additionally, he is not included in group activities with his classmates at school". Following each scenario, respondents are asked to indicate their level of willingness to help their hypothetical classmate on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*certainly not*) to 5 (*certainly yes*), responding to questions such as "Would you help Marco?". The total score for each of the three scenarios was calculated, with higher scores indicating greater intention to help peers experiencing

rights violations (i.e., social exclusion and discrimination). The study conducted by Soresi and Nota (2007) demonstrated that the instrument exhibits robust psychometric properties, namely, good internal consistency reliability, and evidence of content validity. The content validity was established through alignment with the participation rights framework outlined in the CRC (United Nations, 1989) and through expert review by developmental psychologists. For this study, the McDonald's Ω value was .87 at the pre-test, thus showing a good internal consistency. As reported in the preliminary correlational analyses (see Section 4.4.2), the intention to help classmates whose rights are violated was positively correlated with positive peer nominations received, social skills and ability to collaborate with classmates, providing evidence of construct validity in the present sample.

Direct naturalistic observation of social behaviours of children at risk of social exclusion. Observational methods are particularly valuable for assessing changes in social behaviours towards children at risk of social exclusion (Soresi & Nota, 2007), as this approach captures both the behaviours provided by these children and the responses they receive from classmates. The researcher observed the positive and negative social behaviours provided and received by children who, at pre-test, showed low sociometric status and low acceptance levels within their classes and were at risk of social exclusion. These observations were conducted in accordance with the procedure for quantitative behavioural observations of school inclusion as detailed by Soresi and Nota (2007). Quantitative observation methods involve researchers meticulously documenting behaviours through the utilisation of checklists, thereby facilitating the examination of the occurrence and extent of specific behaviours or interactions (Creswell,

2018). Participants at risk of social exclusion were observed during three 20-minute sessions of mathematics classes, three 20-minute sessions of Italian classes, and three 15-minute sessions of break times, totalling 165 minutes of observation. Prior to the observation period, the teacher introduced the observer to the class, explaining that she would be taking notes about the way students talk and play during classes and break periods. During the observations, the researcher maintained proximity of approximately 3–6 metres from the observed students to avoid interference, while still ensuring audibility and visibility of any social behaviour exhibited by children and their classmates (Owen-DeSchryver et al., 2008).

To record social behaviour, the observer employed the "School inclusion facilitation" coding system (Soresi & Nota, 2007), the categories of which are outlined in the following checklist: Positive behaviours provided towards classmates (e.g., smiling at other children, making eye contact during verbal expressions, helping other children, and using expressions of kindness towards other children); Negative behaviours provided towards classmates (e.g., being verbally hostile and physically aggressive); Positive behaviours received from classmates (e.g., verbal indications regarding an assignment, hugging, making eye contact during verbal expressions, greeting); Negative behaviours received from classmates (e.g., being verbally hostile, physically aggressive). The scoring system was based on the calculation of the frequency of positive and negative social behaviours provided and received by each student at risk of social exclusion.

The "School inclusion facilitation" coding system has been utilised in previous studies that examined the efficacy of programmes in promoting social behaviours and inclusion in Italian primary school children (Ginevra et al., 2025; Nota et al., 2019). These

studies demonstrated the utility and sensitivity of the coding system in detecting changes in social behaviours following interventions, supporting its use in evaluating inclusion programmes.

To obtain accurate recordings of social behaviours in the present study, two researchers underwent training to utilise the "School inclusion facilitation" coding system. This training included the review of videos depicting social interactions and the administration of initial inter-rater reliability tests, ensuring consistency in the application of the categories of social behaviours. The inter-rater reliability was assessed by calculating the prevalence bias-adjusted kappa (PABAK; Byrt et al., 1993) for each category across pre- and post-test, which yielded a value of .64. This value can be regarded as substantial (Byrt et al., 1993; McHugh, 2012) and is considered adequate for behavioural observation studies, particularly when coding low-frequency behaviours in naturalistic settings (Hallgren, 2012). Furthermore, the proportion of positive agreement between two raters was high (93%).

During the observations, the researcher took notes of the social behaviours observed in preparation for discussion in a dedicated meeting with a supervisor. To address any discrepancies, the researcher and the supervisor reviewed and reconciled any differences in their evaluation at the beginning of the coding process, thus ensuring consistency in the coding process of social behavioural categories.

4.3.3 Intervention Programme

The 'A Journey Towards Rightsland' intervention programme comprised five weekly sessions, each lasting approximately 90 minutes, conducted during school hours. All sessions were led by the same researcher who was expert in developmental

psychology and school inclusion. To ensure personalised reinforcement and feedback, and to provide participants with more opportunities to actively participate, ask, and answer questions, the intervention programme was implemented in small groups of 8-10 classmates (Peterson, 2016).

Aims. The intervention had two overarching aims: firstly, to promote the knowledge of and respect for participation rights of all students; and secondly, to foster the development of social skills related to assertively dealing with situations of discrimination and conflict, as well as initiating meaningful social relationships with all students, including those with stigmatised attributes or identities (e.g., disabilities, migration status, etc.).

Content and structure. The first four sessions of the intervention focused on discussing four rights and presenting social situations in which these rights were violated. These rights were selected following a systematic procedure. First, suggestions from multiple scholars (e.g., Blaisdell et al., 2021; Jones & Manion, 2023; MacKenzie et al., 2020) were consulted regarding the use of the CRC (UN, 1989) as a fundamental framework and tool for HRE to promote knowledge of the rights contained therein. During the selection of rights in the Convention, following the guidelines for designing intervention programmes with the objective of promoting school inclusion (Blaisdell et al., 2021; MacKenzie et al., 2020), the rights most aligned with the principles of school and social inclusion and participation (e.g., participatory rights) were selected. Secondly, to define an intervention programme directly involving the school context, several primary school teachers were contacted and their suggestions on rights associated with social participation and inclusion were gathered for consideration. In accordance with the

aforementioned procedure, the following rights from the CRC (United Nations, 1989) were selected: The right to engage in play and recreational activities (Art. 31; first session), the right to freely participate in cultural life, encompassing educational activities (Art. 31; second session), the right to express one's opinion and to be heard (Arts. 12-13; third session), and the right to be treated well and not to suffer violence or discrimination (Arts. 19 and 37; fourth session).

The first four sessions focused each on one of the aforementioned rights. Following the presentation of the right and the explanation of the necessity to guarantee it for all students, several hypothetical situations of social discrimination that violate the outlined right were introduced. These situations were presented in the context of a hypothetical new classmate, thereby guiding participants' attention to the sense of injustice these situations entail and the sense of social responsibility towards this hypothetical classmate experiencing such difficult circumstances. During the course of the sessions, the gender of the hypothetical new classmate was systematically alternated to control for this variable.

The sessions then concentrated on the development of social skills to allow for the assertive addressing of situations involving discrimination and violations of participation rights. Participants were presented with social behaviours that could be employed to support their peers when confronted with adverse situations. These behaviours were exemplified and their benefits were highlighted. Subsequently, the participants engaged in a guided mental simulation. The researcher invited them to imagine how they would react to a situation in which a hypothetical new classmate experienced social exclusion and a violation of their rights. The utilisation of mental simulation is suggested on the

premise that it has been demonstrated to be efficacious in other interventions that have been designed to reduce prejudice towards others (e.g., Crisp & Turner, 2013; Vezzali et al., 2020). This technique has been demonstrated to be effective in real-life scenarios, as evidenced by research findings that suggest visualising behaviours can elicit the same emotional and cognitive responses as the behaviour itself (e.g., Nicholson et al., 2021). Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that mental simulation can act as a substitute for direct experience (Kappes & Morewedge, 2016), activating neurological bases such as perception and mechanisms like memory, emotion, and motor control, and eliciting cognitive, physiological, and behavioural responses comparable to real situations (Nicholson et al., 2021). Participants were asked to write a comprehensive account of the imagined situation to reinforce the impact of the exercise (Vezzali et al., 2020). Specifically, participants were asked to identify the right that was not being respected, and the specific social behaviours performed to address the situation and support the peer experiencing it (Husnu & Crisp, 2010).

In the concluding session, the emphasis was placed on the importance of respecting the rights that had been discussed in the preceding sessions. The benefits of these rights in a school context were highlighted, including discovery of new games and fun things, establishing new friendships, and providing mutual assistance. Participants were invited to imagine a school situation (e.g., organising a class party) where classmates must collaborate and respect each other's rights. These rights include the right to engage in play and recreational activities, the right to freely participate in cultural life, the right to express one's opinions and be heard, and the right to be treated well and not suffer violence or discrimination.

Intervention's materials and strategies. At the beginning of the first session, the researcher elucidated the goal of the intervention programme, and each child received a contract to sign, along with a 'Logbook' for the purpose of collecting all the materials and exercises to be conducted during the intervention. In each session, a token economy was employed through the implementation of a *course board* that involved the awarding of coloured stickers (tokens) for attendance, participation, and completed homework. At the conclusion of the intervention, a specific tangible reward (e.g., personalised notepaper, a coloured pen) was provided for each participant who had collected all tokens.

Each session was structured using a learning guide that delineated the verbal and non-verbal behaviours the researcher was to use for each session. An example of a session is reported in Appendix A. Moreover, each session was characterised by a specific goal, with the purpose of operationalising the desired outcomes and ascertaining the attainment of the specific goals established for each session. The goals were composed of three elements: performance, condition and mastery criteria. Performance is defined as the behaviour expected of each child at the conclusion of the activity carried out during the session. The condition denotes the circumstances in which performance is anticipated to occur. Mastery criteria refer to the quality or quantity of performance required to consider the objective achieved. The specific goals for each session are reported in Appendix B.

In addition to the guided mental simulation, a variety of educational procedures and strategies were employed, incorporating social reinforcements, informational feedback, modelling, and teaching methods. The provision of social reinforcements took the form of verbal feedback, expressed through positive phrases and compliments, or non-verbally, through gestures and facial expressions. These social reinforcements have been

demonstrated to facilitate positive reinforcements of the desired behaviour or response (Gunaretnam, 2021).

Modelling is defined as a learning strategy based on observation, in which children acquire new behaviours, skills or attitudes by observing a model (teacher, peer or other significant figure) who embodies the behaviours into practice (Bandura & Rosenthal, 1966). Learning through modelling is founded on the premise that students can observe models that are directly imitated. It is through this process of observation that students develop a sense of admiration and trust for the models, which in turn serves as a reliable surrogate for the authentic objects in question (Sulasmi, 2021). In this intervention, the researcher functioned as the observed model, facilitating the development of inclusive social skills, an understanding of participation rights, and the acquisition of appropriate strategies for dealing with rights violations through processes of imitation and internalisation.

To guarantee and consolidate children's knowledge of participation rights and the development of social skills, teaching methods were employed during the sessions (Carter et al., 2024; UNICEF, 2014). These comprised instructions and group discussions. The instructions involved explicitly articulating the objectives, explaining key concepts using multiple forms of representation, checking for understanding and providing feedback. The multiple forms of representation encompassed verbal instructions, visual resources and examples. The utilisation of verbal instructions served to introduce participation rights and to promote reflection on the value of social participation and inclusion (UNICEF, 2014). Visual resources, encompassing slide presentations, were employed to complement spoken explanations using images and keywords. The integration of visual

information with verbal explanation has been demonstrated to enhance the comprehension and retention of students, particularly when learning complex concepts (Carter et al., 2024). Examples were used to illustrate situations of violation of participation rights and inclusive social behaviours, thereby enabling children to practise and develop inclusive social skills. The incorporation of real-life examples, including situations of violation of participation rights, further supported students' comprehension of topics addressed (Carter et al., 2024). The examples were alternated with group discussions and personalised questioning, during which the children were asked questions to assess their understanding. This approach created opportunities for dialogue and has been shown to foster active participation, thereby ensuring that all pupils were engaged by involving a few children at a time and tailoring questions to their responses.

To guarantee the maintenance and generalisation of knowledge, students were tasked with the completion of homework assignments. These assignments instructed participants to implement the knowledge they had acquired during the session in a variety of contexts, including in their homes and schools (Rao et al., 2008). For example, between sessions, children were invited to write about any situation they encountered involving violations of rights, either in the classroom or outside the school context, and to apply the social behaviours they had learned during the sessions.

4.3.4 Statistical Analysis

No missing data were found in this study. Preliminary analyses were conducted in two steps. First, the homogeneity of the experimental group and the control group was examined with respect to socio-demographic characteristics and the measured outcomes. Specifically, a χ^2 test was conducted for gender, while independent-sample *t*-tests were

used for age and dependent variables (i.e., peer sociometric nominations, social skills, ability to collaborate with classmates, and intention to help hypothetical classmates whose rights are violated). Effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's *d*, with values of 0.20 considered small, 0.50 as medium and 0.80 as large (Cohen, 1988). Second, to examine relationships among the outcomes at baseline and to provide empirical support for the theoretical integration of PYD and HRE approaches underlying the intervention, Pearson correlation analyses were conducted among all dependent variables measured at pre-test.

Subsequently, to evaluate the efficacy of the intervention, the effects of the independent variables, namely Time and Condition, on the dependent variables (which included peer sociometric nominations, social skills, ability to collaborate with classmates, and intention to help hypothetical classmates whose rights are violated), were analysed. Given the repeated measurement design and nested data structure, mixed-effects models were applied. These analyses were performed using the GAMLj module of the JAMOVI statistical platform (Gallucci, 2019; The Jamovi Project, 2022). The effects of Time and Condition and their interaction were estimated as fixed effects, while for the random components, the intra-class coefficient (ICC) value - representing the variance of the random intercept across the cluster variables (i.e., children and classes) - was calculated by dividing the variance of the random coefficient by the sum of its own and residual variances. Model adequacy was assessed by reporting marginal R^2 (the variance explained by the fixed effects over the total variance of the dependent variable) and conditional R^2 (the variance explained by the fixed and the random effects together over the total variance of the dependent variable). To support the relevance of including the random effects, the overall model (fixed + random effects) was expected to capture a

greater proportion of the variance than the model including only the fixed effects (Johnson, 2014). A Linear Mixed-Effects Model with restricted maximum likelihood estimation (REML) was conducted. Simple effects were analysed to examine the effect of Time separately for the experimental and control groups.

For the subgroup of ten children (five from the experimental group and five from the control group) with low sociometric status and low acceptance levels, baseline equivalence regarding the positive and negative social behaviours provided to and received from classmates was tested using the Mann-Whitney test. The effect of the intervention on positive and negative social behaviours provided to and received from classmates was examined using the Mann-Whitney and Wilcoxon tests. Specifically, the Mann-Whitney test was employed to assess significant post-test differences between the experimental group and the control group, while the Wilcoxon test was used within each group to evaluate changes from the pre-test to the post-test.

