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Do socio-emotional and diversity awareness learning interventions work across countries: contextualisation in the case of the HAND in HAND: empowering teachers programme

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ABSTRACT

The HAND in HAND: Empowering Teachers programme is a universal group-based intervention for socio-emotional and diversity awareness learning among teachers experimentally evaluated (a randomised control group experiment, including a pre- and post-measurement) in five European countries. Despite efforts to align the implementation of this intervention, considering fidelity as well as adaptation, there was significant variation in the detected effects across countries. In this paper, we discuss the contextual transferability of socio-emotional and diversity awareness learning interventions within the theoretical framework of Bronfenbrenner's bio-social model of development using comparative case study methodological approach. We focus on the embedding of teachers' social and emotional competencies as well as diversity awareness in the countries' policies, the national characteristics of the teaching profession and teachers' professional development, and other contextual specifics of the implementation. We detected potential contextual influences in all Bronfenbrenner's systems that may have contributed to the diverse effects across countries.

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Teachers' socio-emotional competencies and diversity awareness (SEDA) are a tool to deal with increasing challenges of the teaching profession (Oliveira et al. 2021). However, these competencies have only recently gained the attention of researchers, practitioners, and policymakers. There is a documented increase in levels of stress and burnout (Organisation for Economic Co-ordination and Development 2019) and, consequently, teacher attrition that can be partially attributed to this neglect. Evidently, effective, sustainable, and coordinated approaches at the European level are needed to attract and retain competent teachers (Council of the European Union 2021). However, the important, but still open, scientific and policy relevant question is whether interventions in education can be effective across multiple countries and cultural settings.

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The need to discuss contextual transferability of interventions in education has been stressed in this regard (Wigelsworth et al. 2020) but not yet addressed. Contextual transferability is understood as the characteristic of a learning intervention that is designed, applied, evaluated and has documented effects across various contexts. Educational interventions are inherently shaped by the cultural and temporal context in which they occur and, therefore, are deeply embedded in their context. Bronfenbrenner (1996) explained contextual embeddedness in his bioecological model of development, claiming that interactions across multiple environmental systems influence human development: the microsystem (immediate surroundings like family and school), the mesosystem (interactions between microsystems), the macrosystem (broader cultural and societal influences), and the chronosystem (the dimension of time, including life transitions and historical events). In SEDA learning interventions, the microsystem is shaped by the characteristics of the participants and the group leader, the mesosystem is characterised by the way the intervention is embedded in a specific school, the macrosystem is formed by the cultural, policy and political contexts of countries, and the global influences in the specific time of intervention represent the chronosystem.¹ Evaluating the impact of SEDA interventions requires a consideration of all these systems. The impact of cultural aspects on social and emotional learning is well recognised (e.g. Hecht and Shin 2015). However, to our knowledge, contextual differences have not been adequately considered when examining the effects of SEDA learning interventions for teachers, particularly in the European context. Although there are some existing attempts to address contextual transferability of educational interventions and of social and emotional interventions specifically (e.g. Wigelsworth et al. 2020), these were mainly focused on in-country variation, for example, variation between students, classrooms, or schools within the same national system and not on macro-level cross-national differences.

Current study fills this gap by using European intervention to support SEDA in teachers – HAND in HAND: Empowering Teachers (HAND:ET; Kozina 2024) and its documented effects across five countries, Austria, Croatia, Portugal, Slovenia, Sweden, as a case study. The simultaneous implementation of the same intervention across multiple countries is a rare phenomenon, making HAND:ET a notable exception. The aim of the study is to contextualise the HAND:ET cross-countries effects by answering the following research question: Can a single SEDA learning intervention be effective across multiple countries and cultural settings? The comparative case study methodological approach (e.g. Bamberger, Vaessen, and Raimondo 2016; Goodrick 2014) has been used to address this aim. The comparative case study is a useful methodological approach for identifying the contextual transferability of the HAND:ET intervention because it systematically examines how the same intervention operates across diverse settings. It enables to understand which contextual factors shape its outcomes. We frame this contextualisation by using Bronfenbrenner's (1996) bioecological model, starting with the common chrono- and macrosystems and continuing with the specific macro-, meso-, and microsystems at the country level. The study, which examines how factors at different levels, including the macro level, influence intervention outcomes, is essential for assessing the international validity of interventions and promoting universal evidence-based approaches to social and emotional learning at the EU level. Contextualisation will therefore be based on embeddedness of SEDA competencies in the countries' policies; the national characteristics of the teaching profession and development; and other national specifics of the

HAND:ET implementation. In order to make a clear starting point for the contextualisation, first HAND:ET intervention, its development and implementation, is introduced and second effects of the HAND:ET intervention on SEDA competencies across countries are presented.

