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## **THE ROLE OF PRE-SERVICE TEACHER EDUCATION IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENTS' COMPETENCIES FOR SHAPING LGBTIQ-INCLUSIVE EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE**

***Abstract:** This research describes the understanding that final-year master-level students in pre-service teacher education programs at the University of Zagreb hold regarding the role of their studies in developing teachers' competencies for LGBTIQ-inclusive educational practices. The results, based on the data collected in two focus groups, show that the participants assess their knowledge and skills for shaping LGBTIQ-inclusive practices as inadequate, while simultaneously blaming their study programs for this deficit, but also understanding why it occurs. Contemplating the possibilities of LGBTIQ-inclusive education using a competency-based framework opens up numerous questions for future research.*

***Keywords:** critical pedagogy, qualitative methodology, sexual and gender diversity, teacher education*

## INTRODUCTION

Recent meta-analyses and systematic reviews (Abreu et al., 2022; Myers et al., 2020) point to the persistent perception of schools as hostile places for LGBTIQ students, highlighting the importance of the protective function of the pedagogical relationship between teachers and LGBTIQ students (see in Bartulović et al., 2023). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that more and more authors acknowledge the education of (future) teachers as a relevant strategy for supporting the well-being of LGBTIQ students and making a step forward toward a more inclusive educational practice (Bartholomaeus et al., 2017; Brant, 2017; Coulter et al., 2021; Ferfolja & Robinson, 2004; Fortunato et al., 2018; Robinson & Ferfolja, 2001; Szalacha, 2004). Nevertheless, the actual readiness of teachers to shape LGBTIQ-inclusive educational practices is questionable (Fredman et al., 2015; Kull et al., 2017; Graybill & Proctor, 2016; Payne & Smith, 2014), where the complex entanglement of supportive attitudes, the skills that enable the practical implementation of supportive attitudes and actual teacher behaviors proves particularly interesting. Bartholomaeus et al. (2017, p. 132) show that ‘direct experience in teaching a trans or gender diverse student does not seem to help teachers feel more confident in their work, whereas it does appear to impact positively on attitudes and comfort levels. This suggests a skills gap in this area, where teachers may feel broadly more accepting through direct experience of trans or gender diverse students, while still lacking clarity about how to teach or support students’, while, along similar lines, preliminary results of Milburn and Palladino’s (2012, p. 86) ‘research study found disparities between the responders’ willingness (dispositions) to confront the issue, and their lack of knowledge and skills to do so effectively.’ Furthermore, in a survey-based research study involving a sample of 98 teachers in Grades 6–12 (summary), 63% of teachers indicated that personal values and/or discomfort surrounding LGBT issues prevent them from providing support, reflecting an unwillingness to intervene. Moreover, 55% reported not knowing how or when to intervene as a barrier, reflecting an inability to intervene.’ (Swanson & Gettinger, 2016, p. 344).

Development of competencies for LGBTIQ-inclusive practices can occur at various stages of professional development and activity. The opportunity for their intensive and systematic cultivation is particularly afforded during pre-service teacher education. However, it seems that in different educational contexts, this opportunity is missed, as in many of them, even the component of knowledge about LGBTIQ topics is placed in the null curriculum. For example, Sherwin and Jennings (2006) examined the visibility of sexual orientation topics within 77 public teacher preparation programs across seven US states and found that 40% of the programs did not address sexual orientation. Interestingly, for the context of this study, it is noteworthy that

the topic was more prevalent in theoretical than practical courses designed to develop specific skills of future teachers. The representation of LGBTQ themes in multicultural education courses was examined by Gorski et al. (2013, p. 224), who analyzed the content of 41 syllabi and data from a survey of 80 people who teach multicultural education courses aimed at detecting the likelihood of incorporating LGBTQ themes in their teaching. They concluded that ‘LGBTQ concerns often are invisible in multicultural teacher education coursework in the United States and that, when these concerns are covered, they generally are addressed in decontextualized ways that mask heteronormativity’ (see also Robinson & Ferfolja, 2001). Across various contexts, systematic literature reviews of different research articles, which included studies on the outcomes of teacher training programs by O’Brien et al. (2021) brought similar findings.