4.4 Results

4.4.1 Baseline Equivalence

Considering gender and age, no significant differences were found for gender ($\chi^2_{(1)} = .600$, $p > .05$), and age ($t_{(164)} = .365$, $p > .05$). The *t*-tests also indicated no significant pre-test differences between the two groups on any of the dependent variables (see Table 2): Positive peer sociometric nominations provided ($t_{(165)} = .354$, $p = .724$, Cohen's $d = .08$), Negative peer sociometric nominations provided ($t_{(165)} = .055$, $p = .141$, Cohen's $d = .19$), Positive peer sociometric nominations received ($t_{(165)} = .531$, $p = .596$, Cohen's $d = .06$), Negative peer sociometric nominations received ($t_{(165)} = 1.192$, $p =$

.235, Cohen's d = .23), Social skills ($t_{(165)}$ = .274, p = .784, Cohen's d = .10), Ability to collaborate with classmates ($t_{(165)}$ = .125, p = .900, Cohen's d = .02), and Intention to help hypothetical classmates whose rights are violated ($t_{(165)}$ = .470, p = .639, Cohen's d = .07).

Table 2

Means (M) and Standard Deviations (SD) of experimental and control groups at pre-test and post-test in Study 1

	Pre-test				**Post-test**			
	EG		**CG**		**EG**		**CG**	
	M	***SD***	***M***	***SD***	***M***	***SD***	***M***	***SD***
PPSN provided	7.64	4.47	7.40	4.02	8.82	5.02	7.72	3.61
NNPSN provided	4.59	3.47	5.47	4.18	4.02	3.52	5.33	3.79
PPSN received	7.58	3.04	7.33	2.98	8.48	3.35	7.18	2.79
NPSN received	4.71	3.87	5.38	3.39	4.00	3.29	5.06	2.89
Social skills	93.00	15.32	94.47	15.16	95.21	17.18	94.74	16.31
Ability to collaborate with classmates	71.92	11.81	71.7	10.05	73.12	11.61	70.72	12.49
Intention to help classmates whose rights are violated	12.39	0.85	13.37	0.70	13.52	1.98	13.39	2.19

Note. EG = Experimental Group, CG = Control Group, PPSN = Positive Peer Sociometric Nominations, NNPSN = Negative Peer Sociometric Nominations.

4.4.2 Preliminary Correlational Analyses

Table 3 presents the correlations among the dependent variables measured at pre-test for the entire sample (N = 167). The analyses revealed significant correlations

between peer sociometric nominations and the ability to collaborate with classmates. Specifically, positive peer sociometric nominations received were positively correlated with the ability to collaborate with classmates (r = .209, p < .01), whilst negative peer sociometric nominations received were negatively correlated with the ability to collaborate with classmates (r = -.174, p < .05). Both correlations were weak. Additionally, a significant strong positive correlation emerged between social skills and the ability to collaborate with classmates (r = .680, p < .01).

Table 3

Correlations among dependent variables at pre-test in Study 1

Dipendent variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	1	-.071	.256**	-.169*	-.114	-.083	.041
2		1	-.008	.227**	-.143	-.144	-.008
3			1	-.562**	.135	.209**	.232**
4				1	-.115	-.174*	-.083
5					1	.680**	.245**
6						1	.328**
7							1

Note. ** = Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). * = Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). 1 = Positive peer sociometric nominations provided; 2 = Negative peer sociometric nominations provided; 3 = Positive peer sociometric nominations received; 4 = Negative peer sociometric nominations received; 5 = Social skills; 6 = Ability to collaborate with classmates; 7 = Intention to help classmates whose rights are violated.

Furthermore, the intention to help classmates whose rights are violated was positively and significantly correlated with positive peer sociometric nominations received (r = .232, p < .01), social skills (r = .245, p < .01), and the ability to collaborate

with classmates ($r = .328$, $p < .01$). These correlations ranged from weak to moderate, with the strongest association observed with the ability to collaborate with classmates.

4.4.3 Efficacy Evaluation

Table 4 and Table 5 present the significance of Time, Condition, and Time × Condition effects for each of the dependent variables. The ICC value, representing the variance of the random intercept across the cluster variables (i.e., children and classes), is also reported.

Table 4

Mixed Model Analysis on peer sociometric nominations (Study 1)

Dependent variable	*Effect*	*F* (*df*)	*p*	ICC for the random intercept for children	ICC for the random intercept for classes
NPSN received	Time	5.06 (1, 164.06)	.026	.783	.309
	Condition	.98 (1, 7.09)	.354		
	Time × Condition	.52 (1, 164.06)	.471		
PPSN received	Time	2.32 (1, 164.27)	.130	.746	.397
	Condition	.44 (1, 8.36)	.525		
	Time × Condition	8.53 (1, 164.27)	.004		
PPSN provided	Time	5.55 (1, 162.98)	.020	.530	.158
	Condition	.28 (1, 8.27)	.613		
	Time × Condition	8.53 (1, 162.98)	.253		
NPSN provided	Time	2.87 (1, 161.90)	.092	.630	.198
	Condition	1.94 (1, 6.89)	.207		
	Time × Condition	1.39 (1, 161.90)	.240		

Note. F = F-statistic, df = degrees of freedom, p = p value. PPSN = Positive Peer Sociometric Nominations, NNPSN = Negative Peer Sociometric Nominations.

Peer sociometric nominations. Regarding Negative peer sociometric nominations received, the *marginal R²* was .017 and the *conditional R²* was .805. The interaction effect Time × Condition was not significant (see Table 4). However, analysis of the main effect of Time for the two groups separately indicated a significant effect of Time in the experimental group ($F_{(1,164)} = 4.47$, $p = .036$) but not in the control group ($F_{(1,164)} = 1.15$, $p = .285$), suggesting a significant decrease in this variable only for students in the experimental group.

As for the Positive peer sociometric nominations received, the *marginal R²* was .015 and the *conditional R²* was .786. The interaction effect Time × Condition was significant (see Table 4). Analysis of the main effect of Time indicated a significant effect in the experimental group ($F_{(1,164)} = 9.99$, $p = .002$) but not in the control group ($F_{(1,164)} = .96$, $p = .328$), suggesting that the intervention programme was effective in increasing this variable only for students in the experimental group.

Concerning the Positive peer sociometric nominations provided, the *marginal R²* was .012 and the *conditional R²* was .574. The interaction effect Time × Condition was not significant (see Table 4). However, analysis of the main effect of Time showed a significant effect in the experimental group ($F_{(1,163)} = 6.28$, $p = .013$) but not in the control group ($F_{(1,163)} = .72$, $p = .399$), indicating a significant increase of this variable only for students in the experimental group.

Regarding Negative peer sociometric nominations provided, the *marginal R²* was .029 and the *conditional R²* was .671. The interaction effect Time × Condition was not significant (see Table 4). Analysis of the main effect of Time for the two groups separately indicated a significant effect in the experimental group ($F_{(1,161)} = 4.25$, $p = .041$) but not

in the control group ($F_{(1,161)}$ = .13, p = .719), suggesting a significant decrease of this variable only for students in the experimental group.

Social skills. Regarding general social skills, the *marginal R^2* was .012 and the *conditional R^2* was .757. The interaction effect Time × Condition was significant (see Table 5), indicating that a significant change in this variable over time occurred only in the experimental group. Analysis of the main effect of Time for the two groups separately revealed a significant effect in the experimental group ($F_{(1,163)}$ = 15.05, p < .001) but not in the control group ($F_{(1,163)}$ = .07, p = .787), suggesting that the intervention programme was effective in increasing social skills.

Table 5

Mixed Model Analysis on social skills, ability to collaborate with classmates and intention to help classmates whose rights are violated (Study 1)

Dependent variable	*Effect*	*F* (*df*)	*p*	ICC for the random intercept for children	ICC for the random intercept for classes
Social skills	Time	8.41 (1, 162.89)	.004	.746	.115
	Condition	.06 (1, 7.18)	.807		
	Time × Condition	6.33 (1, 162.89)	.013		
Ability to collaborate with classmates	Time	2.38 (1, 162.57)	.125	.749	.184
	Condition	1.10 (1, 7.68)	.602		
	Time × Condition	9.99 (1, 162.57)	.002		
Intention to help classmates whose rights are violated	Time	2.32 (1, 164.27)	.130	.746	.397
	Condition	.44 (1, 8.36)	.525		
	Time × Condition	8.53 (1, 164.27)	.004		

Note. F = F-statistic, df = degrees of freedom, p = p value.

Ability to collaborate with classmates. Regarding the ability to collaborate with classmates, the *marginal* R^2 was .018 and the *conditional* R^2 was .760. The interaction effect Time × Condition was significant (see Table 5). Analysis of the main effect of Time for the two groups separately indicated a significant effect in the experimental group ($F_{(1,163)} = 11.33, p < .001$) but not in the control group ($F_{(1,163)} = 1.28, p = .260$), suggesting that the intervention programme was effective in enhancing the ability to collaborate with classmates.

Intention to help hypothetical classmates whose rights are violated. Regarding intention to help hypothetical classmates whose rights are violated, the *marginal* R^2 was .035 and the *conditional* R^2 was .704. The interaction effect Time × Condition was significant (see Table 5). Analysis of the main effect of Time for the two groups separately indicated a significant effect in the experimental group ($F_{(1,158)} = 34.00, p < .001$) but not in the control group ($F_{(1,158)} = .29, p = .591$), suggesting that the intervention programme was effective in enhancing the intention to help classmates whose rights are violated.

Children at risk of social exclusion. The descriptive statistics of experimental and control groups at pre- and post- test are showed in Table 6. As regards children who outlined low sociometric status and low acceptance levels within their classes and were at risk of social exclusion, no significant differences were found between the two groups at pre-test for Positive social behaviours provided (U = .838 $p = .402$), Negative social behaviours provided (U = 1.273, $p = .203$), Positive social behaviours received (U = .946 $p = .344$), and Negative social behaviours received (U = .000, $p = 1.000$).

At post-test, the non-parametric Mann-Whitney test revealed no significant differences between experimental group and control group for Positive behaviours

provided (U = -0.838, p = .402), Negative behaviours provided (U = -0.645, p = .519), Positive behaviours received (U = -1.054, p = .292), and Negative behaviours received (U = -0.949, p = .343).

Table 6

Means (M) and Standard Deviations (SD) of children of the experimental and control groups with low sociometric status and low peer acceptance levels at pre-test and post-test (Study 1)

	Pre-test				**Post-test**			
	EG		**CG**		**EG**		**CG**	
	M	***SD***	***M***	***SD***	***M***	***SD***	***M***	***SD***
Positive behaviours provided	52.00	30.64	57.00	58.38	63.00	42.78	56.80	60.33
Negative behaviours provided	12.00	11.55	3.40	2.61	3.00	2.83	2.00	2.55
Positive behaviours received	5.4	5.27	12.40	13.47	23.00	12.12	17.40	13.94
Negative behaviours received	2.00	2.74	1.60	2.61	0.80	0.84	0.40	0.89

Note. EG = Experimental Group, CG = Control Group.

Within the experimental group, the Wilcoxon test showed a significant change between pre-test and post-test for Positive behaviours received (z = -2.023, p = .043). No significant changes were found for Positive behaviours provided (z = -1.633, p = .102), Negative behaviours provided (z = -1.841, p = .066), and Negative behaviours received (z = -1.069, p = .285). These results suggest that children who outlined low sociometric status randomly assigned to the experimental group received significantly more positive social behaviours from their classmates at post-test (see Table 6).

As regards the control group, the Wilcoxon test revealed no significant changes between pre-test and post-test for Positive behaviours provided (z = -0.184, p = .854), Negative behaviours provided (z = -1.069, p = .285), Positive behaviours received (z = -1.761, p = .078), and Negative behaviours received (z = -1.342, p = .180).

4.5 Discussion

The present study aimed to analyse the efficacy of an intervention designed to promote school inclusion in primary school children by integrating the two approaches of PYD and HRE. The intervention aimed to promote knowledge of and respect for the participation rights (i.e., rights associated with school inclusion and participation of all students) of all students, and to foster the development of social skills to counteract situations of discrimination and conflict assertively, and initiate meaningful social relationships with their peers, including those with stigmatised attributes or identities.

The analyses carried out demonstrated that the intervention programme effectively improved almost all the considered outcomes. Children in the experimental group showed more developed social skills, greater ability to collaborate with classmates, and stronger intentions to help hypothetical classmates whose rights are violated. In addition, these children received a greater number of positive sociometric nominations at post-test compared to those in the control group. Moreover, although the Time × Condition interaction was not significant, a Time effect was found (between pre-test and post-test of the intervention programme) involving the positive and negative nominations provided by children in the experimental group.

These results may be interpreted in light of PYD and HRE frameworks (Gonzalez et al., 2020; Lerner et al., 2021; Howe & Covell, 2021; Jones & Manion, 2023). The

intervention stimulated the knowledge of both participatory rights and the consequences of discrimination, alongside social skills to assertively address discrimination situations where such rights are violated. It is hypothesised that the results may have been obtained through mental simulation and homework assignments between sessions, which could have enhanced the participants' overall social skills and intentions to help children whose participation rights are violated (Ginevra et al., 2020). Furthermore, the intervention programme emphasised the importance of collaboration among classmates to organise recreational activities together, whilst respecting the rights of all children. These rights included the right to engage in play and recreational activities, the right to freely participate in cultural life, the right to express opinions and be heard, and the right to be treated well and not suffer violence or discrimination. This might explain the significant increase in the ability to collaborate with classmates in the experimental group (Kennedy, 2013; Lyskova et al., 2023). The increase in positive sociometric nominations and the decrease in negative sociometric nominations within the classes may be attributed to the fact that the social relationships promoted by the intervention programme provided positive reinforcement, thereby fostering greater peer acceptance (Broekhuizen et al., 2016).