The HAND in HAND: empowering teachers intervention

HAND:ET (Kozina 2024) is a universal group-based intervention to support SEDA in teachers. The intervention targets teachers' social and emotional competencies (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making; Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning 2003) and diversity awareness (intersectionality, critical consciousness, and social justice). Mindfulness, empathic curiosity, and reflection are used as core tools as well as a bridge between these competencies. The intervention's outcomes, grounded in theoretical models of the prosocial classroom model (Jennings and Greenberg 2009), the theory of change model (Roeser 2016), and the Harvey and Evans model (Harvey et al. 2012), aim for direct (enhanced SEDA) and indirect results (improved relationships with students, colleagues, and principals).

Implementation of HAND:ET has involved walking a fine line between fidelity and adaptation (Lund Nielsen et al. 2019). Fidelity refers to the importance of maintaining the active ingredients in a certain intervention, while adaptation refers to the necessity of adapting the intervention activities to the needs of specific participants and contexts (Durlak 2016). For fidelity, efforts were made to align it across countries and groups as much as possible (a) to define the core concepts, tools, and expected outcomes; (b) to follow a strict experimental plan with randomisation and control groups; (c) to align the trainers in the training process; (d) to provide international monitoring and supervision throughout the implementation process; and, finally, (e) to develop detailed and structured intervention manuals. Additionally, adaptation and alignment of the content to the groups were emphasised throughout the development and implementation of the intervention. The intervention consisted of 6 full-days of onsite sessions and five online meetings over the course of the school year 2022/2023. It was delivered to ISCED 1 (primary) and ISCED 2 (lower secondary) teachers in Austria, Croatia, Portugal, Slovenia, and Sweden, allowing country variation (Austria targeted ISCED 1; Portugal added ISCED 3 (upper-secondary)). All countries followed similar invitation and recruitment procedures using open calls. Altogether 667 teachers participated. The implementation varied to some degree across countries. The dosage and the content stayed the same; however, the sequencing of the interventions (variety of options to participate offered in Austria, i.e. option of half days, etc.), the locations (off site in Croatia, Slovenia and Sweden), timing (outside working hours in Portugal and Austria), crediting (in all countries except for Sweden teachers were credited for their participation), stability of trainers' group (lowest in Sweden), rescheduling (disruptions and rescheduling due to strikes in Portugal), low participation (in Austria). A detailed description of intervention development, implementation and evaluation can be found in Kozina (2024).

The HAND:ET intervention was evaluated with an experimental approach. Specifically, the evaluation combined a randomised control group experiment, including a pre- and post-measurement established to determine the efficacy of

the HAND:ET intervention in enhancing SEDA competencies (a quantitative approach) and semi-structured focus group interviews with participants after the intervention (predominantly a qualitative approach) (Kozina 2024). Our research questions were the following: (1) How effective is the intervention in fostering SEDA competencies (summative evaluation)? (2) Are there any unintended effects resulting from the intervention? (3) How do participating teachers perceive the intervention and its effectiveness? and (4) How can future versions of the intervention be improved (formative evaluation)?

The pre- and post-test questionnaires used in the summative quantitative evaluation were based on self-report scales. Measures for mindfulness, well-being, and burnout were included to assess emotional competences and related aspects. For social competencies, scales targeting empathy, relational competence, and teacher cooperation were used. Diversity awareness was assessed using scales that targeted self-efficacy and beliefs regarding classroom diversity, as well as flexibility and openness to diversity (Roczen et al. 2024). In addition to SEDA competencies, the pre-test questionnaire included items on teacher training and professional and personal experience. The post-test questionnaire assessed the participants' subjective evaluation of the intervention, providing insights into their perceptions of the programme's effectiveness, as well as the application of the intervention elements in everyday life and in classrooms. Additionally, focus group interviews were conducted to gather in-depth feedback about participants' experiences and views. These qualitative inputs complemented the quantitative findings and provided context for interpreting the outcomes.