An important research area is the question of the effectiveness of pre-service teacher education in developing students’ competencies for shaping LGBTIQ-inclusive educational practice. Bezrukova et al. (2016, p. 19, who analyzed 260 studies on diversity training published over a period of forty years, concluded that ‘the good news is that cognitive learning, presumably a key focus of the educational arena, was an outcome found to be more likely to persist or even increase over time. Our results also demonstrate that larger effect sizes were associated with integrated diversity training programs– and this is also consistent with the APA guidelines that encourage an intense, immersive experience and integrated approaches to diversity components in the undergraduate curriculum.’ This points to the enormous potential of knowledge-oriented university programs focused on LGBTIQ-inclusive educational practice, but also to the need for deeper insights into the complex relationship of different elements that the concept of competencies encompasses.

Existing empirical studies highlight the potential of educational interventions during pre-service teacher education in the development of competencies for LGBTIQ-inclusive practice. For instance, in a group interview with pre-service teachers who identify as LGBTQ+, Mitton et al. (2021) highlighted the contribution of the LGBTQ+ awareness education program in the two-year Bachelor of Education Program to their readiness to address challenges in the field (e.g. to intervene or advocate). Additionally, Coulter et al. (2021), who used a quasi-experimental research design, demonstrated the potential to influence the development of specific skills, such as active-empathic listening and self-efficacy for working with LGBTQ youth, within learning programs centered around LGBTQ themes. Vural-Batik (2020) investigated the effectiveness of the Dealing with Homophobia Psycho-Education Program attended by psychological counselor candidates within a quasi-experimental design and utilizing mixed model methods. The findings indicate the program’s effectiveness in reducing levels of homophobia among the candidates. While understanding the scope of the described intervention programs and individual

courses designed for LGBTIQ inclusivity is crucial, a more comprehensive understanding is required regarding the incorporation of LGBTIQ issues within the full-time study programs that most of the teachers in the specific context predominantly undertake. This includes an exploration of the manner in which they contribute to preparing future teachers for LGBTIQ-inclusive practices. Therefore, this study aimed to describe the understanding of the role of study programs in fostering teachers' competencies for shaping LGBTIQ-inclusive educational practices among students in their final year of graduate studies in pre-service teacher education programs at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Zagreb. This aim enabled us to situate the research topic within a familiar context, drawing on our extensive experience of over ten years as teachers at this institution. To further establish the context for our research, we conducted a preliminary analysis of the ongoing teaching-oriented programs at the Faculty to better understand the subject, with the focus of our examination encompassing categories such as the course name, objectives, course contents, and learning outcomes. This revealed that nearly all programs incorporate some content that can be placed in the broad domain of diversity, such as exploring the relationship between culture and identity. However, content related to sexual and gender diversity is notably scarce, discernible only in a very limited number of courses, often through references to gender, feminist, queer, or LGBTIQ studies.

## METHOD

We gathered data through two focus groups that we facilitated ourselves. Eight final-year master-level students enrolled in pre-service teacher graduate studies at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb, participated in these sessions (five in the first, and three in the second focus group).<sup>1</sup> We ensured that each focus group comprised students exclusively from a single study program for two primary reasons. Firstly, to foster in-depth discussions among participants and obtain a more intricate, multiperspective understanding of how students attribute the role of a specific study program in shaping competencies for LGBTIQ-inclusive educational practices. Secondly, this approach aimed to prevent a comparative perspective on programs, as our research does not aim to involve direct program-to-program comparisons. The formation of the focus groups followed the principle of convenience sampling, where final-year students from various study programs volunteered to participate in the sessions. Even after multiple attempts to gather participants through different channels (department heads, professors, students and student organizations) the initially planned representation of the heterogeneity of

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<sup>1</sup> Considering the aim and context of the study, the collection of other demographic data was deemed unnecessary, i.e. ethically justified.

the study programs was not achieved. We faced comparable challenges in recruiting educators in our previous research, which serves as motivation to contemplate alternative sampling modalities and explore the reasons behind the low response rate of potential participants in researching this topic. The conducted focus groups took place at the end of 2022 and the beginning of 2023 at the Faculty and each lasted approximately 90 minutes. The research received approval from the Ethics Committee for Scientific Research of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb, and adhered to established research conventions in the social sciences.