The findings further indicate that the intervention programme was effective in strengthening intergroup relations towards children with low sociometric status and low acceptance levels within their classes. Specifically, children at risk of social exclusion in the experimental group received significantly more positive social behaviours from their classmates following the intervention programme. This suggests that the intervention may have contributed to the creation of a more welcoming and supportive school context,

encouraging the development of positive peer relationships for children who, prior to the intervention programme, experienced low sociometric status (Sebba & Robinson, 2010). This effect may be explained, on the one hand, by evidence from research in the HRE field (e.g., Covell & Howe, 2005; Howe & Covell, 2021), which has demonstrated that promoting knowledge of and respect for human rights can stimulate socially responsible behaviours and foster greater commitment to preventing discrimination and social exclusion. On the other hand, consistent with findings from the PYD literature (e.g., Diaz-Garolera et al., 2022), the development of social skills aimed at initiating and maintaining friendships might have enhanced peer acceptance even for children who were initially more rejected or isolated.

4.5.1 Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite the encouraging results of this study, several limitations should be acknowledged and considered in future research. A first limitation concerns the complexity of the nested data structure. A post-hoc power analysis was conducted using the Optimal Design Software [version 3.01] for Multi-level and Longitudinal Research (Raudenbush et al., 2011). This analysis indicated that the number of randomized clusters (10 classes) was insufficient to detect a power of 0.80 for outcome variables with higher ICC values (Hemming et al., 2017). Nonetheless, the study design reflects the realistic constraints and practices of school-based intervention research (Li et al., 2024; Raudenbush & Schwartz, 2020). Moreover, balance and comparability between the experimental and the control groups were ensured with respect to gender distribution, age, school grade and school affiliation. As noted by Raudenbush and Schwartz (2020), this improves precision when the number of randomized clusters is fewer than 20.

A second limitation relates to the duration of the intervention. The programme comprised five sessions, totalling 450 minutes (90 minutes per session). Future studies might extend the number of sessions to ensure a positive dose-response effect (Chae et al., 2019). A third limitation concerns the absence of follow-up assessments beyond the immediate post-test conducted two weeks after the intervention. Although this timeframe was appropriate for capturing short-term effects, it may result in spike effects that weaken rapidly after the intervention programme ends. Longitudinal studies with follow-up evaluations at 6 and 12 months are therefore recommended to determine whether improvements, particularly among children with low sociometric status and low acceptance levels within their classes, are sustained over time (Huic et al., 2017).

A fourth limitation concerns the implementation of the intervention program: the sessions were conducted by a researcher external to the school context, with expertise in developmental psychology and school inclusion. Future research should examine the intervention's effectiveness when delivered by trained teachers, thereby testing its feasibility and sustainability within schools. A fifth limitation is that only one child identified as at risk of social exclusion (based on low sociometric status and low acceptance levels) was selected for each class in the experimental group and control group. Future studies might adopt alternative sociometric classification procedures and include larger numbers or include of at-risk pupils per class to increase generalisability (Maassen et al., 2005).

Finally, the evaluation of the intervention's efficacy relied exclusively on direct and indirect measures. Future research could strengthen ecological validity by including social-validity measures administered to teachers and parents. Using measures with

parents would be useful to assess their ability to recognise discrimination and social exclusion and to intervene on behalf of their children in extra-school contexts (e.g., at home, in sports contexts, during leisure time).

5 The ‘A Jigsaw Puzzle of Rights’ Intervention Programme to Foster Inclusion in Kindergarten Children: A Pilot Study

5.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter presents the second study, which extends the intervention to kindergarten setting. Building on the encouraging results of Study 1, ‘A Journey Towards Rightsland’ was adapted for 4–6-year-olds as ‘A jigsaw puzzle of rights’. This pilot study evaluated the programme’s preliminary efficacy in fostering recognition of rights violations and developing social skills for assertively reacting to discrimination and social exclusion. Six preschool classes (51 5-year-old children) were randomly assigned to experimental or control groups. Results from 2×2 mixed ANOVAs indicated significant improvements in the experimental group, who exhibited higher positive peer nominations, enhanced recognition of rights violations, and more assertive reactions to discrimination and social exclusion (i.e., rights violations). These preliminary findings suggest that the intervention programme is potentially effective with kindergarten children, warranting further testing in larger trials. The limitations and future research directions are discussed.

5.2 Specific Research Goal

The aim of Study 2 was to conduct a preliminary evaluation of the intervention programme entitled ‘A jigsaw puzzle of rights’. Conducting a pilot randomised trial allows for preliminary evaluation of the feasibility, acceptability, and potential efficacy of the programme, providing essential data to inform a future definitive trial (Eldridge et al., 2016). The programme was designed to foster knowledge of and respect for

participation rights in kindergarten children, enhance their ability to react assertively to situations of discrimination and conflict that constitute rights violations, and promote the ability to initiate and maintain meaningful social relationships with all peers, including those with stigmatised attributes or identities.

Children in their final year of kindergarten participated, with classes being randomly assigned to experimental or control groups. Randomisation served to reduce selection bias and provide preliminary estimates of intervention effects under controlled conditions, informing the feasibility of future definitive randomised controlled trials (Eldridge et al., 2016). The study comprised three phases: (1) a Pre-testing, conducted two weeks prior to the intervention; (2) the Intervention programme, structured into ten weekly sessions; and (3) a Post-testing, conducted two weeks after the intervention. The control group participated exclusively in pre- and post-testing, while the experimental group also undertook in the intervention.

All measures, including assessments of children's recognition of rights violations, reactions to rights violations, and peer relationships (i.e., peer nominations), were administered at pre- and post-test. The study examined the effects of Time (pre-test *vs*. post-test), Condition (experimental group *vs.* control group) and Time × Condition interaction on kindergarten students' positive and negative peer nominations provided and received, recognition of rights violations, and reactions to rights violations (i.e., assertive, aggressive and passive). Significant Condition × Time interactions were hypothesised, specifically that , kindergarten children in the experimental group would demonstrate, at the post-test: (a) increased positive and decreased negative peer nominations (both provided and received); (b) greater recognition of rights violations;

and (c) higher assertive and lower passive and aggressive reactions to rights violations (i.e., discrimination and social exclusion), compared to the control group.

5.3 Method

5.3.1 Participants and Procedure

Public kindergarten schools were selected based on the criterion of having at least two classes with 5-year-old students. As a result, the total sample comprised three schools, with 6 classes randomly assigned to experimental or control groups.

Sample size was determined according to the minimal requirements for pilot studies (O'Neill, 2022). As an exploratory pilot study, formal power analysis was not conducted. Sample size was based on O'Neill's (2022) recommendation of approximately 50 participants for preliminary evaluation of intervention feasibility and effects, combined with pragmatic considerations related to school availability and the challenges of research with preschool-aged children.

The study involved 51 kindergarten children (22 boys and 29 girls), all aged 5 years: 26 children (14 boys and 12 girls) in the experimental group and 25 (8 boys and 17 girls) in the control group. Both groups participated were administered all direct and indirect measures at the pre- and post-test, with only the experimental group participating in the intervention programme.

Ethical considerations. This study followed the same ethical procedures as Study 1 and was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education and Applied Psychology (University of Padova, Project identification code: 1463-b).

5.3.2 Measures

Two weeks before and after the intervention programme, the researcher conducted individual oral interviews with each child, administering the following measures.

Peer sociometric nominations. Participants individually completed the same sociometric procedure described in Study 1 (see Section 4.3.2) (Soresi & Nota, 2007), with age-appropriate modifications to ensure comprehension among kindergarten students. The following scenario was presented: “Paolo, a boy of your age, has a little turtle called Rughina. Maybe Paolo will come to this school and invite you and your friends to his house to celebrate the arrival of spring and his little turtle”. Children were then invited to nominate classmates they wished to accompany them to Paolo’s house (positive nominations) and those they did not want to go with them (negative nominations). This scenario, involving a familiar social event and a concrete, appealing element, was selected to be developmentally appropriate for five-year-old children whilst maintaining the same underlying structure as the bus trip scenario used in Study 1 (Soresi & Nota, 2007). As in Study 1, the class was the reference group, allowing both same- and other-sex choices and unlimited nominations, with children unable to nominate themselves.

The same four indices were calculated ass in Study 1: Positive peer sociometric nominations provided; Negative peer sociometric nominations provided; Positive peer sociometric nominations received; Negative peer sociometric nominations received. The psychometric properties of this procedure with Italian kindergarten students aged 3-6 years have been documented in previous research (Ginevra et al., 2020; Santilli et al., 2019), demonstrating its developmental appropriateness and sensitivity in assessing the

efficacy of social inclusion interventions. In the present study, children's engagement and comprehension confirmed the procedure's face validity, consistent with previous applications with this age group (Ginevra et al., 2020; Santilli et al., 2019).

Recognition of rights violations and reactions to rights violations. Children's recognition of and reaction to rights violations were assessed using an adapted version of the "Social problem-solving skills" instrument developed by Soresi and Nota (2007). This instrument was designed to assess children's ability to recognise situations in which the participation rights of other children or other living beings are violated, as well as the ability to react assertively to address such violations. Specifically, the instrument collects information on the strategies individuals employ in difficult social situations, particularly focusing on problem-solving strategies related to rights violations (i.e., social exclusion and discrimination). Children were presented with five hypothetical scenarios depicting social problems (i.e., situations involving violations of participation rights) in which a peer or another living being experiences violations of their participation rights. For example: "Giovanni, a child your age, is often teased by his classmates, which makes him very upset and causes him to cry a lot." In addition to situations involving children's rights, scenarios also include rights of other living beings; for instance: "At school, a classmate begins to tear flowers from the school garden during a ball game…".

Following each scenario, children were asked: (1) "Which right is not being respected?" and (2) "What would you do and say in this situation?". Responses to the first question were used to assess recognition of rights violations. Answers were coded dichotomously as correct (score = 1) if the child correctly identified the violated right, or incorrect (score = 0) if the child responded 'I don't know' or provided an incorrect

answer. A total score for recognition of rights violations was calculated by summing correct responses across the five scenarios, with higher scores indicating greater ability to recognise rights violations.

Responses to the second question were coded into three mutually exclusive categories based on the child's reactions: Assertive, Aggressive, and Passive. Assertive reactions involve expressing their feelings, thoughts, and needs clearly, confidently, and respectfully, while considering the rights and perspectives of others (e.g., 'It's not nice, stop making him sad'). Aggressive reactions involve expressing feelings, thoughts, or desires in a hostile, forceful, or disrespectful manner, potentially violating others' rights (e.g., 'I'll hit him and shout at him'). Passive reactions involve avoiding expression of feelings, thoughts, or needs, often yielding to others or failing to defend their own or others' rights (e.g., 'I won't say/do anything' or 'Sorry'). For each child, frequency scores were calculated for each reaction type across the five scenarios.

The original "Social problem-solving skills" instrument (Soresi & Nota, 2007) assessed only children's reactions to social problems. For the present study, the instrument was adapted by adding the first question ("Which right is not being respected?") to each scenario, thereby enabling assessment of children's ability to recognise rights violations. This adaptation aligns the instrument more closely with the HRE approach underpinning the intervention and allows for evaluation of both cognitive (recognition) and behavioural (reactions) dimensions of children's responses to rights violations.

The original "Social problem-solving skills" instrument has been employed in previous intervention studies with Italian kindergarten students (Ginevra et al., 2020;

Santilli et al., 2019). These studies utilised this measure to evaluate the efficacy of social skills interventions with children aged 3-6 years, finding significant improvements in assertive reactions and reductions in passive reactions following the interventions, thereby demonstrating the instrument's sensitivity to change. These studies support the developmental appropriateness of the instrument for young children and its capacity to detect intervention effects.

In the current study, all responses to both questions were coded by two independent researchers. Inter-rater reliability was calculated as percentage agreement (Hallgren, 2012), which exceeded 86% across both the recognition question and the reaction coding, indicating a good level of agreement between researchers and supporting the reliability of the coding procedures. The face validity of the instrument was supported by children's engagement during the interview and their ability to provide relevant responses, consistent with previous applications of this measure with kindergarten children (e.g., Ginevra et al., 2020; Santilli et al., 2019).

5.3.3 Intervention Programme

The 'A Jigsaw Puzzle of Rights' intervention programme consisted of ten weekly sessions, each lasting approximately 40 minutes, conducted during school hours. As in Study 1, all sessions were conducted by the same researcher with expertise in developmental psychology and school inclusion.

Aims. The intervention programme built upon the core aims of Study 1, adapted for kindergarten children. Specifically, the programme aimed to: (1) promote knowledge of and respect for participation rights of both children and other living beings (i.e., animals, plants and the planet); (2) foster social skills for inclusion and for assertively

reacting to situations of discrimination and social exclusion; and (3) initiate meaningful social relationships with all students.

Content and structure. While the core structure of the programme remained similar to Study 1, a distinctive feature of the kindergarten version was the explicit inclusion of rights relating to animals, plants and the planet. This reflected kindergarten teachers' recommendations to present abstract social issues using more tangible examples involving non-human living beings. In line with Sparks (2020), who highlights the interdependence of human, animal, and environmental rights, the inclusion of these rights aimed to provide children with a more interconnected approach to the concepts of respect and inclusion for all living beings. Participation rights from international Conventions and Declarations (e.g., the right to play, the right to be heard, the right to be treated well and free from discrimination) were therefore presented alongside rights aimed at fostering respect for non-human living beings (i.e., animals, plants and the planet). This adaptation provided developmentally appropriate entry points for understanding inclusion, respect for human rights and diversity, while simultaneously promoting early knowledge of environmental and animal rights.

The ten sessions covered the following themes. The first session introduced the goal of the intervention programme and presented five rights: the right to play, the right to express one's opinion, the right to be treated well, the right to diversity and the rights of animals and the environment. Sessions two to nine focused on specific rights: the right to play (sessions two and three); the right to express and be listened to (sessions five and six); the right to be treated well (session seven); the right to diversity (session nine); and the rights of animals and the environment (sessions four and eight). The tenth

session summarised all previously addressed rights, inviting children to recognise them and their associated benefits. This final session consolidated learning and emphasised the importance of rights in fostering inclusive communities.

Each session followed a three-phase format: (1) presentation of a right; (2) discussion of a hypothetical situation involving a rights violation; and (3) role-playing simulations. For example, after introducing the right to be treated well, children discussed a scenario where a classmate was teased while drawing. The violation was identified, and strategies to counteract the situation were modelled (e.g., explaining why teasing is unkind, showing empathy to the victim, and valuing their work). These strategies consisted of assertive reactions to rights violations. Role-playing then allowed children to practise assertive responses to similar scenarios. This experiential method has been shown to effectively promote social skills, and in particular assertiveness, in preschool children (Wirahandayani et al., 2023).

Intervention's materials and strategies. The intervention programme was delivered in small groups, with up to six children per group, to maximise attention from kindergarten children, opportunities for participation and individual feedback (Trinczer et al., 2023). As in Study 1, aach session was guided by a learning guide and followed structured learning objectives composed of three elements: performance, condition and mastery criteria (see Appendix C for session goals).