The evaluation findings of HAND in HAND: empowering teachers across countries

In the context of summative evaluation, the results of the quantitative evaluation (based on regression-analytic prediction of pre-test–post-test differences, for a detailed analyses plan see Rožman et al. 2024) show that there are small to medium intervention effects in each participating country, however, the effects vary considerably between the five countries (see Table 1). In Austria, the most significant effects are found in the social competence constructs. In Croatia, all effects relate to the emotional competence constructs. In Portugal there was only one significant effect (within the social competencies). In Slovenia, the intervention had the most positive effects compared to the other countries. Most of those effects relate to emotional competencies, specifically to self-management. In Sweden, most of the significant effects were found for emotional and relational competencies.

Regarding the summative qualitative evaluation, the impact of HAND:ET was largely similar and positive across the five European countries (for details see Rožman et al. 2024). Open questions in the questionnaire and data from focus group interviews followed a thematic qualitative content analysis approach (see Kuckartz 2016). Based on these data, the participants were very positive about the intervention, noting its quality, usefulness, and positive impact on various aspects (Rožman et al. 2024).

Table 1. Effects of the HANDET intervention on social and emotional competencies and diversity awareness in each participating country.

Domain	Measure	Reliability	AUT	CRO	PRT	SVN	SWE
Emotional Competencies – Self Awareness	Mindfulness skill: Observe	.81–.85	medium effect	medium effect	n.s.	n.s.	medium effect
	Mindfulness	.88–.90	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
	Mindfulness in teaching: Intrapersonal	.81–.87	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Emotional Competencies – Self Management	Mindfulness in teaching: Interpersonal	.53–.71	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
	Wellbeing	.86–.91	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	medium effect	small effect
	Emotional self-efficacy	.94–.97	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
	Burnout: Physical fatigue	.90–.95	n.s.	small effect	n.s.	medium effect	n.s.
	Burnout: Cognitive weariness	.87–.95	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	small effect	n.s.
	Burnout: Emotional exhaustion	.81–.88	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	small effect	medium effect
	Cognitive strain	.74–.86	n.s.	small effect	n.s.	small effect	n.s.
	Emotional strain	.77–.87	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
	Empathy: Affective response	.63–.72	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	small effect
	Empathy: Affective mentalising	.72–.84	n.s.	n.s.	small effect	n.s.	small effect
Social Competencies – Social Awareness	Empathy: Perspective taking	.67–.82	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
	Empathy: Self-other awareness	.63–.97	small effect	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
	Relational competence	.79–.88	small effect	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
	Teacher cooperation	.72–.81	small effect	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Social Competencies – Relational Competence	Teacher self-efficacy for classroom diversity	.81–.91	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
	Multicultural beliefs	.83–.89	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
	Egalitarian beliefs	.83–.91	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
	Flexibility/openness	.78–.86	small effect	n.s.	n.s.	small effect	n.s.

Notes: Effect sizes > .5 are interpreted as medium effects; AUT = Austria, CRO = Croatia, PRT = Portugal, SVN = Slovenia, SWE = Sweden. We examined several theory-driven, a priori hypotheses about distinct but conceptually related facets of SEDA competencies in this study. Because these outcome variables are strongly correlated and our hypotheses were specified in advance, we did not apply a highly conservative family-wise error correction such as the Bonferroni method, as it can substantially reduce statistical power and increase the risk of Type II errors when many or correlated tests are conducted (Cabin and Mitchell 2000). The results are based on a complete cases analysis, as described in Kozina (2024) and Rožman et al. (2024).

Contextualisation of the findings of HAND in HAND: empowering teachers intervention

The intervention exerted diverse effects on SEDA competencies in each country (Table 1). In the following section we add country-specific information, which contextualise these findings. We start with the common chrono- and macrosystems and continue with the specific macro-, meso-, and microsystems at the country level.

Chrono- and macrosystems across countries

At the time of the HAND:ET intervention, the chronosystem was consistent across all participating countries, shaped by the post-coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic era.

All five countries, like many others in Europe, have recently faced several challenges in the teaching profession, such as teacher shortages, low societal recognition of the profession, and high levels of stress and burnout (e.g. European Commission 2023; Šterman Ivančič 2024). Additionally, over the past decade, Europe has experienced increased migration (European Commission 2024), altering the composition of classrooms and further highlighting the importance and relevance of teachers' SEDA competencies. The macrosystems are, on the one hand, similar (i.e. European), but at the same time different (i.e. national) across countries.² At the European Union (EU) level, several recent policy documents have been adopted that implicitly call for the development of SEDA competencies across EU member states (e.g. Council of the EU 2021). However, due to the principles of sovereignty, subsidiarity, and the non-obligatory nature of cooperation in the field of education, EU member states have developed distinct national policy approaches for supporting teachers' SEDA competencies, tailored to their unique cultural and structural contexts (Štremfel 2024). However, the review by Štremfel (2024) revealed that support for teachers' SEDA competencies in these countries is not systematically integrated. This is evidenced by the lack of clear definitions and goals in key national policy documents; the non-mandatory inclusion of the topic in both initial teacher education and continuous professional development; the absence of systematic monitoring of teachers' SEDA competencies; and the scarcity of policy-related research in this field. Although the chrono- and macrosystems exhibit consistent cross-country patterns, notable country-specific differences within the macrosystem are also evident. These differences – along with substantial variation in the meso- and microsystems across the five countries – may have influenced the intervention outcomes.

