

Chapter # 10

DEMOCRATIC SCHOOL CULTURE AND STUDENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS: INSIGHTS FOR IMMIGRANT-BACKGROUND STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Relationships between students and teachers are central to academic success and psychological well-being, yet perceptions of these relationships can differ across student groups. Immigrant-background students are often at risk of less positive relationships than their native peers due to language and acculturation challenges. Positive student–teacher relationships can, however, function as a protective factor by supporting inclusion, social engagement, and a sense of school belonging. Drawing on data from the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS), the present study examines how aspects of democratic school and classroom culture—openness in classroom discussions, perceived influence on school decision-making, participation in civic activities, peer interactions, and civic learning—are associated with perceptions of student–teacher relationships among immigrant-background students in Slovenia and Croatia, two neighboring countries that differ in the proportion of students with an immigrant background. In both countries, results show that peer interactions and perceived influence on decision-making are robust positive predictors of student–teacher relationships, whereas openness in classroom discussions and participation in civic activities differ between countries. Findings are discussed through the lens of fostering positive perceptions of student–teacher relationships for immigrant-background students.

Keywords: student-teacher relations, immigrant background, students, ICCS 2022.

1. INTRODUCTION

The relationships students build with their teachers are foundational to school practice and educational systems, shaping motivation, engagement, and well-being (Endedijk et al., 2022; Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011; Zheng, 2022). Yet students do not perceive these relationships uniformly, nor are they homogeneous in their characteristics. In increasingly multicultural classrooms, immigrant-background students may be at greater risk of less positive student–teacher relationships than their native peers, as differences in cultural background, language proficiency, prior schooling, and experiences with stereotyping or discrimination shape both their perceptions and their relationships (e. g. Štremfel, Šterman Ivančič, & Peras, 2024; Wanders, Dijkstra, Maslowski, & Van Der Veen, 2020). At the same time, warm, respectful, and responsive teacher–student interactions can be especially consequential for these students, buffering social exclusion and supporting psychosocial adjustment (Archambault et al., 2024; Peguero & Bondy, 2011; Štremfel, Šterman Ivančič, & Peras, 2024; Wanders, Dijkstra, Maslowski, & Van Der Veen, 2020).

A growing literature suggests that student–teacher relationships are embedded in the social ecology of classrooms and schools (Endedijk et al., 2022). This foregrounds elements of democratic school and classroom culture (Tzankova, Albanesi, Cicognani, 2021; Yavuz

Tabak & Karip, 2022) as a promising lens for understanding immigrant-background students' perceptions of student–teacher relationships. In particular, fostering open discussions, enabling meaningful student participation in decision-making, cultivating supportive peer relationships, and promoting civic participation are plausible antecedents of more positive perceptions of student–teacher relationships. However, the literature has not sufficiently examined how these features relate to the perceptions of immigrant-background students, particularly across national contexts.

To address this research gap, this study uses data from the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS 2022), an international large-scale assessment (ILSA). Accordingly, we focus on Slovenia and Croatia—neighboring countries with shared historical and regional ties but different proportions of immigrant-background students in the latest ICCS data. Specifically, we examine whether—and how—core elements of democratic school and classroom culture—openness in discussions, influence on decision-making, civic participation, peer interactions, and civic learning—predict immigrant-background students' perceptions of student–teacher relationships within each national context.

2. BACKGROUND

Student–teacher relationships are important to students' educational success, shaping academic performance and engagement (Zheng, 2022). Yet, because students are a heterogeneous group, these relationships are not experienced uniformly. In the contemporary context of rising immigration, students with an immigrant background provide a critical lens for examining variation in perceived relationship quality. In this study, we define immigrant-background students as those who were born abroad and/or have at least one parent born outside the country of schooling.

Using national data from the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS 2022), we adopted a civic and citizenship education framework to examine immigrant-background students' perceptions of student–teacher relationships. According to prior work (e.g., Munniksma, Ziemes, & Jugert, 2022; Wanders et al., 2020), practices such as openness in classroom discussions, student voice and perceived influence in decision-making, participation in civic activities, supportive peer interactions, and civic learning at school are associated with more positive student–teacher relationships. The present study assumes that immigrant-background students' perceptions of student–teacher relationships are embedded in classroom and school ecologies shaped by the values, norms, and practices that constitute democratic school and classroom culture (Yavuz Tabak & Karip, 2022).