During the intervention's implementation, the researcher employed several evidence-based strategies also used in Study 1. Positive social reinforcement (e.g., verbal praise, gestures, facial expressions) was used to consolidate desired social behaviours (Ramadan & Adriani, 2023). Modelling was provided to promote assertive reactions and

inclusive behaviours in response to rights violations (Sulasmi, 2021). For a detailed description of the theoretical foundations and application of modelling in the intervention, see Study 1 (Section 4.3.3). As in Study 1, homework tasks were assigned to promote the maintenance and generalisation of knowledge, with teachers supporting the implementation of certain activities in the classroom (Rao et al., 2008).

The kindergarten version of the intervention programme was distinguished by strategies specifically tailored to this age group. Short videos and images were employed to illustrate rights in engaging and accessible ways, supporting comprehension of abstract concepts (Carter et al., 2024). Videos, along with demonstrations by the researcher, were also used as behavioural models, depicting assertive reactions to rights violations that children could observe, imitate and practise in role-playing simulations. Role-playing served as the principal method, enabling children to actively rehearse inclusive and assertive behaviours within structured scenarios. This experiential approach provided children with direct opportunities to observe, imitate, and internalise positive behaviours, representing the central feature of the kindergarten adaptation (Wirahandayani et al., 2023).

5.3.4 Statistical Analysis

No missing data were present in this study. The experimental and the control groups were preliminarily assessed to ensure homogeneity of socio-demographic characteristics and the measured outcomes. Specifically, a χ^2 test was conducted for gender, and independent-samples *t*-tests were performed for the dependent variables (i.e., peer sociometric nominations, recognition of rights violations, and reactions to rights violations). Cohen's *d* values were also calculated as a measure of effect size, with values

of 0.20 considered small, 0.50 as medium and 0.80 as large (Cohen, 1988). Subsequently, to examine the relationships among the dependent variables at baseline and to provide empirical support for the theoretical integration of PYD and HRE approaches underlying the intervention, Pearson correlation analyses were conducted among all dependent variables measured at pre-test.

To evaluate the efficacy of the intervention, the effects of the independent variables, namely Time and Condition, on the dependent variables (peer sociometric nominations, recognition of rights violations, and reactions to rights violations), were examined. Despite the relatively small sample size, ANOVAs were conducted given their robustness to moderate departures from normality with balanced designs (e.g., equal group sizes; Blanca et al., 2017). For each subscale of the dependent variables (e.g., positive and negative peer sociometric nominations provided and received; recognition of rights violations; assertive, aggressive, passive reactions to rights violations), a series of 2×2 mixed ANOVA was conducted, with Time (pre-test *vs.* post-test) as the within-subjects factor and Condition (experimental group *vs.* control group) as the between-subjects factor. Simple effects analyses were performed to examine the effect of Time separately within each group. Effect sizes were calculated using partial eta-squared (η^2p) to provide information about the magnitude of observed effects independent of sample size. Cohen (1988) suggested that $\eta^2p \leq 0.06$ can be considered a small effect size, $0.07 \leq \eta^2p \leq 0.14$ represents a medium effect size, and $\eta^2p > 0.14$ is a large effect size.

Given the exploratory nature of this pilot study and the relatively small number of clusters, multilevel modelling was not conducted. Pilot studies are not intended to achieve sufficient statistical power for hypothesis testing; rather, they aim to assess feasibility,

refine procedures, and generate preliminary estimates to inform future, larger-scale trials (Eldridge et al., 2016).

5.4 Results

5.4.1 Baseline Equivalence

Considering gender and age, no significant differences were obtained with respect to gender: $\chi^2_{(1)} = 2.48$; $p = .115$. Regarding age, all students of experimental and control groups were 5 years old. The *t*-tests indicated no significant pre-test differences between the two groups on any of the dependent variables (see Table 7): Positive peer sociometric nominations provided ($t_{(49)} = -1.137$, $p = .261$, Cohen's $d = .31$), Negative peer sociometric nominations provided ($t_{(49)} = 0.302$, $p = .764$, Cohen's $d = .08$), Positive peer sociometric nominations received ($t_{(49)} = -1.091$, $p = .281$; Cohen's $d = .30$), Negative peer sociometric nominations received ($t_{(49)} = 0.737$, $p = .464$, Cohen's $d = .21$), Recognition of rights violations ($t_{(49)} = 1.728$, $p = .090$, Cohen's $d = .77$), Assertive reactions ($t_{(49)} = 0.980$, $p = .332$, Cohen's $d = .21$), Aggressive reactions ($t_{(49)} = -1.795$, $p = .079$, Cohen's $d = .50$), and Passive reactions ($t_{(49)} = 1.067$, $p = .291$, Cohen's $d = .39$).

Table 7

Means (M) and Standard Deviations (SD) of the experimental and control groups at pre- and post-test (Study 2)

	Pre-test				Post-test			
	EG		CG		EG		CG	
	M	***SD***	***M***	***SD***	***M***	***SD***	***M***	***SD***
PPSN provided	2.81	1.13	3.48	2.79	4.69	1.19	3.88	2.59
NNPSN provided	2.42	2.35	2.24	1.94	2.35	2.23	1.24	1.27
PPSN received	2.81	1.77	3.52	2.80	4.38	1.72	3.84	2.04
NPSN received	2.54	2.35	2.12	2.03	2.15	2.03	1.20	1.44
Recognition of rights violations	0.69	0.79	0.32	0.75	3.46	1.36	0.32	0.63
Assertive reactions	0.04	0.20	0.00	0.00	1.80	1.50	0.32	0.80
Aggressive reactions	0.19	0.40	0.56	0.96	0.27	0.72	0.58	0.28
Passive reactions	1.92	1.60	1.44	1.64	0.58	0.81	1.68	1.86

Note. EG = Experimental Group, CG = Control Group, PPSN = Positive Peer Sociometric Nominations, NNPSN = Negative Peer Sociometric Nominations.

5.4.2 Preliminary Correlational Analyses

Table 8 presents the correlations among the dependent variables measured at pre-test for the entire sample (N = 51).

The analyses revealed a significant positive weak correlation between positive peer sociometric nominations provided and recognition of rights violations ($r = .343$, $p < .05$). Furthermore, positive peer sociometric nominations received were significantly

correlated with children's reactions to rights violations. Specifically, positive nominations received are positively associated with aggressive reactions ($r = .310$, $p < .05$) and negatively correlated with passive reactions ($r = -.484$, $p < .01$) to discrimination and social exclusion. These correlations were moderate. No significant correlations emerged between assertive reactions and the other dependent variables.

Table 8

Correlations among dependent variables at pre-test in Study 2

Dipendent variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	1	-.063	.534**	.139	.343*	-.077	.220	-.250
2		1	.097	.335*	.135	-.089	-.017	-.194
3			1	-.198	.130	-.071	.310*	-.484**
4				1	.257	-.094	-.111	-.127
5					1	.271	-.228	-.171
6						1	-.071	-.149
7							1	-.216
8								1

Note. ** = Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). * = Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). 1 = Positive peer sociometric nominations provided; 2 = Negative peer sociometric nominations provided; 3 = Positive peer sociometric nominations received; 4 = Negative peer sociometric nominations received; 5 = Recognition of rights violations; 6 = Assertive reactions; 7 = Aggressive reactions; 8 = Passive reactions.

5.4.3 Efficacy Evaluation

Table 9 and Table 10 report the significance of Time, Condition, and Time × Condition effects for each dependent variable.

Table 9

ANOVA's results on peer sociometric nominations (Study 2)

Dependent variable	*Effect*	*F* (*df*)	*p*	η^2p
PPSN provided	Time	8.39 (1,49)	.006	.146
	Condition	.03 (1,49)	.868	.001
	Time × Condition	3.54 (1,49)	.066	.067
NPSN provided	Time	3.33 (1,49)	.074	.064
	Condition	1.84 (1,49)	.181	.036
	Time × Condition	2.44 (1,49)	.125	.047
PPSN provided	Time	7.56 (1,49)	.008	.147
	Condition	.03 (1,49)	.864	.001
	Time × Condition	3.41 (1,49)	.065	.065
NPSN received	Time	10.42 (1,49)	.002	.175
	Condition	1.94 (1,49)	.170	.038
	Time × Condition	1.76 (1,49)	.191	.035

Note. F = F-statistic, df = degrees of freedom, p = p value, η^2p = partial eta-squared. PPSN = Positive Peer Sociometric Nominations, NNPSN = Negative Peer Sociometric Nominations.

Peer sociometric nominations. Regarding positive peer sociometric nominations provided, the Time × Condition interaction was not significant (see Table 9). However, by analysing the main effect of Time for the two groups separately, we found a significant increase in the experimental group [$F_{(1,25)} = 39.36$; $p < .001$, $\eta^2p = .612$], whereas no significant change was observed in the control group [$F_{(1,24)} = 0.29$; $p = .595$, $\eta^2p = .012$]. This indicates that the intervention programme was effective for the experimental group.

For negative peer sociometric nominations provided, the Time × Condition interaction was not significant (see Table 9). Furthermore, no significant main effect of

Time was observed in either the experimental group [$F_{(1,25)} = 0.04$; $p = .841$, $\eta^2p = .002$] or the control group [$F_{(1,24)} = 4.84$; $p = .058$, $\eta^2p = .108$].

Concerning positive peer sociometric nominations received, the Time × Condition interaction was not significant (see Table 9). Nevertheless, a significant main effect of Time was found in the experimental group [$F(1,25) = 33.43$; $p < .001$, $\eta^2p = .572$], whereas no significant change occurred in the control group [$F(1,24) = 0.25$; $p = .619$, $\eta^2p = .010$], indicating that the intervention programme was effective in enhancing this variable only for the students in the experimental group.

Considering negative peer sociometric nominations received, the Time × Condition interaction was not significant (see Table 9). Moreover, no significant main effect of Time was observed in either the experimental group [F**(1,25)** $= 2.99$; $p = .096$, $\eta^2p = .107$] or the control group [$F_{(1,24)} = 7.27$; $p = .053$, $\eta^2p = .103$].

Recognition of and reactions to rights violations. Concerning recognition of rights violations, a significant Time × Condition interaction was observed (see Table 10), indicating that significant changes occurred only in the experimental group. The main effect of Time was significant in the experimental group [$F_{(1,25)} = 82.234$; $p < .001$, $\eta^2p = .767$], whereas no change was observed in the control group [$F_{(1,24)} = 0.000$; $p = 1$, $\eta^2p = .000$]. This demonstrates that the intervention programme effectively enhanced recognition of rights violations.

Regarding assertive reactions to rights violations, a significant Time × Condition interaction was found (see Table 10). The main effect of Time was significant in the experimental group [$F_{(1,25)} = 40.20$; $p < .001$, $\eta^2p = .617$], whereas no significant change occurred in the control group [$F_{(1,24)} = 3.97$; $p = .058$, $\eta^2p = .142$].

Table 10

ANOVA's results on recognition of and reactions to rights violations (Study 2)

Dependent variable	*Effect*	*F* (*df*)	*p*	η^2p
Recognition of rights violations	Time	60.92 (1,49)	<.001	.554
	Condition	84.60 (1,49)	<.001	.633
	Time × Condition	60.92 (1, 49)	<.001	.554
Assertive reactions	Time	41.27 (1,49)	<.001	.457
	Condition	18.45 (1,49)	<.001	.274
	Time × Condition	19.86 (1,49)	<.001	.288
Aggressive reactions	Time	2.30 (1,49)	.136	.045
	Condition	.52 (1,49)	.474	.011
	Time × Condition	4.39 (1,49)	.071	.082
Passive reactions	Time	8.45 (1,49)	.005	.147
	Condition	.66 (1,49)	.421	.013
	Time × Condition	17.37 (1,49)	<.001	.262

Note. F = F-statistic, df = degrees of freedom, p = p value, η^2p = partial eta-squared.

For aggressive reactions to rights violations, the Time × Condition interaction was not significant (see Table 10). The main effect of Time was not significant in either the experimental group [$F_{(1,25)} = 0.22$; $p = .646$, $\eta^2p = .009$] or the control group [$F_{(1,24)} = 5.27$; $p = .051$, $\eta^2p = .100$].

Finally, concerning passive reactions to rights violations, the Time × Condition interaction was significant (see Table 10). The main effect of Time was significant only in the experimental group [$F_{(1,25)} = 38.82$; $p < .001$, $\eta^2p = .568$], whereas no change was observed in the control group [$F_{(1,24)} = 0.63$; $p = .434$, $\eta^2p = .026$]. These results indicate that the intervention programme was effective in reducing passive reactions to rights violations.

5.5 Discussion

Following the encouraging results of Study 1 with primary school children, this pilot study aimed to evaluate the preliminary efficacy of the 'A Jigsaw Puzzle of Rights' intervention programme. As in Study 1, the programme aimed to promote the knowledge of and respect for participation rights and to foster assertive reactions to discrimination and conflict, as well as the development of meaningful social relationships in kindergarten children. Findings indicated that the intervention yielded the hypothesised effects, as participants in the experimental group showed improvements in peer sociometric nominations and in the ability to recognise and assertively react to rights violations, compared to the control group.

Specifically, children in the experimental group exhibited a significant increase in positive peer sociometric nominations provided and received, compared to the control group. This demonstrates improvements in positive peer interactions, facilitating the initiation and maintenance of meaningful relationships among classmates – a result also observed in Study 1. This may have been facilitated by the intervention's emphasis on the well-being of all children at school, respecting not only one's own rights but also those of others, in line with the principles of PYD and HRE (Blaisdell et al., 2022; Sancassiani et al., 2015).

Moreover, the Time × Condition interaction was significant for both recognition of rights violations and reactions to rights violations, indicating improvements in these variables in the experimental group, compared to the control group. Regarding recognition of rights violations, this effect may have resulted from the intervention fostering knowledge of participation rights and a sense of injustice regarding situations

of discrimination and social exclusion that violate such rights. This finding is consistent with previous studies showing that HRE can effectively enhance knowledge of human rights and the ability to recognise violations affecting oneself and others (Howe & Covell, 2021; Jones & Manion, 2023).

Concerning reactions to rights violations, participants in the experimental group demonstrated a significant increase in assertive reactions and a significant decrease in passive reactions to situations of discrimination and social exclusion that violate participation rights. These outcomes were likely facilitated by role-play simulations, which may have enhanced children's overall ability to assertively react to such situations (Ginevra et al., 2020).