Country specific chrono-, macro-, meso- and microsystems

Austria

The findings in Austria can be contextualised by characteristics of micro and macro context and their intertwining. In the micro context, the implementation was shaped by difficulties in the participant acquisition and high dropout (Fredericks, Odescalchi, Fasching, Williere, et al. 2024). This can be explained by the national specific macro-level arrangements. In Austria, teachers employed since 2019 are required to

complete 15 hours of professional development during their non-working hours. This requirement often poses challenges for recruitment and participation in longer interventions like HAND:ET. In initial teacher education and continuous professional development, teachers tend to focus on the subject being taught, classroom management, and promotion of the pupils' socio-emotional competencies, rather than teachers' socio-emotional competencies or strategies (Fredericks, Odescalchi, Fasching, Solraadl, et al. 2024). Particularly, mindfulness, as a tool used in the HAND:ET intervention, is a rather new topic in Austria and many teachers are still reluctant to use it. On the other hand, the fact that the concept was new to the participants could also have contributed to the positive effects, especially the increase in mindfulness, that we observed after the HAND:ET intervention (Table 1). However, with regard to emotional competencies, this was the only significant effect.

Similarly, there was only one significant effect in the area of diversity awareness. In the macro context, the first language of many students (26% in all school types, 32.7% in primary schools) in Austria is different from the language of instruction (Statistik Austria 2024), making diversity an important topic in Austrian classrooms (Dalton-Puffer, Boeckmann, and Hinger 2019). In recent decades, at the macro level, attempts have been made to make the system more inclusive, but these attempts have often not overcome the pilot project status, or when they have been implemented on a large scale, teachers have not felt ready for the challenges because the decisions have been top-down and the system has not been prepared for its successful implementation (Paudel and Subasi Singh 2020). The collaborative, reflection-based approach of HAND:ET might have filled this gap and increased the openness and flexibility of the teachers who participated in the intervention.

Most of the effects in Austrian teachers were found in the area of social competencies. In contrast to other countries, Austrian teachers' relational competence, empathy: self-other awareness, and cooperation increased (Table 1). Some of these results could be attributed to influences from the macro context. For instance, in primary schools, cooperation between teachers and special needs education teachers has been crucial over the last decades because most primary school students with special educational needs are taught in inclusive classrooms (Gebhardt et al. 2015; Paulsrud and Nilholm 2020). In practice, this means that the classroom teacher and a special education teacher work together, either full-time or for a couple of lessons per week. This practice may explain why this topic is relevant for Austrian teachers and why they were able to benefit from the HAND:ET intervention in the area of teacher cooperation. It could also be argued that the self-other awareness subscale in particular supports this view. This competence is very relevant to joint teaching and planning. Concerning the teachers' relational competence, which refers to the teacher–student relations, there are several initiatives in Austria focusing on this particular topic. For example, a joint initiative between ministries and NGOs (e.g. Austria's Ministry of Education, Youth Red Cross) created a teacher cooperation platform offering materials on relationship-focused topics (e.g. Baer, Koch, and Vogelsaenger 2020; Tillack 2014). Perhaps this emphasis on the macro level has already created a foundation on which relationship competence could be further cultivated within the HAND:ET intervention on the micro level, enabling teachers to be open to its content through their awareness of the importance of relationship work.