Focus groups were conducted using a semi-structured protocol (non-piloted) that we created for the purpose of this research. The interview protocol consisted of three parts corresponding to the overall aim and specific objectives of the study:

- objective 1: to investigate how final year students of pre-service teacher graduate programs at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb, conceptualize teachers' competencies for shaping LGBTIQ inclusive educational practice
- objective 2: to investigate how final year students of pre-service teacher graduate programs at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb, assess their own competencies for shaping LGBTIQ inclusive educational practice
- objective 3: to investigate how final year students of pre-service teacher graduate programs at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb, understand the role of their study programs in developing competencies for shaping LGBTIQ inclusive educational practice.

We adopted the general inductive approach for data analysis (Thomas, 2006), deeming this strategy appropriate for its emphasis on the data itself rather than predetermined frameworks for interpretation. Following the author's recommendations, the coding process was carried out following these steps: preparation of raw data files, where transcribed focus groups were prepared as text documents for coding; close reading of text, where each researcher read the transcripts several times to familiarize themselves with their content; creation of categories, keeping the author's distinction between upper-level/general and lower-level/specific categories; overlapping coding and uncoded text, where a significant part of the data that are not relevant to the set research aim is omitted from further analysis, while the data relevant to the aim could belong to two or more different categories; continuing revision and refinement of category system, where thematically related categories are merged into a superordinate category. Also, in accordance with the author's recommendation on reporting research results, we present the results of our analysis based on the designed superordinate categories, accompanied by 'detailed descriptions of categories

and suitable quotations from the text to illustrate the meanings of the categories' (Thomas, 2006, p. 245).

## RESULTS

While the questions posed in the focus group were not structured to prompt a systematic comparison, participants in their responses analyzed the study program they are currently enrolled in, followed by suggestions for addressing identified shortcomings that, in their totality, shape an image of an ideal study program that would foster the development of competencies of future educators for LGBTIQ-inclusive education. This dichotomy (*current vs. envisioned study program*) constitutes the first two topics, while the third topic centers on questioning the place of competencies for shaping LGBTIQ-inclusive educational practices within a pre-service teacher program (see Table 1). The generated themes partly correspond with the focus group protocol, which in the third part addresses the role of the study programs in developing competencies for shaping LGBTIQ inclusive educational practice, while the dichotomy between *current vs. envisioned study programs* was inductively generated from the data.

**Table 1**

*Themes and codes*

<b>Current study program</b>	<b>Envisioned study program</b>	<b>Competencies as part of the study program</b>
Lack of explicit LGBTIQ content	Suggestions for study program content	Ineffective competence development
Other organizational units of the faculty currently	Other organizational units of the faculty in the future	Effective competence development
Teaching practice critique	Teaching practice in schools – suggestions	Competencies as study program outcomes
Limited familiarity with protocols	Teaching the importance of responding	Acceptability of changing student beliefs during studies
Atmosphere during studies	Proposing study program activities	Responsibility of the study program
Pedagogical orientation of the studies	Proposing study program skills Cross-curricular topic Selection during study program enrolment	

The consensus within the conducted focus groups is that there is a noticeable absence of explicit LGBTIQ content in the study programs in which the participants are currently enrolled. This deficiency is evident both in the incorporation of such content within the official curriculum and in the inclusion of related discussions and similar activities during classes. Despite this shortcoming, participants in one focus group evaluate the atmosphere at the department, particularly “concerning such topics” (f1), as highly positive, noting that this positive atmosphere extends to both professors and students. On the one hand, they are aware of instances in some departments where the atmosphere is negative, while on the other hand, they also highlight examples of departments where the atmosphere is so inclusive of LGBTIQ issues that students with homophobic beliefs might find it challenging to integrate into their study communities. The participants attribute the absence of explicit LGBTIQ content in their study program curricula to the limited number of courses available to them. They emphasize that prioritizing courses narrowly focused on the teaching methods of individual subjects is understandable due to these constraints. According to them, the curricula do not allow for the incorporation of additional content, given the existing limitations. They additionally emphasize that such a study program orientation ensures their thorough preparation for engaging in teaching work, but simultaneously does not provide an opportunity for the development of specific knowledge and skills that go beyond the dimension of methodical preparedness, such as conflict resolution skills, skills in addressing challenging topics in class, and so on.