Overall, these findings are encouraging and provide preliminary support for the feasibility and potential efficacy of 'A Jigsaw Puzzle of Rights'. The results suggest that the programme can promote school inclusion, enhance knowledge of and respect for participation rights, and foster social skills to assertively counteract situations of discrimination and social exclusion from an early age, within a preventive perspective. Although this was a pilot study and the results should be interpreted with caution (Lancaster et al., 2004; Eldridge et al., 2016), the positive outcomes observed in the experimental group suggest that the kindergarten adaptation of the intervention programme holds considerable promise for supporting school inclusion for all children.

5.5.1 Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite the promising results of this pilot study, several limitations should be acknowledged and addressed in future research. Multilevel modelling was not conducted because of the exploratory nature and the relatively small sample size. Although the use

of a 2×2 Mixed ANOVA design allowed examination of Time, Condition, and Time × Condition effects, this approach does not fully account for the nested structure of the data. Future studies should employ more robust statistical approaches, such as mixed-effect models, to better account for individual and classroom variances (Meteyard & Davies, 2020).

Several limitations identified in Study 1 (Section 4.5.1) also apply to this pilot study. First, the intervention programme was delivered by an external researcher with expertise in developmental psychology. While this ensures fidelity to the intervention model, it may not reflect feasibility of implementation by preschool teachers in daily school settings. Future research should examine the effectiveness of the intervention when conducted by trained teachers, and its long-term sustainability in preschool contexts (Herlitz et al., 2020). Second, the current study did not include long-term follow-up assessments to investigate whether improvements in positive peer sociometric nominations, recognition of rights violations and ability to assertively react to discrimination and social exclusion were maintained. Longitudinal research could assess the persistence of effects over time (Huic et al., 2017). Third, the study relied only on direct and indirect measures. Further research should expand the evaluation of the intervention's ecological validity by incorporating perspectives of teachers and parents. Parent-reported measures could assess whether gains in children’s ability to recognise and assertively react to rights violations also manifest at home, during leisure time, or in peer interactions outside the school environment.

Finally, given the limited sample size and the exploratory nature of this pilot study, the observed effects cannot be generalised. Rather, they should be considered as

preliminary indications that warrant replication and further testing in larger, adequately powered trials (Eldridge et al., 2016). Future research should consider increasing the sample size and conducting a cluster randomised trial to evaluate the efficacy of the intervention using more rigorous statistical analyses such as mixed-effect modelling.

6 General Discussion

6.1 Chapter Overview

This concluding chapter provides a synthesis of the findings from the two studies described above. It begins by revisiting the overarching aim of the research project and then synthesises the results from each study with respect to different aspects of the overarching research question. These aspects include the limitations of, and contribution to, existing literature on PYD- and HRE-based intervention programmes aimed at fostering school inclusion (i.e., knowledge of and respect for participation rights, social skills, positive peer relationships, and positive social behaviours).

The chapter then discusses both theoretical and methodological considerations arising from findings, highlighting how the research contributes to theory and reflecting on the design and procedures used. Subsequently, the practical implications of the findings are considered, with particular attention to policymakers, developmental psychologists, schools and teachers, parents, and children. Finally, after addressing ethical considerations, the chapter discusses limitations of the research project, provides recommendations for future research, and presents concluding remarks.

6.2 Synthesis of Research Findings

The objective of this research project was to design, implement and evaluate the efficacy of a school-based intervention programme to promote school inclusion in primary school and kindergarten children. The intervention was grounded in the integration of PYD and HRE frameworks. Its aim was to foster the knowledge of and respect for participation rights and to develop inclusive social skills that support positive

peer relationships and prevent social exclusion and discrimination from early developmental stages.

The overarching research question that guided this research project was as follows: *Does the combination of knowledge of and respect for children's rights associated with social inclusion and participation, together with the development of inclusive social skills, promote school inclusion in Italian primary school and kindergarten children?* To address this question, the intervention programme was initially developed to involve primary school children (Study 1) and, following its evaluation in this developmental age, adapted for kindergarten children (Study 2). This procedure enabled the evaluation of the intervention's impact across different stages of childhood and the exploration of its potential as a scalable and age-sensitive programme for the promotion of school inclusion.

Across both developmental stages, the intervention programme effectively enhanced children's inclusive social skills, peer acceptance, and the knowledge of and respect for participation rights, thereby confirming its efficacy in fostering school inclusion. Specifically, Study 1, which involved 8- to 10-year-old primary school students, demonstrated the efficacy of the intervention programme 'A Journey Towards Rightsland' in enhancing peer acceptance (i.e., peer nominations), social skills, the ability to collaborate with classmates, and the intention to help peers whose rights are violated towards classmates. Additionally, the intervention enhanced peer acceptance and positive social behaviours towards classmates identified as being at risk of social exclusion, suggesting its potential for reducing and preventing discrimination and social exclusion in the classroom. Although not all Time × Condition interaction effects were statistically

significant, significant changes over time (i.e., from pre- to post-intervention) were observed only in the experimental group. This finding supports the efficacy of the intervention programme in fostering more inclusive classrooms.

Study 2, a pilot study conducted with kindergarten children, explored the preliminary validity of an adapted version, ‘A Jigsaw Puzzle of Rights’, examining whether the intervention programme could promote school inclusion at an earlier stage. The results showed that children in the experimental group demonstrated a significant increase in their ability to recognise situations of rights violations and react assertively, compared with those in the control group. Additionally, there was a significant decrease in their passive reactions to discrimination and social exclusion following the intervention programme. Furthermore, children who participated in the intervention programme provided and received more positive peer nominations, suggesting that the programme successfully supported school inclusion even at this early stage of development. The results of the pilot study provided preliminary evidence that fostering knowledge of and respect for participation rights and the development of social skills to counteract social exclusion and discrimination is both feasible and effective from the earliest developmental stages. This supports a preventive perspective to promoting school inclusion.

Beyond the core outcomes directly addressed by the intervention effects described above, the preliminary correlational analyses conducted at baseline in both studies provide additional insight into the relationships amon the targeted constructs. In Study 1, positive peer sociometric nominations received were significantly associated with the ability to collaborate with classmates. Furthermore, the intention to help classmates

whose rights are violated was positively correlated with positive peer nominations, social skills, and the ability to collaborate with classmates. In Study 2, children who provided more positive peer nominations also demonstrated greater ability to recognise situations involving rights violations. Moreover, children who received more positive peer nominations displayed more frequent aggressive reactions and less frequent passive reactions when confronted with rights violations. It is important to clarify that, in the context of this study, aggressive reactions refer to active, confrontational responses to rights violations (e.g., directly opposing or confronting the rights violation), thus representing a more engaged stance compared to passive avoidance. Although the correlation between positive peer nominations and assertive reactions did not reach statistical significance, a positive trend was observed. These baseline associations provide preliminary evidence that the constructs targeted by the intervention programme (i.e., inclusive social skills, knowledge of and respect for participation rights, positive peer relationships) are empirically interrelated, providing preliminary support for the theoretical rationale underpinning the integration of PYD and HRE approaches.

These findings, both from the intervention and baseline analyses, provide insight into the problem outlined in the introduction, namely the persistence of social exclusion and discrimination within the school contexts, which undermine children's participation rights and hinder the promotion of their social inclusion. It is important to note that, while a substantial proportion of the literature on school-based intervention aimed at fostering inclusion focuses on children with specific characteristics – such as disabilities, behavioural difficulties, or migration backgrounds (e.g., Cavicchiolo et al., 2020; Dalcin, 2022; Nota et al., 2019; Ordaz & Mosqueda, 2021) – this research project adopted a more

comprehensive approach. It was designed to address the needs of all children, including those with low sociometric status, who are at increased risk of social exclusion regardless of other attributes or identities. The improvements in social behaviours provided and received by these children in Study 1 extend the results of previous PYD-based interventions (Ciocanel et al., 2017; Ginevra et al., 2020), thereby demonstrating that the integration of social skills development with the knowledge of participation rights can improve children's attention to vulnerable peers and strengthen their intention to help classmates facing rights violations. In Study 2, an increase in assertive responses and a decrease in passive responses to rights violations among kindergarten children was observed. This demonstrates that, even at very young ages, children can be guided to actively address discrimination and social exclusion. Moreover, the ability to address rights violations is rarely explored in research in early childhood HRE research, which has predominantly focussed on knowledge of human rights (Covell & Howe, 2005; Howe & Covell, 2021).

Taken together, both the intervention outcomes and the baseline correlational patterns emphasise the efficacy of integrating PYD and HRE approaches in creating inclusive school contexts that foster appreciation for diversity and provide support for all students, including those who are at risk of social exclusion and discrimination. These findings are significant from both a theoretical and methodological standpoint. Theoretically, they confirm and extend the evidence from PYD- and HRE-based interventions, thereby offering novel insight into the efficacy of integrated approaches from the early developmental stages. Methodologically, they address the limitations

found in the literature, such as the absence of control groups and the reliance on self-report measures alone (Howe & Covell, 2021; Taylor et al., 2017).

6.3 Theoretical Considerations

In relation to the extant literature, the results of this research project are consistent with previous studies demonstrating that PYD-based interventions can strengthen social skills, positive social behaviours, and peer acceptance (Ginevra et al., 2020; Larsen, 2021), and that HRE-based programmes can improve knowledge of human rights and promote the intention to respect others' rights (Covell & Howe, 2005; Howe & Covell, 2021; Jones & Manion, 2023). However, the present research extends beyond these established findings by integrating the two frameworks into a single, coherent approach, offering novel theoretical insights into how school inclusion can be conceptualised and promoted.

6.3.1 Support for the Theoretical Integration

The baseline correlational patterns observed in both studies provide empirical support for integrating PYD and HRE frameworks. The strong association between social skills and ability to collaborate with classmates in primary school children underscores the centrality of social competencies within the PYD framework, consistent with the theoretical accounts emphasising that social skills both enable and are reinforced by cooperative interactions (Catalano et al., 2002; Salari et al., 2024; Sancassiani et al., 2015). More importantly, the finding that intention to help peers whose rights are violated was positively correlated with social skills, ability to collaborate with classmates, and positive peer nominations suggests that children's motivation to defend others' rights may

be grounded in their social competencies and experiences of positive peer relationships (Howe & Covell, 2021; Lerner et al., 2021). This pattern provides empirical support for recent theoretical extensions of PYD that emphasise the interconnection between social skills and social justice orientations (Gonzales et al., 2020; Lerner et al., 2021).

The correlational patterns observed among kindergarten children offered complementary developmental insights. The association between positive peer nominations provided and recognition of rights violations suggests that even at this early stage, peer acceptance may be linked to heightened attention to fairness (MacKenzie et al., 2020). Furthermore, the finding that children who received more peer acceptance (i.e., positive peer nominations) displayed more aggressive (active) responses and fewer passive reactions to rights violations suggests that kindergarten children may already differentiate between passive acceptance of injustice and active opposition, even if their strategies are not assertive (Wachs et al., 2023). The positive trend between peer acceptance and assertive reactions, although not statistically significant, may indicate an emergent developmental trajectory wherein children begin to develop more sophisticated strategies for addressing rights violations. These developmental insights underscore the importance of early intervention during a critical window when social biases are not yet fully entrenched (Hilliard & Liben, 2010; Kart & Kart, 2021).

The improvements in social skills observed in both studies align with the principles outlined in PYD literature, which emphasise the central role of competences such as the ability to give and receive feedback, to collaborate with others, to express emotions and wishes, to establish positive relations with others, and to adopt assertive responses in conflict scenarios (Catalano et al., 2002; Lerner et al., 2021; Wachs et al.,

2023). In accordance with previous research, the intervention programme effectively enhanced social skills and the ability to collaborate with classmates in primary school students, as well as the ability to assertively react to discrimination and social exclusion in kindergarten children. These competences have been identified as crucial for the establishment of inclusive social contexts (Broekhuizen et al., 2016; Sancassiani et al., 2015). Specifically, Study 1 demonstrated that integrating PYD and HRE approaches in a school-based intervention effectively promoted primary school students' peer acceptance, social skills, collaboration with classmates, and intention to help children whose rights were violated. Furthermore, the results regarding peer acceptance and positive social behaviours, particularly towards children at risk of social exclusion, are consistent with prior PYD research that has demonstrated the efficacy of PYD programmes in fostering positive peer relationships and reducing discrimination and social exclusion (Ginevra et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2017). These findings indicate that, in primary school children, fostering knowledge of and respect for participation rights, alongside inclusive social skills can support the development of meaningful peer relationships and assertive responses to discrimination. This confirms the relevance of combining PYD and HRE to operationalise school inclusion (Babik & Gardner, 2021; Yamniuk, 2017; Struthers, 2016; Wade, 1994; Salmon-Letelier & Russel, 2022). This study also demonstrates that peer acceptance can be enhanced not only by empowering individuals with vulnerabilities, but also by involving the whole classroom and its social contexts.

6.3.2 Reconceptualising Discrimination and Social Exclusion as Rights Violations

Building on these empirical associations, this research also contributes to theoretical knowledge by conceptualising discrimination and social exclusion not only as interpersonal conflicts or behavioural problems that hinder social inclusion, but also as violations of children's participation rights as outlined in the CRC (United Nations, 1989). Within the PYD approach, this could operationalise the recent suggestions of scholars that highlight the need for a social justice lens and for improving school inclusion through the promotion of participation rights (Lerner et al., 2021; MacKenzie et al., 2020). By connecting assertive responses to discrimination and social exclusion with the defence of participation rights, this research project aimed to promote inclusive school contexts based on the development of positive peer relationships, which are rooted in the respect for participation rights, from a social justice perspective. This perspective integrates the principles of social inclusion (i.e., active social participation for all, emphasising people's strengths) with the most recent CPYD model proposed by Gonzalez et al. (2020), which emphasises the capacity to recognise and address social injustices.

In accordance with the HRE approach, the consideration of social exclusion and discrimination as violations of participation rights shifts the focus from individual characteristics or interpersonal skill deficits to the collective social responsibility of acting to respect one's and others' rights (Howe & Covell, 2021). This perspective aligns with the relational understanding of participation rights (Blaisdell et al., 2021; Moosa-Mitha, 2005), according to which human rights are experienced differently depending on social relationships and contexts. Therefore, school inclusion could be considered as being

strictly linked to the promotion of children's rights to social participation and non-discrimination, as well as to the building of positive social relationships founded upon the respect for participation rights. This corroborates the conceptualisation of inclusion as an active and contextual process that recognises and ensures the respect for participation rights, especially in school environments where children could develop the knowledge and skills to advocate for their own and others' rights (Howe & Covell, 2021; MacKenzie et al., 2020).