Croatia

The post pandemic context was especially challenging for many Croatian teachers who were already struggling with stress-regulation skills and relational competencies (Markočić Dekanić, Gregurović, and Batur 2020). This suggests that HAND:ET may have provided valuable tools and techniques to support their emotional competencies and help alleviate this stress which is shown in the effect on emotional competencies in Croatia. More specifically, concerning emotional competencies, the qualitative and quantitative feedback from teachers showed that HAND:ET positively supported well-being and stress reduction, with participants regularly using mindfulness in their daily professional and personal lives in their micro and meso-contexts, underscoring the broader relevance of HAND:ET. For the meso-context, teachers in Croatia have reported that they already employed various techniques – mindfulness and empathetic listening – to manage classroom dynamics and student well-being. Although quantitative data showed no significant effects on social competencies, qualitative feedback highlighted improvements, with teachers using empathetic listening with both students, including those with special needs, and parents. These practices may explain the significant effects on teachers' social and emotional competencies during and after the HAND:ET intervention.

The impact of HAND:ET intervention on diversity awareness in Croatia was less pronounced: based on the qualitative evaluation, the teachers in Croatia described diversity awareness less often as a learning outcome compared with the teachers from the other countries (Roczen et al. 2024). The intervention aimed at enhancing diversity awareness of Croatian teachers might not have yielded significant results due to the limited focus on these topics in the macro context, within the educational system. Issues related to diversity are relevant to the meso-context but not commonly addressed in Croatian schools, making it a more abstract concept for teachers. In Croatia, the concept of diversity in schools before the HAND:ET intervention primarily referred to students with special educational needs, although their numbers remain quite low, or to the socio-economic differences among students. However, during our intervention, diversity did not – and still does not – encompass multicultural diversity, as the number of foreign students or Croatian students whose first language is not Croatian remains very low. Currently, Croatia lacks comprehensive data on the number of foreign students in schools, despite the increasing socio-cultural diversity in the country, a trend that has been observed across many European nations (European Commission, 2024). Since 2023, foreign nationals have begun to constitute a more prominent part of the Croatian workforce, with the majority of migrants working jobs that require minimal education (Butković, Samardžija, and Rukavina 2022). However, the student and teacher composition in Croatian schools has not changed significantly. Unlike social and emotional competencies, which teachers can easily apply in Croatian schools, the topic of diversity may remain distant from everyday teaching practice due to the relatively low diversity among students and within schools in general. Here we can see the interconnectedness of the micro, meso, and macro contexts. Nevertheless, the growing diversity in Croatian society underscores the need for teachers to be better prepared to address these changes.

Overall, there is a need for more professional education related to these topics, especially given the high levels of stress and burnout reported among the teachers and

the challenging educational context in Croatia, where attracting and retaining qualified teachers is difficult. Teachers' stress may intensify in more culturally diverse educational environments, a phenomenon that is likely to occur given that the number of foreign workers in Croatia is increasing and Croatian society is diversifying. Some research suggests that future teachers in Croatia may feel inadequately prepared to work in diverse classroom settings, indicating a limited integration of these topics into teacher training programmes (Šenjug Krleža and Knežević 2024). Because Croatia's chronosystem regarding diversity has shifted since the implementation of HAND:ET intervention, it is especially important to incorporate diversity awareness into continuous professional development programmes for teachers.

Portugal

Even though the feedback from the Portuguese teachers in the qualitative evaluation was positive, the HAND:ET intervention was received slightly less positively in Portugal compared with the other countries (Oskarsson and Gøtzsche 2024). The quantitative evaluation also highlighted this less enthusiastic reception: there was only one significant effect, namely empathy in the area of social competencies. Interestingly, compared with the other countries, the lack of mention of empathetic listening or other communication-related learning outcomes was quite apparent (Roczen et al. 2024).

The lack of effects might have been largely influenced by the chronosystem as the current teacher trends in Portugal are negative. Education in Portugal is currently experiencing a significant crisis (e.g. a shortage of teachers, etc.) that necessitates substantial changes at the national level. The 2022/2023 school year, the year in which the HAND:ET intervention was implemented, was particularly difficult for teachers in Portugal, marked by strikes due to labour dissatisfaction. The key factors contributing to this dissatisfaction include disinvestment in the educational sector, overwork, violence among students, relational problems between teachers and students, the transfer of social issues into schools, the constant redefinition of curricular objectives, the lack of social support, the need for ongoing professional development, financial and contractual instability, unequal access to resources, and instability in career progression and teaching levels (de Matos et al. 2022). Although the strikes amplified the teachers' voices, they significantly impacted the educational system, particularly teacher participation in training programmes. Unpredictable schedules and the pressure to mitigate lesson disruptions overburdened teachers, reducing their motivation and availability for professional development. Furthermore, Portuguese teachers face declining social prestige, low pay, heavy workloads, career instability, and poor working conditions, deterring new entrants and demotivating current staff (Neves 2020). An ageing workforce and an increase in retirements are causing teacher shortages, larger class sizes, and gaps in key subjects (e.g. science; Thomas Dotta and Lopes 2021). These pressures, compounded by societal shifts, economic decline, strikes, and strained government–union relations, increase stress and mental health risks (Parker et al. 2012). Despite continuous professional training programmes, teachers often invest personal resources to adapt to recent pressures, aiming to improve conditions and to sustain the profession (Santos et al. 2013). To address these challenges, various measures to improve teachers' working conditions were introduced during the 2023/2024 school year and continue to be implemented to date (e.g. programmes to boost annual hiring of teachers; financial supports for teachers working in