According to the latest ICCS data, immigrant-background students in both Slovenia and Croatia report perceptions of student–teacher relationships below the international average. This pattern is concerning because prior research consistently identifies positive student–teacher relationships as a protective factor, supporting development (Peguerro & Bondy, 2011), school belonging (Štremfel et al., 2024), and adaptation to new environments (Archambault et al., 2024). When teachers demonstrate personal regard, provide structure, and offer choices, they help meet students' needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy, thereby fostering more positive perceptions of student–teacher relationships among students (Roorda et al., 2011). From this perspective, schools play a key role in supporting the integration and well-being of immigrant-background students within the broader community.

Moreover, examining student–teacher relationships among immigrant-background students is warranted because many are at risk, depending on the timing and circumstances of arrival in the host country and on their daily experiences. They may encounter language barriers, unfamiliar school systems, cultural dissonance, the use of a different home language, and instances of discrimination. In this context, warm, respectful, and responsive relationships with teachers are especially important; they not only promote academic adjustment but also buffer social exclusion and emotional distress. Thus, for immigrant-background students, student–teacher relationships function as academic and psychosocial protective factors, promoting student engagement, school satisfaction, and prosocial behavior (Wanders et al., 2020).

Schools themselves play a key role in fostering a democratic culture through civic and citizenship education, not only by building civic knowledge but also by creating opportunities for participation and inclusive dialogue (Tzankova et al., 2021). From a psychological perspective, however, these practices may not benefit all students equally unless they are enacted in culturally responsive ways. Open classroom discussions can remain superficial or exclusionary if topics, norms, and interactional routines fail to include diverse perspectives. Participation in civic activities may also be ineffective if immigrant-background students cannot relate to the sociopolitical context and civic norms of the host country.

To address this gap, we examine how specific features of democratic school and classroom culture are associated with immigrant-background students' perceptions of student–teacher relationships in Slovenia and Croatia. We focus on these two neighboring countries because they share historical ties as former Yugoslav republics but differ in the proportion of immigrant-background students according to ICCS 2022 data. In Slovenia, approximately 21 % of eighth-graders reported having an immigrant background, reflecting long-standing migration from the former Yugoslav republics and more recent arrivals from other countries (e.g., Ukraine). In contrast, only 6 % of eighth-graders in Croatia reported having an immigrant background.

More specifically, we aim to identify which aspects of democratic school and classroom culture predict these perceptions for students with an immigrant background and whether similar patterns of predictors emerge in both countries. Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions:

- 1) What factors related to democratic school and classroom culture are associated with immigrant-background students' perceptions of student–teacher relationships?
- 2) What similarities and differences can be observed in these associations between Slovenia and Croatia?

Given the exploratory nature of the research design, we did not pose specific hypotheses.

3. METHODS

3.1. Participants

This study draws on data from the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study 2022 (ICCS 2022). For Slovenia and Croatia, only data from the student-background questionnaire are used. ICCS is an international large-scale assessment organized by the IEA and implemented across participating countries in regular cycles. ICCS employs a complex sampling and assessment design that enables representative population estimates (Schulz et al., 2025).

In Slovenia, the ICCS 2022 sample included 3,466 eighth-grade students (50.12% male), with 21% reporting an immigrant background (they themselves were born abroad and/or at least one parent was born outside the country of assessment). In Croatia, the sample included 2,759 eighth-grade students (52.09% female), of whom 6% reported an immigrant background. For the present study, only data for immigrant-background students from Slovenia and Croatia were used.

3.2. Measures

For this study, we used scales available in the international ICCS database. Item Response Theory (IRT) was used in the development and construction of these scales. All scales were rescaled to have a mean of 50 (the international average) and a standard deviation of 10 points (Schulz et al., 2025).