6.3.3 Addressing the Action Dimension in Human Rights Education

The results regarding knowledge of and respect for participation rights are in line with previous HRE research. Structured programmes have been shown to enhance children's understanding of their rights and increase their intention to support respect for rights for themselves and others (Howe & Covell, 2021; Jones & Manion, 2023). In accordance with the evidence of prior studies, the intervention programme addressed the cognitive dimension of HRE (i.e., educating *about* human rights). This enhanced the ability to recognise rights violations and the intention to help peers who experience such violations (Covell & Howe, 2005; Howe & Covell, 2021). However, this research addresses a critical gap identified in HRE literature regarding the translation of rights knowledge into concrete actions. Indeed, previous HRE interventions have demonstrated effectiveness in improving knowledge of human rights but have shown limited impact on rights-respectful behaviours (Howe & Covell, 2021). Supporting this notion, Study 2 provides preliminary evidence that even kindergarten children can benefit from an integrated PYD and HRE approach. Children in the intervention group demonstrated the ability to recognise rights violations and to adopt more assertive and fewer passive

responses in unjust or discriminatory situations. These outcomes suggest that early, school-based interventions can promote the development of social skills and inclusive behaviours before social biases and patterns of exclusion become entrenched, emphasising the preventive potential of this combined approach (Sounoglou & Michalopoulou, 2017; Babik & Gardner, 2021; Hilliard & Liben, 2010). Therefore, the present research makes a theoretical contribution through demonstrating that the integration of social skills development has the potential to address the action dimension of the HRE approach (i.e., educating *for* human rights). This dimension was identified by Struthers (2015) and Howe and Covell (2021) as being of crucial importance but often underdeveloped in HRE interventions. The programme could have improved the ability of children to enact their and others' rights in peer interactions within the context of everyday life. In this sense, the results demonstrated that children can be guided not only to identify rights violations but also to counteract such violations in an assertive manner. Thus, the integration of knowledge of and respect for participation rights with inclusive social skills constitutes a novel approach that has been demonstrated to empirically support both cognitive understanding and behavioural implementation of human rights. This addresses the limitation of purely knowledge-based approaches to rights education as identified by Parker (2018) and Quennerstedt (2020).

6.3.4 The Integration of Positive Youth Development and Human Rights Education for School Inclusion

As supported by both the intervention outcomes and the baseline correlational patterns, the most significant theoretical contribution of this research lies in its integration

of PYD and HRE frameworks into a coherent model for school inclusion. Previous studies have suggested the possible value of using participation rights and positive youth development to foster school inclusion (Blaisdell et al., 2021; MacKenzie et al., 2020). This research project offers the first empirical validation of such integration. To summarise, the findings demonstrate how PYD's focus on social skills complements HRE's approach to promote the respect and defence of human rights. Furthermore, most studies on social skills interventions focus on individual behaviour change, potentially reinforcing the notion that social exclusion and discrimination result from individual deficit rather than contextual dynamics (Antoninis et al., 2020). The integration of PYD and HRE reinforces the significance of context and collective responsibility in fostering inclusion. This is achieved through the establishment of positive peer relationships, which are founded upon the respect of human rights (MacKenzie et al., 2020). Moreover, the theoretical underpinning of the PYD's emphasis on contribution and community engagement (Lerner et al., 2021), together with the HRE's emphasis on active citizenship and the responsibility to protect the rights of others (Howe & Covell, 2021), provides a theoretical foundation for transcending the limitations of individual skill development, thereby fostering collective action for the promotion of social justice.

In conclusion, this theoretical integration also prompts further reflection on school inclusion, PYD and HRE from a novel perspective. It suggests that the promotion of inclusion should not be considered as merely a matter of reducing prejudice or increasing social skills in isolation. Rather, inclusion should be regarded as a process that requires an integrated approach, simultaneously developing social skills and a knowledge of rights. This dual focus has the potential to engender not only behavioural change but also

a shift in school culture, thereby reinforcing the idea that inclusion is a shared responsibility that is embedded in everyday school life. Collectively, the results from both studies provide empirical support for this integrated theoretical model. They show that combining PYD and HRE approaches can enhance social skills, peer acceptance, and assertive reactions to rights violations across developmental stages, from kindergarten to primary school. This reinforces the argument that school inclusion should be conceptualised not only as an individual or cognitive endeavour, but as a socially and developmentally grounded process that requires early and continuous interventions to foster rights-respectful behaviours and inclusive peer relationships.

6.4 Methodological Considerations

The two studies were designed to address common limitations in the literature on school-based interventions grounded in PYD and HRE. Through careful attention to participant characteristics, research design, measurement strategies, and issues of sustainability, the research project sought to overcome methodological limitations identified in previous studies.

Regarding participant characteristics, the two studies involved classroom groups rather than self-selected or individually recruited samples, a methodological choice that is typical of school-based interventions (Li et al., 2024). Working with intact classes enhances ecological validity, as the intervention programme was implemented in the natural social environment in which children's daily interactions occur (Herlitz et al., 2020). This allows the findings to be grounded in real classroom dynamics, assessing peer acceptance, peer rejection and social behaviours as they naturally emerge. This approach

also enables the evaluation of the intervention's effects in line with the view that inclusion should be supported at both individual and contextual levels (Schwab et al., 2024).

The decision to conduct the studies with kindergarten and primary school students reflects the importance of targeting developmental stages where social hierarchies and intergroup biases begin to consolidate (Babik & Gardner, 2021; Nesdale & Dalton, 2011). In Study 1, the research also assessed children at real risk of social exclusion, identified through low sociometric status, regardless of specific personal characteristics. This contrasts with most inclusion interventions, which often target groups defined by a particular attribute or identity (e.g., disability, migration background) (Cavicchiolo et al., 2020; Dalcin, 2022; Kart & Kart, 2021; Ordaz & Mosqueda, 2021), thereby offering a more comprehensive picture of vulnerability within peer groups.

From a design perspective, both studies employed a control group, addressing a frequent limitation in the literature on HRE interventions where pre–post designs without a comparison group predominate (e.g., Covell & Howe, 2005; Howe & Covell, 2021). For instance, although Howe and Covell (2021) conducted a decade-long programme of research on HRE in schools, their studies did not include control groups that would allow comparisons between classes exposed to HRE and those that were not. In contrast, this research project accounted for the nested data structure. Specifically, Study 1 adopted a cluster-randomised design at the class level and considered the nested data structure in the analyses, in line with recent methodological recommendations for school-based interventions (Li et al., 2024). This multilevel approach strengthens internal validity by controlling for intra-class correlations that could otherwise inflate effect sizes. Study 2, as a pilot study with a smaller sample size, did not apply this approach; however, it

nevertheless employed a control group and maintained the cluster structure, as recommended when conducting pilot studies prior to a full cluster-randomised trial (Eldridge et al., 2016), and demonstrated promising effects.

Regarding measures, both studies employed a combination of direct and indirect measures of inclusion, thus overcoming the common reliance on self-report instruments alone (Taylor et al., 2017). Sociometric nominations were used as direct behavioural indicators of peer acceptance and rejection, complemented by measures assessing recognition of rights violations, intentions to help peers whose rights are violated, or assertive reactions to rights violations. Moreover, Study 1 included observational data to capture children's classroom interactions, offering an additional perspective on behavioural change over time. Furthermore, while HRE research has often struggled to show significant behavioural changes (Howe & Covell, 2021), the consistent increase in intentions to help may represent an important step in the action pathway, signalling children's readiness to translate knowledge into action. In this sense, intention to help could be viewed as a precursor to more assertive, situationally appropriate behaviours, such as those assessed in Study 2 with kindergarten children. Although observations were not conducted in Study 2, the inclusion of a measure of assertive, passive, and aggressive reactions to discrimination and social exclusion allowed for the assessment of children's capacity to act upon their rights knowledge, a dimension rarely addressed in early childhood HRE research.

From a sustainability perspective, both the intervention and the research design were developed to be feasible within school constraints, requiring limited external resources and minimal disruption to regular activities (Herlitz et al., 2020). In evidence-

based intervention research, sustainability refers to the extent to which a programme continues to deliver benefits beyond the period of implementation by external facilitators (Rabin & Brownson, 2017). From this perspective, ensuring sustainability requires designing interventions that are not only evidence-based but also aligned with the priorities, values, and everyday practices of the institutions in which they are implemented. The intervention programme proposed in this research aligns with schools' mission to promote inclusive classroom contexts, a goal explicitly supported by school leaders who tend to endorse initiatives that can provide tangible benefits in this area. This alignment represents a recognised strategy for enhancing the sustainability of evidence-based interventions (Hailemariam et al., 2019). Nevertheless, several factors can limit sustainability, such as competing priorities that place academic outcomes above socio-emotional objectives and constraints in time and resources (Herlitz et al., 2020). These challenges were considered in the design of the two intervention programmes, tailoring the structure to the organisational context of each educational stage. In primary schools (Study 1), the intervention comprised five sessions of approximately 90 minutes each, scheduled to fit within existing curricular structures. In preschools (Study 2), where timetables are typically more flexible, the intervention was delivered in ten shorter sessions of about 40 minutes each. This adaptation not only ensured feasibility within each context but also enhanced the likelihood that the programme could be maintained and integrated into regular school practices over time. Moreover, at both educational levels the use of classroom-based delivery, integration of activities into existing routines, and involvement of the whole peer group make the programme adaptable across different

school contexts and increase the likelihood of long-term implementation. This adaptability will be further discussed in the following section on practical implications.

6.5 Practical Implications

Drawing on insights from the combined application of PYD and HRE frameworks to promote school inclusion from early childhood, several practical implications emerge for policymakers, developmental psychologists, schools and teachers, parents, and children. These implications emphasise the creation of inclusive school contexts that benefit all children, regardless of their characteristics. While the translation of research findings into concrete actions may vary depending on contextual and resource constraints, the evidence outlined in this thesis provides a solid foundation for guiding policies and practices, highlighting evidence-based strategies that address inclusion from the earliest developmental stages.

The findings indicate that structured PYD-HRE interventions significantly enhance children's ability to recognise rights violations and respond assertively to social challenges across the broader student population. In Study 1, children at risk of social exclusion based on low sociometric status, rather than visible characteristics such as disabilities or migration status, showed post-intervention improvements in peer acceptance. In Study 2, kindergarten children across the sample demonstrated increased recognition of rights violations and more assertive reactions after the intervention. These results underscore that school inclusion concerns all children, as many may be at risk due to relational difficulties or structural barriers rather than easily identifiable vulnerabilities. This suggests that national and local education policies should address not only students with clearly identified needs (e.g., disabilities, migrant backgrounds) but also the wider

population of children who may be at risk of social exclusion because of low sociometric status and low peer acceptance levels. Embedding practices that foster relational problem-solving and assertiveness for all children may help prevent peer victimisation and support the participation rights outlined in the CRC (United Nations, 1989) and the 2030 Agenda's Goal 4 (United Nations, 2015).

To support implementation of such programmes, policymakers could provide guidance and resources to schools, ensuring that evidence-based interventions are accessible and adaptable to different school and community contexts. Supporting schools in embedding these programmes helps create inclusive environments that promote positive peer relationships and foster respect for participation rights across the student population (Hailemariam et al., 2019). Moreover, the intervention model developed and evaluated in this research project could be used as a reference framework for scaling up inclusion initiatives, not only in schools but also in other social contexts where children interact, such as community centres, sports associations, and cultural organisations. By adapting the core structure and principles of the programme to different environments, it would be possible to promote inclusion and well-being in a coherent and continuous way across multiple spheres of children's lives (Schalock et al., 2020; Schwab et al., 2024).

Furthermore, given the complexity of designing developmentally appropriate, evidence-based inclusion programmes, policy makers could involve developmental psychologists with expertise in inclusion to lead their development, ensuring that the interventions are both theoretically grounded and tailored to the different age groups. Developmental psychologists can play a crucial role in operationalising these policy directives into practice by designing, adapting, and validating intervention programmes

for inclusion for various educational stages. Study 2 demonstrates that interventions promoting knowledge of and respect for participation rights, alongside the development of assertive reactions to discrimination and social exclusion, can be effectively implemented at early eage (Brantefors et al., 2019; Ginevra et al., 2020). Developmental psychologists could also provide teachers with targeted training to implement these intervention programmes within existing school curricula, thereby enhancing sustainability and long-term impact (Herlitz et al., 2020). Moreover, they could evaluate the outcomes of such programmes, ensuring that benefits are maintained beyond the initial implementation phase (Li et al., 2024).

Teachers are in a unique position to translate inclusion principles into everyday classroom practices. The intervention programme validated in this research project could serve as a flexible model, which teachers can adapt to meet the specific needs of their students, thereby increasing sustainability. The materials and activities were developmentally appropriate for kindergarten children, and evidence from both studies suggest that teachers can be trained to implement these programmes, embedding inclusive practices from the earliest stages of education. This flexibility reflects evidence that teachers-led adaptations enhance ownership and long-term adoption in schools (Herlitz et al., 2020). Given that time constraints and curriculum priorities can limit intervention uptake, the modular design of the two programmes offers a feasible model that balances efficacy with the realities of school scheduling. By integrating activities that explicitly address participation rights alongside collaborative and conflict-resolution skills, teachers can cultivate classroom norms that reinforce inclusion and respect for human rights as a shared responsibility (Howe & Covell, 2021).

Parents and community members also have an important role in extending the principles of inclusion beyond school. Communities can support inclusive practices in extracurricular setting, ensuring consistency across children's social contexts. Activities promoting knowledge of rights and inclusive skills could be organised in community centres, sports clubs, and other settings where children interact outside school. Engaging families though community events, collaborative projects, or take-home activities related to rights and inclusion can reinforce children's learning and embed inclusive values in daily lives (Durlak et al., 2007). This aligns with the PYD principle of involving the broader community in youth development (Lerner et al., 2021) and with the HRE's aim of embedding rights-respectful norms across all social spheres (Blaisdell et al., 2021). Strengthening school–community collaboration can increase children's opportunities to practise inclusive behaviours in diverse contexts, further consolidating their knowledge and skills.

Finally, children are the primary beneficiaries of inclusive school programmes. They can develop inclusive social skills, alongside knowledge of and respect for participation rights, enabling them to build and contribute to inclusive communities throughout their lives. By learning to recognise rights violations, react assertively to discrimination and social exclusion, and build positive relationships with diverse peers, children are better equipped to foster inclusive communities in the future (Howe & Covell, 2021; Lerner et al., 2021).