remote areas; set of guides and support materials for stress and burnout prevention; monitoring of teachers' well-being and implementation teachers' need based interventions).

Slovenia

The teachers in Slovenia were highly motivated to participate in the HAND:ET intervention; in fact, there was a waiting list for schools that wished to be selected. This may have been associated with investments in this country in social, emotional, diversity awareness competencies, even prior to implementation of the HAND:ET intervention (Štremfel et al. 2024). Although most of the effects were found in the area of emotional competencies, they were related to self-management and not self-awareness. In order for one to recognise the need for their own support in SEDA competencies, one must have reached a certain level of self-awareness. Regarding the micro context, teachers in Slovenia were highly motivated to take part in the intervention; thus, we can assume that their self-awareness might have been high even before the intervention and, therefore, the intervention did not contribute significantly. As self-awareness provides the foundation for subsequent development of self-management, it is possible that the participants in Slovenia reported significant effects in self-management due to the HAND:ET intervention's capacity to enhance their self-management techniques. We hypothesise that the combination of high levels of motivation and (prior) awareness of the need to get the support for SEDA competencies enables teachers in Slovenia to improve their self-management with the support of an intervention.

Furthermore, considering the meso context, the participants expressed high levels of satisfaction with the decision to conduct the intervention in locations other than schools. This allowed them to disengage from everyday schoolwork and to focus more on themselves. Finally, at the macro context, there is currently a growing interest in the well-being of teachers and the reduction of teachers' burnout in Slovenia (Dolenc et al. 2023), largely due to a shortage of teachers and the high rate of attrition among (novice) teachers (World Bank 2015). Hence, there is greater interest among Slovene teachers in themes related to self-management, including stress regulation and burnout, which were recognised also during the trainers' supervision process. This can be also linked to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in chronosystem: teachers in Slovenia were more focused on being able to set appropriate boundaries and looked for support to further develop their emotional competencies.

Despite the increase in emotional competencies and the interconnectedness of social and emotional competencies, there was no significant effect, at least based on the quantitative evaluation, on social competencies. However, in the qualitative evaluation, the participants reported improvements in their communication skills and relationships with others, including colleagues and students. The discrepancy in the results may be attributed to several factors. Considering the micro context, it is possible that the participants perceived the HAND:ET intervention as a way to enhance personal well-being and self-reflection, rather than also as a means of focusing on others. For example, the invitation for schools and teachers in Slovenia addressed the increased levels of stress and the need to support the well-being of teachers with the aim of attracting them to the intervention. Later, they pointed out in their qualitative evaluation that what they appreciated most about the intervention was that it provided support for them and did

not only include activities for them to do with the students. In the context of social competencies, HAND:ET emphasised relational competence reflecting democratic values and pointing out the responsibility of the teachers for their relationship with their students. Individuals with higher relational competences are capable of being responsible for the student–teacher relationship while simultaneously attuning their behaviour to the student’s needs without using power or disciplining them or trying to correct their behaviour. In the future, in the Slovene context, the lack of effects on social competencies will need to be explored further.

There were also notable positive effects regarding diversity awareness, particularly in egalitarian beliefs and flexibility/openness to diversity. In recent years, considering the macro and chrono contexts, diversity in Slovenian classrooms has increased (i.e. a growing number of migrant students, differences in socioeconomic status, and students with special needs; Statistical Office of the Republic Slovenia 2024). These changes might have made Slovene teachers more accepting of activities that support diversity awareness. Thus, as stated by the teachers, participation in the intervention allowed them to be more prepared for increased diversity in their schools and classrooms (the meso and micro contexts).