In addition to the issue of curriculum oversaturation with various contents, participants in one focus group do not view the teachers in their department as individuals who should or could address LGBTIQ topics. This perspective is attributed to the teachers’ narrow scholarly research specialization and their focus on the scholarly foundations of teaching. However, in the latter part of the discussion, they criticize the study program for not acquainting them with concepts they deem crucial for their future professional endeavors, such as *heteronormativity* and *homonormativity*. Interestingly, they only encountered these concepts in the last semester of their studies, prompting them to question the feasibility of such a situation in a university setting focused on disciplines in social sciences and the humanities. Additionally, they express concern about the lack of exposure to elements of school legislation, essential for their daily teaching responsibilities, leading them to question whether they will possess sufficient knowledge in their future practice to respond appropriately to various challenging situations. We link their aspiration to be prepared for pedagogically constructive responses to challenging situations with their call for university teachers to take responsibility for modelling LGBTIQ-inclusive educational practices:

For example, in all situations where there were some really, I don't know how else to call them, inappropriate comments, there was no reaction. For instance, there was no reaction from the teacher at the seminars. If someone did say something, it was the other colleagues. Because you know, (pause in speech), it was actually about the positive attitude towards violence, sexist statements, and things like that. In my opinion, this is unacceptable for any kind of... I mean, discourse at the university, let alone in courses aimed at future teachers. I think to myself, "Who is the crazy one?" I mean (laughter). So, at the moment, it doesn't seem to me that the study program is responsible, but it should be. (f1)

As one opportunity to develop competencies for LGBTIQ inclusivity, the participants in one focus group precisely see the parts of the study program that are implemented as practical teaching in schools. However, they express criticism regarding the staged aspect of that practice:

I was really lucky (speaking through laughter; laughter in the background) because the rest of the time, everything was running really smoothly. Everything was ideal, but that one class was... and then I saw, for instance, how she reacts in such a situation. And I was like, "Oh, okay, so I can do that", or I would think, "Maybe this was too much, maybe it wasn't", but let's see these real-life situations. (f1)

This point of criticism guides us to the second topic, where focus group participants delineate an ideal study program designed to equip them for shaping LGBTIQ-inclusive educational practices. The framework of this envisioned program is largely shaped by the criticisms voiced about the current program in which they are enrolled. This study program should include fundamental theoretical knowledge about these topics, as participants believe such knowledge is essential for any academically educated citizen. Participants express optimism that the awareness of the consequences of a teacher's inadequate reactions could foster a greater willingness among educators to respond effectively in complex situations:

As I said, again it mostly depends on the personality in my opinion, but what could emerge is what kind of consequences a failure to answer can have on the future of the children, of the school, and culture in general, as well as society. Because as soon as these consequences are very, very strongly emphasized, it may lead to those teachers who maybe started out as insecure, in the end choosing that specific reaction. (...) But with an emphasis on everything that can happen unless you react in that hypothetical situation, I think that the chances would certainly increase, you know. (f2)

As possible solutions to the described problems, the participants mention the cross-curricular inclusion of LGBTIQ topics in different courses at their studies, but also in different courses at other departments. One participant illustrates the effectiveness of the cross-curricular strategy by highlighting

the fact that exposure to diverse literature in various courses heightened their sensitivity to issues of diversity. Alongside a cross-curricular approach to topics explicitly addressing LGBTIQ inclusivity, participants recognize the potential of situating these topics within a broader framework of learning about tolerance and diversity. They emphasize the importance of teaching how individual differences among students should be considered when selecting a didactic-methodical approach. However, they also acknowledge the risk that the broad concepts of tolerance and respect for diversity in everyday education might be reduced to mere platitudes:

Yes, but I think it is; it seems to me that it has become something of a platitude in our education system. When I was at school... we had this so-called day of diversity. And there, every year, the same presentation was repeated, like we had to tolerate everything, this and that, and that was the end of it. That's where it all stopped. And I think that's the problem. (f2)

Alongside varied theoretical frameworks and specific knowledge, participants also propose diverse skills that future studies should cultivate, including communication skills, critical thinking, abilities to respond to challenging situations, and conflict resolution skills. They believe these skills are currently underdeveloped, in their case:

But I'm more afraid that I won't have the tools needed to react in situations that can happen in class. For example, if I teach in a class where there is a trans person or (pause in speech) or, you know, a person, I don't know, a homosexual person, whatever, anyone actually (pause in speech) from that spectrum and that person experiences, that is, that male or female student experiences abuse by their peers and the like. How am I supposed to be competent to resolve something like that? I am confident of my beliefs and attitudes about it. I do not support this abuse in any sense of the word, and I know what I would think about it, but I don't know how to access the tools that I need. Mental tools and verbal tools that would help me stop what's happening, that would help me somehow initiate change. (f2)

As modalities for developing specific knowledge and skills, participants envision various interactive methods and educational formats aimed at immersing themselves in challenging situations through role-playing. They also highlight the importance of strengthening communication and argumentation skills through engaging in debates. The above points to their need for exposure to situations that require their immediate reaction and improvisation skills, while the abovementioned activities enable such exposure, even in an academic setting. Participants in one focus group even express dissatisfaction with their study program's emphasis on *quiz knowledge*, stating that it "is not the type of knowledge that will truly assist us in our work" (f2). However, participants perceive a unique potential in their preparation for shaping LGBTIQ-inclusive work during their studies within the previously mentioned practical teaching.

They emphasize that, in addition to the existing methods focused on training and teaching, it would be beneficial to introduce the practice of job shadowing.

I think it would be great if, as part of practice, we have... we have... that we not only listen to the teacher teach one of their classes and then at the end, I mean (pause in speech) we teach our own class. That we also get maybe, I don't know, for example, one day or a couple of days or a week to be with that mentor of ours and not only listen to them in class, but for instance we go to the staff room with them. For instance, we follow them for that one day. (f1)

Likewise, they believe that practical teaching at the organizational level should reflect the diversity that teachers will encounter once they enter the labor market:

And maybe some kind of exposure during our studies to different students, different schools and different classrooms in general. So, to different communities and classes. Because we, let's say specifically, we go through [various] schools, [some] of which are primary and [some] secondary schools, and since we're in Zagreb, I don't know, at least one of those will be a grammar school, and grammar schools in Zagreb are, for the most part, if you're based in the center, they're pretty much elite schools (laughter), let's put it that way. And I think it would be good if we went to some schools that are maybe a little, that are, you know, not exactly in the city center.

Nevertheless, it appears that even with such a reorganization, the participants remain concerned that in practice there may still be teachers who, in their opinion, should not have had the opportunity to enroll in the pre-service teacher program at all. While one of the focus groups emphasized the insufficient motivation of some teachers for their job, the other spontaneously touched upon the topic of candidate selection during the admission process to the study program:

I have one extreme suggestion. But really, I talked to a lot of colleagues, and they all agree with me (laughs). That is... I think that some kind of psychological testing or an orientation interview should be introduced for students who enroll in teaching majors because (pause in speech) the things we hear from our colleagues at seminars are sometimes really terrible. (f1) And then I think to myself, if that's absolutely no problem for him... It is not a problem at all for him to say something like that at the university. In front of your colleagues, in front of the teachers. What will such people one day be saying in front of the kids? I wouldn't even let them near the kids (saying through laughter; laughter in the background), let alone allow them to have any educational role in their lives. And I think that's a big mistake. I mean, if we do have psychological testing, I don't know, in order to pass a driving test, something like that is not taken into account at all for someone

who will be working with children for years. Who will have a big role in their lives? (f1)

Thus, regarding selection procedures, they mention the use of motivational interviews and the application of various psychological tests.