While this research was conducted in the Italian educational context, the integration of PYD and HRE represents an approach grounded in the promotion of children's strengths and the respect for participation rights as articulated in the CRC and

in the literature on school inclusion (Bellacicco et al., 2022; United Nations, 1989). These principles hold relevance across diverse cultural contexts, including societies where levels of inclusion remain low and where children face greater risks of discrimination and social exclusion based on characteristics such as ethnicity, disability, socio-economic status, or other marginalised identities (UNESCO, 2020). The modular structure and format of the interventions developed in this research project may offer a feasible model for adaptation in such contexts. However, successful implementation would require culturally responsive approaches that respect local values and educational practices whilst upholding universal human rights principles (Struthers, 2016). Practitioners and policymakers seeking to promote inclusion in diverse settings should consider how the core components of these interventions (i.e., inclusive social skills, knowledge of and respect for participation rights) can be meaningfully adapted to reflect the cultural realities, languages, and social challenges faced by children in their specific contexts. Future cross-cultural research examining the transferability and efficacy of integrated PYD-HRE approaches across diverse societies would provide valuable insights for advancing inclusive education globally (Shek et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2020).

Overall, the findings of the two studies conducted demonstrate that structured, evidence-based inclusion programmes can be adapted to different educational contexts and age groups, promoting rights-respectful and inclusive school environments. The results also highlight the importance of involving teachers, school leadership, and communities to ensure sustainability and long-term impact, reinforcing the shared responsibility for fostering inclusive practices across children's developmental trajectories.

6.6 Ethical Considerations

This research project and the two studies presented in this thesis were conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Italian Association of Psychology (AIP). Ethical approval was granted by the ethics committee of the Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education and Applied Psychology at the University of Padova. Chapters 4 and Chapter 5 provide detailed information on the ethical considerations specific to each study.

Written informed consent was obtained from parents or guardians, and children provided verbal assent in age-appropriate language (Priest et al., 2012). Participation was voluntary, and all participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Given the sensitive nature of addressing issues such as discrimination and social exclusion, care was taken to create a supportive environment in which children could discuss and role-play situations of rights violations without fear of judgement. Scenarios were framed in inclusive, non-stigmatising ways to avoid reinforcing stereotypes or singling out individuals. No unexpected ethical issues arose during the studies.

6.7 Thesis Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Although the present thesis provides promising evidence on the efficacy of PYD- and HRE-based interventions in promoting school inclusion and respect for participation rights, several limitations should be acknowledged. These limitations reflect both the realistic constraints of school-based research and important directions for future studies. The specific limitations and implications for future research of each study are discussed

in their respective chapters (see Chapters 4 and 5); here, the focus is on summarising the main limitations of the research project as a whole.

A first limitation concerns the statistical power and data structure. In Study 1, the relatively small number of randomized clusters limited the statistical power to detect effects at the classroom level, while Study 2, as an exploratory pilot, did not employ multilevel analyses. Although balance across groups was ensured to improve precision (Li et al., 2024), future research should increase the number of participating classes and apply more robust statistical models, such as mixed-effects modeling, to account for nested and longitudinal data. This would strengthen the reliability of findings and enhance the generalisability of intervention effects (Raudenbush & Swartz, 2020).

Secondly, both studies relied on short-term outcome assessments. While positive effects emerged immediately after the interventions, the absence of follow-up assessments prevents conclusions about the stability and sustainability of behaviour change. Future research should therefore adopt longitudinal designs with follow-ups at multiple time points (e.g., 6 and 12 months) to determine whether gains in peer acceptance, social skills, recognition of rights violations and assertive reactions to rights violations persist over time, particularly among children at risk of social exclusion (Huic et al., 2017).

A third limitation relates to the implementation of the interventions, which may limit generalisability. In both studies, the programmes were delivered by an external researcher with expertise in developmental psychology. While this ensured fidelity to the intervention model, it does not reflect the ecological validity of teacher-led implementation in everyday school practice. Future research should investigate the

effectiveness of teacher-led delivery, considering issues of training, feasibility, and sustainability in both primary and preschool contexts (Herlitz et al., 2020). This would provide a clearer understanding of how interventions can be scaled and integrated into regular curricula.

Fourthly, although both studies incorporated direct and indirect measures to address the common limitation of relying predominantly on self-report instruments, they did not include the perspectives of teachers and parents. This omission restricts the ecological validity of the findings, as improvements in inclusive social skills, positive social behaviours, and assertive reactions may extend beyond the classroom into family, leisure, and community contexts. Moreover, while Study 1 included direct behavioural observations of children at risk of social exclusion during unstructured activities (e.g., breaks, free play), the efficacy evaluation for the broader sample relied primarily on children's self-reported intentions and peer nominations rather than systematic observation of real-life behaviours in naturalistic settings. Future research should therefore incorporate multi-informant and social validity measures, as well as systematic behavioural observations across diverse naturalistic contexts (e.g., playground, lunchtime, extracurricular activities), to examine whether children are able to recognise and counteract discrimination and exclusion in broader social environments and whether intervention effects translate into observable changes in real-life social interactions.

Fifthly, the scope of outcome variables was limited to constructs directly targeted by the interventions. While the studies assessed inclusive social skills, peer relationships, knowledge of and respect for participation rights, and reactions to rights violations, they did not include measures of broader psychological outcomes that may be influenced by

inclusive school environments, such as psychological wellbeing, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. Future research should adopt a more comprehensive outcome assessment that includes not only the proximal targets of PYD-HRE interventions (social skills, peer acceptance, rights knowledge) but also distal outcomes related to children's overall psychological adjustment and subjective wellbeing. Such an approach would provide further evidence of how integrated PYD-HRE interventions contribute to children's positive development and would allow for examination of potential mediating pathways through which social skills and rights education may influence broader indicators of thriving (Lerner et al., 2021; Salmon-Letelier & Russell, 2022).

Sixthly, the measurement instruments employed may not have fully captured the breadth of effects produced by the integrated PYD-HRE interventions. Instruments were either adapted from existing measures developed for related constructs (e.g., social problem-solving adapted to assess reactions to rights violations) or focused on specific intervention dimensions (e.g., peer nominations, social skills). Although psychometrically sound, this approach may potentially miss subtle changes in children's rights consciousness, sense of agency as rights-holders, or capacity to advocate for inclusion across diverse contexts. Moreover, the field currently lacks validated instruments specifically designed for integrated PYD-HRE approaches with children. Future research should consider developing and validating measurement tools tailored to PYD-HRE frameworks that are developmentally appropriate and capture not only behaviours and knowledge but also children's emerging rights consciousness and understanding of inclusion as both relational practice and justice. More theoretically

aligned measures would enable comprehensive evaluation and advance the field (Blaisdell et al., 2021).

Seventhly, sample composition and sociometric procedures present additional considerations. In Study 1, only one child at risk of social exclusion was selected per class, and in Study 2, gender distribution was unbalanced across groups. These aspects may have introduced confounding effects or limited the detection of peer dynamics. Future research could adopt more refined sociometric classification procedures (Maassen et al., 2005), ensure balanced group characteristics and examine whether intervention effects differ depending on children's gender, sociometric status, or other background variables (Li et al., 2024).

Finally, the transferability of these findings to other cultural contexts should not be assumed. While the CRC (United Nations, 1989) provides a universal normative framework, the meaning and enactment of participation rights, as well as the promotion of social skills, are culturally situated (Struthers, 2016; Tomé-Fernández et al., 2024). The intervention programmes developed for Italian children in the studies of this research project would need to be carefully adapted to reflect the languages, cultural contexts, and specific forms of exclusion and discrimination experienced by children in other settings. Future cross-cultural research should therefore examine how integrated PYD-HRE interventions can be meaningfully adapted and implemented across diverse societies, particularly in contexts where systemic barriers to inclusion are more pronounced. Such research would provide valuable insights into the cultural adaptability and universal applicability of this approach, contributing to a truly global understanding of how schools

can uphold children's rights and foster inclusive peer relationships (Shek et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2020).

6.8 Concluding Remarks

Promoting school inclusion requires fostering both social skills and respect for human rights (Larsen, 2021; MacKenzie et al., 2020). In today's diverse school settings, it is essential to implement intervention programmes that promote respect, acceptance of diversity, and the initiation and maintenance of meaningful social relationships, thereby supporting school inclusion (Freer, 2023; Losinski et al., 2019).

The overarching research question for this research project asked whether the combined promotion of knowledge of and respect for participation rights, together with the development of inclusive social skills, could foster school inclusion among Italian primary school and kindergarten children. Across two studies conducted at different developmental stages, the findings provide a consistent and affirmative answer to this question. Both the primary school intervention, 'A Journey Towards Rightsland', and the kindergarten adaptation, 'A Jigsaw Puzzle of Rights', enhanced inclusive social skills, peer acceptance and respect for participation rights. Importantly, in Study 1 these effects were observed not only at a general classroom level but also for children at risk of social exclusion due to low sociometric status. Together, these studies demonstrate that the intervention is effective across developmental stages, from kindergarten to primary school.

This research project integrated the HRE with the PYD, showing that teaching participatory rights alongside social skills development can foster rights-respectful and inclusive school contexts. The intervention programme also enhanced children's ability

to assertively react to situations of discrimination and social exclusion, which constitute a violation of others' participation rights. Specifically, Study 1 revealed significant improvements in inclusive social skills, ability to collaborate with classmates, intention to help classmates whose rights are violated, and peer acceptance. Building on these results, Study 2 demonstrated that kindergarten children showed not only improvement in recognising rights violations but also showed a significant increase in assertive reactions and a significant reduction in passive ones, indicating that even very young children can be guided towards assertive action in the face of social exclusion and discrimination. These findings confirm that behavioural enactment of rights knowledge is attainable at early ages and support the idea of implementing preventive inclusion programmes beginning in kindergarten (Freer, 2023).

The distinctive contribution of this research lies in its integration of the PYD and HRE frameworks into a coherent, empirically tested model for promoting school inclusion. PYD-interventions enhance inclusive social skills, peer acceptance, and positive social behaviour (e.g., Ginevra et al., 2020; Larsen, 2021), but recent literature suggests they could benefit further from a social justice perspective through the teaching of participation rights (Blaisdell et al., 2021; Lerner et al., 2021). HRE interventions improve knowledge of rights but often fall short in fostering behavioural enactment (e.g., Jones & Manion, 2023). Embedding social skills development within HRE addresses this gap, promoting both understanding and assertive responses to discrimination and exclusion (Howe & Covell, 2021; Struthers, 2016). Moreover, the integration of social skills and rights education aligns with global frameworks such as the CRC (United Nations, 1989), making it adaptable cross-culturally. By addressing both cognitive and

behavioural components of school inclusion and children's rights education (Salmon-Letelier & Russell, 2022; Spörer et al., 2020), considering the classroom as the natural unit of intervention, and evaluating effects for the students at higher risk of social exclusion and discrimination, this research project directly responds to the problem outlined in the introduction: the persistence of discrimination and social exclusion in schools despite policy commitments to equality and social participation.

From a cross-cultural perspective, the findings of this research project, while situated in the Italian context, offer insights that may extend to diverse cultural settings, including societies with low levels of social inclusion, high social stratification, or limited institutional support for children's rights. In such contexts, children may face greater risks of discrimination and exclusion based on characteristics such as ethnicity, disability, socio-economic status, gender, or other marginalised identities (Juvonen et al., 2019). As discussed in the limitations (see Section 6.7), future cross-cultural research examining culturally adapted implementations of this integrated approach would provide valuable insights for advancing school inclusion globally.

Finally, the results of this research project indicate that promoting school inclusion should be embedded in early educational experiences and highlight the potential of intervention programmes that simultaneously develop respect for participation rights and social skills. Sustained efforts in this direction can foster more inclusive school environments and ultimately build a society that is fairer, more equitable and grounded in respect for participation rights.

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Appendix A: An Example of a Session of 'A Journey Towards Rightsland'

Third Session: D*id you Express Your Opinion?*

Goal of the Third Session

Conditions

(a) The child is asked to state the right to express one's opinion and to be heard and the advantages of respecting this right;

(b) There is the description of a negative event that could happen to a new hypothetical classmate (e.g., not being able to express his or her opinion).

Performances

The child:

(a) states the right to express one's opinion and to be heard and identifies the benefits of respecting it;

(b) writes down the social behaviours aimed at respecting the new hypothetical classmate's right to express his or her opinion and taking into account what he or she say.

Mastery Criterion

The goal is considered reached if the child:

(a) clearly states the right to express one's opinion and to be heard and identifies at least one advantage of respecting it;

(b) writes at least two social behaviours aimed at respecting the new hypothetical classmate's right to express his or her opinion and taking into account what he or she say.

Guide of Learning

First phase: Recalling and Advertising the Goal of the Session

The researcher with expertise in developmental psychology and school inclusion, keeping in mind what happened during the second session, sums up the contents and, as a recap of the prerequisites, uses images, photos, or videos of the best performances recorded during the second session. This occasion is used also to propose further comments, feedback, and reinforcements regarding the participation of students and the satisfaction of the psychologist with the activity. The researcher begins by giving stickers (tokens) to children who are present and have completed their homework assignments and proceeds to revise the homework assignments of the second session.

In launching the activity for the third session, the researcher outlines the session's goal and introduces the right to express one's opinion and the benefits of respecting it: "*Today I want to introduce you to another very important right: the right to express your opinion, which means freely saying what you think, sharing your ideas, and proposing for example new games. In previous sessions, I presented the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the document that explains the rights of children. This convention also includes the right to freely express your opinion and be heard (Articles 12 and 13). All children have the right to express themselves through words, writing, art, and any other expressive means while respecting the rights of others and the spaces in which they are. The right to express your opinion is important because it makes every child feel good and allows us to share our ideas, likes and dislikes, agreements, and what we want to do… without fear*".