Sweden

The recruitment of teachers for the HAND:ET in Sweden largely depended on the school principals. In Swedish schools, principals typically decide which continuous professional development programmes staff should attend, often choosing subject based initiatives from the National Swedish Education Agency. As a result, individual teachers rarely select their own professional development. In this case, in the meso context, the principals’ strong interest in staff well-being and the HAND:ET intervention’s content led to their selection of this particular intervention; therefore, the micro context – that is, the motivation and characteristics of the individual teachers – is not very clear. A unique aspect of the Swedish implementation was the possibility to stay for 2 full days, including the possibility of staying overnight on occasions, which allowed the teachers to step away from daily work and to focus entirely on their personal and professional growth. The teachers at the same school also felt that they grew closer to each other and created a common foundation that could be built upon, a meso-level effect. Insights from the focus group discussions revealed that participants viewed this ability as essential for fully engaging with the HAND:ET intervention. Here we can see that the interconnectedness of the micro and meso-contexts is important.

When the participants were asked which elements from the intervention they would continue practicing after its conclusion, nearly 75% of them stated they would keep using empathic listening techniques (Roczen et al. 2024). The Swedish teachers reported improvement in social competence, perhaps due to the close connection between empathic listening, empathic curiosity, and diversity awareness emphasised in the HAND:ET intervention. Given Sweden’s history of increasing migration, with 27% of students in Swedish schools in 2023 coming from various ethnic backgrounds, creating inclusive classrooms that embrace this diversity is particularly important. The Swedish National Agency for Education has provided teachers with resources and guidelines to help manage and address diversity in schools; thus, the teachers were already well equipped before HAND:ET. This diversity, coupled with the increased workload and stress

Swedish teachers face due to administrative demands, large class sizes, and complex classroom challenges, highlights the value of mindfulness and practicing empathic curiosity in supporting both teachers and students and could be a reason for the effects on emotional competencies among the Swedish participants. The Swedish results regarding social and emotional competencies can be attributed to several factors, including mindfulness and empathetic curiosity.

Sweden's cultural emphasis on equality and social justice fosters a receptive attitude towards methods that enhance inclusion and diversity. One possible explanation for the absence of effects on diversity scales, despite the emphasis on diversity in the Swedish context, is the teachers' existing awareness of diversity. However, recognising diversity and effectively translating this awareness into practice to foster inclusivity in schools are two distinct competencies. The Swedish educational system, which prioritises democracy, equality, and human dignity, further encourages teachers to integrate these values into their teaching. Dialogue exercises that foster open communication are also seen as effective in enhancing relationships and well-being (UNESCO, 2020), making empathetic curiosity a natural fit. Additionally, the increasing diversity in Swedish classrooms highlights the need for more inclusive practices (Skolverket 2024). Although diversity awareness did not show statistically significant changes, the participants rated diversity-related exercises highly (Roczen et al. 2024). For example, in the post-intervention questionnaire the teachers were asked to rate different aspects of the HAND:ET intervention. More than 70% of the Swedish participants reported that the exercises targeting diversity in the intervention were good or excellent; none of them thought they were bad. Further on, mindfulness is in the macro context increasingly appreciated in Sweden's health tradition, which views physical, mental, and emotional well-being as interconnected (Folkhälsomyndigheten 2022). In summary, the HAND:ET intervention may have been highly valued in Sweden for its ability to provide tools for managing stress, promoting well-being, and supporting an inclusive school culture.

Conclusions

The findings of the HAND:ET intervention highlight the relevance of developing universal intervention programmes in education, as the key elements have proven to be effective across different contexts. However, due to its diverse effects the findings also show that contexts must be considered and the interventions need to be adapted to the contexts. When viewing the diverse findings through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's (1996) bio-social model of development, efforts were made in the implementation of the HAND:ET intervention to maintain stability in the chronosystem (the implementation was timed to coincide with the same school year). The macro-level variation that we faced due to the implementation of the intervention in different contexts allowed us to analyse contextual transferability and to keep the microsystem and mesosystem as similar as possible to assure the fidelity of the intervention while allowing for contextual adaptation (choosing similar target groups, providing uniform support for the trainers, and aligning the intervention with the core concepts and activities). Keeping the characteristics of the intervention stable at some levels and having variations across countries at other levels allow us to disentangle possible contextual influencing factors and discuss contextual transferability.