The suggestion to implement a selection mechanism for study program enrolment is linked to skepticism about the ability of studies to alter the attitudes, beliefs, and personalities of adults, clearly expressed in both focus groups. However, the pessimism is not absolute, as some participants mention how they experienced changes in their own attitudes and beliefs during their studies. More than contemplating whether attitudes, beliefs, and personality traits *can* be changed during studies, participants grappled with the (un)justifiability of altering beliefs in their own educational setting. They questioned whether all students have the right to their own beliefs and did not fully agree on this matter. Some participants believe that study programs have the right to expose future teachers to content that may potentially make them more affirmative of LGBTIQ issues. However, they argue that the right to one's own beliefs on any issue should be inviolable:

If someone is transphobic, can we say that they have no right to be transphobic – “you shouldn't be transphobic, you have to...”. I mean, that is now the responsibility of the individual. We cannot forbid someone from being like that. We need to somehow educate that person, to raise the awareness of human rights, which is absurd in 2023 that we still have to convince people that (pause in speech) those who are different from us deserve equal rights both under the law and in the eyes of other members of society. So, I don't think that the position of a teacher should require certain beliefs. I think that teachers should be educated that, regardless of their own beliefs and attitudes, they should try to be as neutral as possible in class. (f2)

Others add that they themselves would not be comfortable if anything was imposed on them (an example of faith in a religiously-affirmative context, f1). On the other hand, certain participants believe that assuming a teaching role requires the suspension of certain beliefs:

I mean, yes of course, there are always certain beliefs in the background, and of course someone who has some kind of more liberal beliefs will have an easier time acquiring that knowledge, but I think that a teacher must simply understand when, you know, when they decide to become a teacher and when they find themselves on track to becoming a teacher that this is what they are now training to become, meaning during the studies, or at some point, and they simply have to realize that they have to put some of their own beliefs aside. (f1)

Raising concerns about legitimizing interventions into the beliefs of future teachers, they differentiate between those of a normative character (such as religion) that should not be subject to such interventions and those for which

the social sciences provide clear guidance, ensuring high-quality educational practices:

But I think that's very often the issue with some of this social research. With social sciences in general. That even some of this scientific understanding that we arrive at... For example, if we can agree that, say, it is some kind of scientific understanding that it is good to have an inclusive classroom, for instance, that this is something that is desirable in pedagogy, and that this is what modern pedagogy strives for. And now people perceive this, like, some kind of ideological position, like some attitude, and we have to work on separating what someone's attitude is from something that is scientifically based. And so, for instance, I don't think the imposition of religion is scientifically based, is it? It probably isn't. While let's say, another way of imposing... that is to say, educating people in a more inclusive direction, that has its own scientific basis in social sciences. Now, the fact that some people think that social sciences make no sense is a separate issue altogether, but if something is in fact scientifically based, and this is, then I don't see what the issue would be. (f1)

Indeed, it is noteworthy that in one focus group, there was an expressed opinion that the non-inclusive attitudes of an individual might not necessarily manifest in their behavior:

Someone can be homophobic in their attitude, but that doesn't mean that homophobia necessarily means abuse and something like that. So if someone is indeed homophobic, it can still mean that they can talk to a homosexual person normally, that they can work together with that person, in a way. I don't think the attitude necessarily means, "I will abuse anyone different from myself, I will, I won't tolerate them, I will constantly trip them up and I will", I don't know what. (f2)

Additionally, a comment arose questioning the feasibility of ascertaining the authenticity of future teachers' beliefs during their studies. Participants acknowledged the possibility that students might feign adherence to certain beliefs guaranteed by the outcomes of their study programs, which again triggered their skepticism about whether it is justified to designate LGBTIQ-inclusive beliefs as an outcome in certain pre-service teacher study programs. Participants who advocate for the inclusion of these competencies in pre-service teacher studies base their argumentation on the body of scientific knowledge, emphasizing the significance of teachers acting in an LGBTIQ-inclusive way, also drawing support from the value system of the European Union.