Second Phase: Learning Stimuli and Starting Points for Teaching

After discussing the right to express one's opinion and being heard (Art. 13 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child) and its advantages, the researcher provides examples of unpleasant situations that might occur in daily and school life when this right is violated and guides participants' attention to the sense of injustice these situations cause and the social responsibility towards peers experiencing these situations: "*I'd like to introduce you to a boy named Ludovico**[1]**, who might join your class from another school. We will see how many things we can do to listen to what he has to say. He is 10 years old, has brown hair and blue eyes, and loves many things: playing, having fun with others, reading stories, especially about dragons and dinosaurs, and playing tennis. He also loves acting with his theater classmates. In his previous school, during break time, Ludovico often suggested a game for everyone to play together, but he would be interrupted before he could finish his suggestion. Even during class, when it was his turn to share his opinion, as soon as he started talking, some classmates would laugh and talk among themselves, not hearing what he had to say. According to some legal experts, this situation is truly unjust! The fact that Ludovico was not listened to and considered is a situation that violates his right to express his opinion, as stated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Italian Constitution".*

After illustrating and emphasising the injustice of the situation, the researcher engages the children with questions: "*What injustice did Ludovico experience? Why is it an injustice? Which right was not respected*?". Multiple teaching techniques (modeling, reinforcement, etc.) are used to stimulate children to recognize the violated right.

Using instructions and examples, the researcher brings children's attention to appropriate social behaviours to support peers whose rights to express their opinion and being heard are violated. Participants are asked to read a list of social behaviours to support and defend these peers. Some examples include:

(a) *In a group, check if any classmate has not expressed her or his opinion on the activities taking place, both at school and outside. Also, check if said opinion has been taken into account.*

(b) *Ask each classmate involved in the activity if he or she has expressed his or her opinion.*

(c) *Listen in silence when a classmate is speaking.*

(d) *Highlight classmates' rights ("This child also has the right to say what he or she thinks, just like everyone else").*

(e) *If someone refuses to listen to a classmate during an activity, mocks, or judges him or her, clearly tell this person that his or her behaviour is inappropriate and explain why (it creates difficulties and discomfort, prevents collaboration, and causes injustice).*

(f) *Clearly state the importance of listening to everyone's thoughts and ideas ("I think it would be preferable to also listen to... and consider his or her opinion, just like everyone else's").*

(g) *In particularly difficult situations, seek support from an adult, teacher, or parent.*

After reading the examples of social behaviours, the researcher invites the children to provide additional examples with questions like: "*Can you think of other things we can*

do? Other ideas for respecting Ludovico's right to express his opinion and to be heard? Have you ever experienced similar situations? What would you have liked to happen in those situations?".

The researcher emphasises the advantages of supporting peers whose rights to express their opinions and to be heard are violated (*e.g., feeling capable of listening to others, learning new things and engaging in new activities we wouldn't have known about if we hadn't respected others' rights to express their opinions, creating a supportive group of peers to share opinions without fear, etc*.).

Following this step, the researcher uses mental simulation to train children to recognize rights violations and practice social skills. Specifically, the simulation is organized by asking children to close their eyes for two minutes and imagine the following situation: "*Imagine your teacher asks you to write a poem about spring together. You are in class, and during the activity, Ludovico tries several times to express his opinion, but some classmates mock and criticize his ideas. In the end, none of Ludovico's suggestions are considered. Imagine how you would react when you see this situation".* To reinforce the impact of the mental simulation activity, the researcher asks the children to write down what they imagined using some prompt questions like: "*Which right is not being respected? What actions did you take to help Ludovico? How do you point out to classmates that Ludovico's right is not being respected?".*

At the end of the exercise, the researcher encourages the children to read what they wrote, reinforcing positive aspects, and writes the social behaviours on the board.

Third Phase: Verification of the Achievement of the Goal and Conclusion of the Session

The researcher verifies the achievement of the session's goal for each participant and explains the homework useful to foster the recognition of situations outside school where the right to express one's opinion and to be heard is violated and social skills to support peers who experience this unpleasant situation. Thus, the researcher provides Livia's story[2], in which a girl organizes a picnic with her friends and notices that one of them is excluded by criticizing her ideas and not considering what she said (see Figure 1). The researcher presents the story to the children and assigns them the task of answering some questions to recognize the violated right and identify the social behaviours Livia used to support her friend in difficulty, asking participants to identify other social behaviours that could be useful to handle assertively that situation (Figure 2).

Then, the researcher invites to write in a table any situation involving violations of rights to express one's opinion and to be heard they will observe in and outside school during the week (before the fourth meeting) and the social behaviours they will perform to assertively address it.

Before saying goodbye and closing the session, the researcher congratulates children for at least one positive behaviour they enacted and the entire group for their dedication during the session.

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[1] The gender and related name of the hypothetical classmates presented in the third session was alternated between groups to control for this variable.

[2] The gender and related name of the children presented the story were alternated between groups to control for this variable.

Livia's Story

"*Livia was invited to a spring picnic at the park. On her way to Letizia's house to decide with the other children what to prepare for the picnic, she thought about what she had learned in the course 'A Journey towards Rightsland'. Livia thought it wouldn't be nice if her classmates mocked or ignored her suggestions. At Letizia's house, she made sure that everyone expressed their opinions and that each one was considered. She noticed that Nadir's ideas were often criticized and mocked, and he was frequently interrupted while speaking. Livia thought this was an unpleasant situation for Nadir! So, she said out loud, 'Let's listen to everyone's ideas. I think Nadir's ideas are good too. Why don't we write down our ideas about what to prepare for the picnic and take turns reading them?' Livia was very happy because, in the end, everyone expressed own opinions, and, thanks to Nadir, they discovered a dessert they didn't know about. They prepared cakes, sandwiches, and cookies to bring to the picnic with their parents and in small groups".*

Figure 2. *Livia's story. Homework assignment for the third session of 'A Journey Towards Rightsland'*

1. Which right was not respected in the unpleasant situation experienced by Nadir?

_____

_____

_____

2. What does Livia do to foster Nadir's right to express his opinion?

_____

_____

_____

3. Which advantages does Livia gain in making her suggestion? And which advantages does Nadir gain?

_____

_____

_____

4. What else could have you done if you were in Livia's place?

_____

_____

_____

Appendix B: Specific Goals for Each Session of 'A Journey Towards Rightsland'

Goal of the First Session *'Playing Together is Fun'*

Conditions

(a) The child is asked to state the right to engage in play activities and recreational activities, and the advantages of respecting this right;

(b) There is the description of a negative event that could happen to a new hypothetical classmate (e.g., being isolated in playing and recreational activities).

Performances

The child:

(a) states the right to engage in play activities and recreational activities and identifies the benefits of respecting it;

(b) writes down the social behaviours aimed at respecting the new hypothetical classmate's right to engage in play activities and recreational activities.

Mastery Criterion

The goal is considered reached if the child:

(a) clearly states the right to engage in play activities and recreational activities and identifies at least one advantage of respecting it;

(b) writes at least two social behaviours aimed at respecting the new hypothetical classmate's right to engage in play activities and recreational activities.

Goal of the Second Session *'In a Group, we All Improve Together'*

Conditions

(a) The child is asked to state the right to freely participate in cultural life, encompassing educational activities, and the advantages of respecting this right;

(b) There is the description of a negative event that could happen to a new hypothetical classmate (e.g., being isolated in educational group activities).

Performances

The child:

(a) states the right to freely participate in cultural life, encompassing educational activities and identifies the benefits of respecting it;

(b) writes down the social behaviours aimed at respecting the new hypothetical classmate's right to freely participate in cultural life, encompassing educational activities.

Mastery Criterion

The goal is considered reached if the child:

(a) clearly states the right to freely participate in cultural life, encompassing educational activities and identifies at least one advantage of respecting it;

(b) writes at least two social behaviours aimed at respecting the new hypothetical classmate's right to freely participate in cultural life, encompassing educational activities.

Goal of the Third Session 'D*id you Express Your Opinion?'*

Conditions

(a) The child is asked to state the right to express one's opinion and to be heard and the advantages of respecting this right;

(b) There is the description of a negative event that could happen to a new hypothetical classmate (e.g., not being able to express his or her opinion).

Performances

The child:

(a) states the right to express one's opinion and to be heard and identifies the benefits of respecting it;

(b) writes down the social behaviours aimed at respecting the new hypothetical classmate's right to express his or her opinion and taking into account what he or she say.

Mastery Criterion

The goal is considered reached if the child:

(a) clearly states the right to express one's opinion and to be heard and identifies at least one advantage of respecting it;

(b) writes at least two social behaviours aimed at respecting the new hypothetical classmate's right to express his or her opinion and taking into account what he or she say.

Goal of the Fourth Session '*Gesture and Talk, but Always Calmly*'

Conditions

(a) The child is asked to state the right to be treated well and not to suffer violence or discrimination and the advantages of respecting this right;

(b) There is the description of a negative event that could happen to a new hypothetical classmate (e.g., being teased by others).

Performances

The child:

(a) states the right to be treated well and not to suffer violence or discrimination and identifies the benefits of respecting it;

(b) writes down the social behaviours aimed at respecting the new hypothetical classmate's right to be treated well and not to suffer violence or discrimination.

Mastery Criterion

The goal is considered reached if the child:

(a) clearly states the right to be treated well and not to suffer violence or discrimination and identifies at least one advantage of respecting it;

(b) writes at least two social behaviours aimed at respecting the new hypothetical classmate's right to be treated well and not to suffer violence or discrimination.

Goal of the Fifth Session '*It's Great Being Together'*

Conditions

(a) The child is asked to state the advantages of positive social relationships in their classrooms;

(b) There is the description of an activity with their classmates, taking into account the positive social behaviours aimed at respecting their classmates' rights (as described in the previous sessions).

Performances

The child:

(a) states the advantages of positive social relationships in their classroom;

(b) writes down an activity with their classmates, taking into account the positive social behaviours aimed at respecting their classmates' rights.

Mastery Criterion

The goal is considered reached if the child:

(a) clearly at least one advantage of positive social relationships in their classroom;

(b) writes an activity with their classmates, taking into account at least two social behaviours aimed at respecting their classmates' rights.

Appendix C: Specific Goals for Each Session of 'A Jigsaw Puzzle of Rights'

Goal of the First Session

Conditions

(a) The child is asked to identify five rights (the right to play, the right to express one's opinion, the right to be treated well, the right to diversity, and the rights of animals and the environment) presented via images and videos and to explain their benefits;

(b) The child is asked to indicate why these rights are important.

Performances

The child:

(a) identifies the rights;

(b) explains the benefits of respecting these rights.

Mastery Criterion

The goal is considered reached if the child:

(a) identifies at least three rights;

(b) provides at least one benefit for each identified right.

Goal of the Second Session

Conditions

(a) The child is presented with three videos showing situations in which classmates' right to participate in play and school activities is respected or violated;

(b) During two role-plays, the child interacts with a classmate who is not involved in the intervention's activities.

Performances

The child:

(a) states that it is a right and identifies at least one benefit for themselves and others;

(b) invites the classmate to join the activity during role-plays.

Mastery Criterion

The goal is considered reached if the child:

(a) recognises the right and at least one benefit in at least one video/image;

(b) invites the classmate to participate at least once during the role-play simulations.

Goal of the Third Session

Conditions

(a) The child is presented with three videos showing situations about their own right to play and participate;

(b) During two role-play simulations, the child interacts with a classmate who are playing together.

Performances

The child:

(a) identifies the right and explains the benefits;

(b) asks classmates to include them in play or activities (i.e., express their right to participate).

Mastery Criterion

The goal is considered reached if the child:

(a) recognises the right in at least two videos/images;

(b) request to participate at least once during the role-play simulations.

Goal of the Fourth Session

Conditions

(a) The child is presented with four videos showing situations about environmental rights during play and leisure activities;

(b) The child is presented with three outdoor role-play simulations.

Performances

The child:

(a) recognises that the environment has rights;

(b) suggests ways to protect the environment during play activities.

Mastery Criterion

The goal is considered reached if the child:

(a) identifies the right in at least two videos/images;

(b) suggest at least one way to protect the environment in at least two role-play simulations.

Goal of the Fifth Session

Conditions

(a) The child is presented with three videos about expressing opinions and being heard and respected;

(b) During two role-play simulations, the child interacts with classmates discussing a topic.

Performances

The child:

(a) identifies the right and explains its benefits for themselves and others;

(b) expresses their opinion and asks classmates to participate

Mastery Criterion

The goal is considered reached if the child:

(a) recognise the right and at least one benefit in at least two videos/images;

(b) express their opinion at least once during the role-play simulations.

Goal of the Sixth Session

Conditions

(a) The child is presented with two videos showing classmates' right to express opinions freely;

(b) During two role-play simulations, the child interacts with classmates in a group discussion.

Performances

The child:

(a) states that it is a right and identifies the benefits for themselves and others;

(b) asks each classmate for their opinion during role-play simulations.

Mastery Criterion

The goal is considered reached if the child:

(a) identifies the right and at least one benefit in at least two videos/images;

(b) asks at least once for classmates' opinion in at least two role-play simulations.

Goal of the Seventh Session

Conditions

(a) The child is presented with three videos showing situations about being treated well and not being mocked;

(b) During two role-play simulations, classmates interacts respectfully or one is mocked.

Performances

The child:

(a) recognises the right and explain its benefits for themselves and others;

(b) behaves correctly and defends peers who are mocked during role-play simulations.

Mastery Criterion

The goal is considered reached if the child:

(a) identifies the right and at least one benefit in at least two videos/images;

(b) demonstrate correct behaviour at least once during two role-play simulations.

Goal of the Eighth Session

Conditions

(a) The child is presented with three videos about the rights of animals, plants, and the environment;

(b) During three role-play simulations, situations involve harming plants or helping animals.

Performances

The child:

(a) identifies the right and explain its benefits for themselves and others;

(b) acts to stop harm and provide help during role-play simulations.

Mastery Criterion

The goal is considered reached if the child:

(a) identifies the right in at least two videos/images;

(b) acts at least once during role-play simulations.

Goal of the Ninth Session

Conditions

(a) The child is presented with two videos showing diverse characters;

(b) During three role-play simulations, differences among classmates are highlighted.

Performances

The child:

(a) recognises diversity as a right and explains its benefits;

(b) acts to stop harm and provide help during role-play simulations.

Mastery Criterion

The goal is considered reached if the child:

(a) identifies the right and at least one benefit in the video;

(b) points out at least one difference among classmates during during role-play simulations.

Goal of the Tenth Session

Conditions

(a) The child is presented with a set of videos summarising the rights addressed in the previous sessions (e.g., the right to play together, the right to express one's opinion, the

right to be treated well, the rights of animals and the environment, and the right to be unique);

(b) The child is asked to recall and comment on the rights shown in the videos.

Performances

The child:

(a) identifies the rights presented in the videos;

(b) shares their thoughts on the importance of respecting these rights.

Mastery Criterion

The goal is considered reached if the child:

(a) correctly identifies at least three rights shown in the videos;

(b) expresses at least one thought, benefit, or example related to the respect of these rights.