The chronosystem was characterised by post-COVID-19 pandemic adaptation and several challenges shared among teachers across all five countries: high stress and burnout combined with teacher shortages and low recognition of teachers' profession in the societies. However, it seems that, at the time of the implementation, the situation was the most severe in Portugal, which might have contributed to the lack of effects in this country. The macrosystem – that is, the countries involved in the implementation – was to some extent similar (i.e. all countries are EU members and, therefore, follow the same EU guidelines and to some extent share European values and show similarities in the organisation of teacher education) but it also differed in some important aspects (i.e. differences in the presence of the support for teachers' social and emotional competencies and multiculturalism). Namely, Sweden has a longer tradition of recognising multiculturalism, while these efforts are relatively new in Slovenia and Croatia. Although the implementation was similar across the countries, in the mesosystem, the teachers faced different conditions in their schools determined by their school leaders – for example, whether the teachers could attend the intervention sessions during their regular teaching hours. We assume that the fact that the teachers in Austria and Portugal could only participate during their free time or non-teaching hours was at least one reason for the challenging recruitment process (particularly in Austria). Furthermore, regarding the microsystem, there was an evident difference in motivation among the teachers in Slovenia, which may have contributed to the more significant effects we found in this country. From a motivational perspective, the context in Sweden (i.e. having the possibility to stay overnight) might have had a similar effect. These findings suggest that, in addition to the macro-level determinants of teachers' continuous professional development, the conditions in which the interventions take place are important – specifically, when they occur away from the work environment and during their working hours.

Despite our efforts to align chrono-, meso- and micro-system when planning implementation and allowing only variation in macro context, and therefore expect a more pronounced impact of macro-context on our findings, consistent with the Bronfenbrenner's (1996) bioecological model of development, the findings highlight the importance of all contexts and their intertwining. More specifically, in each country, specific contextual factors contributed to the impact of the HAND:ET intervention. The findings indicate that the chrono and macro-level contexts, as a relatively stable and uncontrollable factor in intervention development and implementation, influence other levels (meso and micro) and, consequently, affect intervention outcomes across different national environments. Hence, we believe it is important to maintain the universal nature of interventions focused on SEDA competencies to give the context the opportunity to respond, to 'take in' the support that is most needed at a specific time. The HAND:ET intervention targets multiple core concepts that are mutually dependent and intertwined (Durlak 2016). Therefore, detecting diverse effects across different contexts might reflect the fact that each context, and even each participant group, gets what is most needed at that particular time from a universal intervention. Theoretically, we also assume that due to the interconnectedness of all competencies (social, emotional and diversity awareness) (Durlak 2016), a positive effect on one competence will over time have a spill-over effect.

Despite its limitations, such as cross-sectional design, convenience samples, the abundance of factors we could not control for, as is the case in every education research, the study contextualises the findings of randomised controlled trials across

five countries, which is its biggest strength. In conclusion, we would like to stress the importance of understanding and embracing the contextual embeddedness of SEDA interventions and to continue ongoing research with the implementation of multi-contextual experiments with a focus on contextualisation, adaptation, and bottom-up approaches that incorporate participants' voices. The paper's findings are crucial for understanding how the interplay of different levels affects both the implementation and the outcomes of SEDA interventions. They show how macro-level contexts shape other levels of influence and highlight the need to study contextual transferability not only within a single macro context but, importantly, across different macro-level (national) contexts.

The HAND:ET outcomes confirm the effectiveness of SEDA interventions for addressing contemporary challenges of the teaching profession across the EU. However, they also demonstrate the critical importance of the macro-level context in the implementation of such interventions. To enhance the full potential of SEDA learning, in addition to providing favourable macro-level conditions for the implementation of a particular intervention, it is even more essential that these macro-level conditions, including curricula and teachers' initial and continuous professional development, support the systematic and sustained integration of SEDA learning into educational practice. The HAND:ET outcomes, as an internationally validated intervention, may serve as an evidence base for the planning and development of such (nationally contextualised) systemic solutions. Although the paper focuses on the SEDA intervention, its findings are important for understanding how different contextual levels (chrono-macro-meso-micro system) shape the implementation and outcomes of various educational interventions, thereby contributing insights relevant to a broader range of educational topics.

Notes

1. Although Bronfenbrenner conceptualises the exosystem (institutional structures and settings) and the macrosystem (cultural values, ideologies, and societal norms) as analytically distinct, these levels can also be considered jointly, as institutional arrangements are embedded within and inherently shaped by broader cultural and societal frameworks. Consequently, both levels function as distal environmental influences that collectively shape the context within which the social, emotional and diversity awareness intervention operates.
2. Similarities are listed here, while specifics are stressed in the country specific sections.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available at www.handinhand.si.

Ethical statement

The research was approved by the Ethical Committee of the University of Lisbon and Mid Sweden University. All participants gave informed consent.

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