## DISCUSSION

One central point of discussion regarding the role of pre-service teacher education in developing teachers' competencies for shaping LGBTIQ-inclusive

educational practice revolves around the representation of LGBTIQ topics in the curricula of pre-service teacher programs, which is comprehensively addressed in the scientific literature (Gorski et al., 2013; Sherwin & Jennings, 2006; Štambuk et al., 2022). The authors address not only the question of the visibility of LGBTIQ topics in the curriculum but also the question of the place assigned to these topics in the curriculum. This includes their placement in courses at the very beginning of the studies, far from the moment when (future) teachers enter practice (Sherwin & Jennings, 2006). Additionally, the authors explore how these topics are addressed within the curriculum, often gaining minor importance as part of other markers of diversity (Gorski et al., 2013). All of the above highlights the potential pitfalls of the approach advocated by the participants in this research. They emphasize that they would not include LGBTIQ-positive attitudes as explicit outcomes of the study programs, but would rather prioritize diversity and tolerance. Airton and Koecher (2019, p. 193) believe that such an approach misses 'disrupting how gender and sexual rigidity circumscribe the lives and life chances of all people in schools, in various ways and to varying degrees', just as the emphasis on safety and human rights does not question the concept of heteronormativity (Letts & Sears, 1999; Nelson, 1999; Pinar, 1998; all as quoted in Szalacha, 2004). The strategy of cross-curricular inclusion of LGBTIQ topics is also susceptible to similar dangers, where on the one hand, cross-curricularity can serve as protection against the essentialization of LGBTIQ identities and the ghettoization of LGBTIQ topics, while on the other hand, it can result in the perpetuation of the invisibility of these topics due to their inclusion in the entire range of identity markers. This inclusion within a wide array of subjects, given the paradigm of embracing diversity, necessitates careful consideration, especially considering the limited time dedicated to addressing such topics (Brant & Willox, 2021). The results from our research highlight the issue of time, where, in one focus group, a participant attributed the lack of time for LGBTIQ topics to the narrow scientific research specialization of university teachers and the focus of study programs on the scientific foundations of teaching. Such a perspective is criticized by Robinson and Ferfolja (2001, p. 126), who, while discussing future, not university teachers, consider that teachers should first of all be identified as 'teachers of people' and not 'teachers of disciplines'. In the participants' statements, we recognize a strategy of *structural idealism versus contextual loyalty*, reflected in a contradictory perception of the burden related to narrowly specialist content shouldered by their own study programs and teachers. Consequently, they suggest that these topics be addressed in other departments while simultaneously criticizing university teachers who do not view their role as oriented toward educating values, focusing solely on subject competence.

Bartholomaeus et al. (2017) state that teachers' knowledge and positive attitudes are not a guarantee of successful work with trans and gender-diverse students, while also recognizing 'a skills gap in this area' (p. 132) that needs to be addressed, whereas Coulter et al. (2021, p. 247) show that 'LGBTQ-focused service-based learning may significantly improve pre-service teachers' active-empathic listening skills and self-efficacy for working with LGBTQ youth', which the authors see as essential for working with LGBTIQ students. In addition to the absence of LGBTIQ content in the curricula of pre-service teacher programs, the participants also highlight the insufficient development of certain skills they are supposed to acquire. Also, they point to the potential of various simulation-based teaching activities (such as role playing) in the development of these skills (see Dotger et al., 2010, for an empirical discussion on the potential of such an approach in the fields of preparing future health and school professionals). Considering the participants' feedback about overloading the curriculum with subject-specific content, we consider focusing on generic skills that are decontextualized from LGBTIQ topics as a transitional strategy in developing skills (as opposed to knowledge), given that they are applicable in various challenging situations within educational practice. Regarding such a strategy as optimal exposes teacher education curricula to the same risks described earlier while addressing the cross-curricular inclusion of LGBTIQ topics.

Regarding the attitudes of future teachers, Hall and Rodgers (2019, p. 26) provide an overview of research that indicates that 'teachers' attitudes can influence their behavior, which suggests that these attitudes may serve as a foundation for supportive actions regarding LGBQ students, or teachers may contribute to a hostile school climate for these youth.' Bearing this in mind, the discussion in one focus group regarding whether homophobic teachers can genuinely support all their students becomes more intriguing. However, the participants also concurred that future teachers should undergo rigorous selection criteria during the enrolment process, with a focus on their motivation and/or personality traits. We discussed this in Bartulović et al. (2019), within the broader context of the general discourse on dispositions for pedagogical activity. Here, we are revisiting the intricate questions surrounding the dilemma of how (un)justified it is to deny access to a study program based on the absence of beliefs that could potentially be cultivated through the studies or not even be expressed in practice (though we find the latter highly improbable), which we consider an invaluable avenue for future empirical research.

## CONCLUSION

This study aimed to describe how students in their final year of master-level pre-service teacher education at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Zagreb understand the role of their study programs in

fostering teachers' competencies for shaping LGBTIQ-inclusive educational practice. The results show that students estimate that their study programs inadequately prepare them for LGBTIQ-inclusive teaching, especially in the domain of skills, although at the same time, they show an understanding of the contextual circumstances that condition this limited preparation. The greatest disagreement is expressed in addressing the question of whether study programs should even tackle personal beliefs or focus solely on the behavior of teacher candidates that, regardless of their beliefs, must be inclusive. We consider the above to be the most interesting finding of the conducted research, which requires further empirical investigation of whether teachers with deeply homophobic, transphobic, and heteronormative beliefs can suspend the transfer of these beliefs into their teaching practices. Aware that such research requires complex methodological solutions, we nevertheless consider them worth pursuing due to the far-reaching consequences that positioning on any polarity (teachers have the right to each and every one of their beliefs vs. teachers must not have beliefs that lead to potentially non-inclusive teaching practices) can have for pre-service teacher study programs and teacher candidates/teachers. More specifically, agreeing with the first position can implicitly validate the beliefs that are in contrast with the internationally recognized framework of human rights, while agreeing with the second position opens complex issues of selection before and during pre-service teacher studies.

The second most significant finding of this research pertains to the focus group participants' emphasis on insufficient opportunities for developing skills for shaping LGBTIQ-inclusive practice during their studies, without which knowledge and attitudes cannot be productively materialized in the educational practice. However, aware of the fact that these skills cannot be fully developed solely during pre-service teacher education, this finding is also relevant in the context of ensuring the continuity of opportunities for the development of knowledge, skills, attitudes and beliefs for shaping LGBTIQ-inclusive educational practice, starting from the pre-service level, through the initial stage of in-service teaching, up to continuous professional development.

## LIMITATIONS

We recognize two important limitations of the conducted research. The first limitation stems from the research design focused on the students of only one institution, generally supportive of LGBTIQ persons and issues; this is why future research should include other types of institutions that educate future teachers. Another limitation stems from the difficulties we encountered while making efforts to recruit participants from different study programs realized at the institution where the research was conducted, which is why different experiences and practices are insufficiently represented in the focus groups.

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## ULOGA NASTAVNIČKIH STUDIJA U RAZVOJU KOMPETENCIJA STUDENATA ZA OBLIKOVANJE LGBTIQ INKLUZIVNE ODGOJNO-OBRAZOVNE PRAKSE

**Sažetak:** Cilj je ovoga rada opisati kako studenti završne godine diplomskih studija nastavničkih usmjerenja na Filozofskome fakultetu Sveučilišta u Zagrebu razumiju ulogu studija u razvoju kompetencija nastavnika za oblikovanje LGBTIQ inkluzivne odgojno-obrazovne prakse. Istraživanje je provedeno na dvjema fokus grupama s ukupno osam studenata završne godine diplomskih studija nastavničkih usmjerenja na instituciji na kojoj su autorice zaposlene. Rezultati pokazuju da sudionici svoja znanja i vještine za oblikovanje LGBTIQ inkluzivne prakse procjenjuju neadekvatnima, istovremeno zamjerajući studijima taj nastali deficit, ali i razumijevajući zašto do njega dolazi. Promišljanje o mogućnostima LGBTIQ inkluzivnoga odgoja i obrazovanja primjenom kompetencijskoga okvira otvara brojna pitanja za buduća empirijska istraživanja.

**Ključne riječi:** obrazovanje nastavnika, kvalitativna metodologija, seksualna i rodna različitost, kritička pedagogija