The primary outcome variable is the Students' Perceptions of Student-Teacher Relations at School scale. Additional variables were selected from the international database as indicators of democratic school and classroom culture.

Accordingly, the following variables are used in this study:

Students' perceptions of student-teacher relations at school (S_STUTREL). This scale captures students' overall perceptions of how they are treated by their teachers. It consists of five items, with responses rated on a four-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 4 = strongly agree). Example item: "Most of my teachers treat me fairly." Higher scores indicate more positive perceptions of student-teacher relationships. Cronbach's alpha was 0.84 in Slovenia and 0.83 in Croatia.

Students' perceptions of openness in classroom discussions (S_OPDISC). This scale reflects the extent to which political or social issues are openly discussed in class. It includes six items rated on a four-point scale (1 = never, 4 = often). Example item: "Teachers encourage students to make up their own minds." Higher scores indicate more frequent opportunities for open classroom discussions. Cronbach's alpha was 0.83 in Slovenia and 0.80 in Croatia.

Perceptions of student interaction at school (S_INTACT). This scale assesses the quality of student-student relationships in school. It is composed of three items on a four-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 4 = strongly agree). Example item: "Most students at my school treat each other with respect." Higher scores reflect more positive peer interactions among students. Cronbach's alpha was 0.88 in Slovenia and 0.75 in Croatia.

Students' civic learning (S_CIVLRN). This scale measures the extent to which students report learning about civic-related topics at school. It includes nine items on a four-point scale (1 = not at all, 4 = to a large extent). Example item: "How citizens can vote in local or national elections." Higher scores reflect greater exposure to civic education. Cronbach's alpha was 0.88 in Slovenia and 0.85 in Croatia.

Students' beliefs about their influence on decision-making at school (S_INFDEC). This scale captures students' beliefs about their influence on decisions made at school. It contains six items rated on a four-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 4 = strongly agree). Example item: "Students' participation in decision-making contributes to making my school better." Higher scores indicate stronger perceptions of student agency. Cronbach's alpha was 0.86 in both Slovenia and Croatia.

Students' participation in civic activities at school (S_SCHPART). This scale reflects the frequency of students' engagement in civic-related activities at school. It is based on seven items assessed on a three-point scale (1 = no, I have never done this; 2 = yes, but more than a year ago; 3 = yes, within the last 12 months). Example item: "Taking part in decision-making about how the school is run." Higher scores represent more frequent participation in civic activities. Cronbach's alpha was 0.76 in Slovenia and 0.59 in Croatia.

3.3. Analysis and Procedure

The present study used student-level data from the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS 2022), an international large-scale assessment. Data were collected during the main survey administration of ICCS 2022 in participating countries and are publicly available through the official ICCS data repository. The analysis focuses on data from Slovenia and Croatia, with specific attention to immigrant-background students. The data were downloaded directly into RALSA (Mirazchiyski, 2021), a statistical package for R designed to analyze data from international large-scale assessments.

All analyses were conducted in RALSA, which automatically accounts for the study's complex sampling design and weighting procedures, including the use of student estimation weights (TOTWGTS) and jackknife replication methods to ensure population-representative estimates. To address the research questions, we employed descriptive statistics, bivariate correlations, and linear regression models. All analyses were conducted separately for each country. Given the ILSA design and the cross-national comparison, linear regression is an appropriate statistical approach (see Schulz et al., 2025).

In both regression models (for Slovenia and Croatia separately), Students' perceptions of student-teacher relations at school (S_STUTREL) served as the dependent variable. The five variables representing aspects of democratic school and classroom culture (S_OPDISC, S_INTACT, S_CIVLRN, S_INFDEC, and S_SCHPART) were entered as independent variables. Gender was included as a control variable. All predictors were entered simultaneously using the enter method. Assumptions for linear regression analysis were met for all models.

4. RESULTS

Descriptive statistics and correlations among the variables are presented in Table 1. The correlation coefficients for immigrant-background students in Slovenia are shown below the diagonal, while those for immigrant-background students in Croatia are displayed above the diagonal. Immigrant-background students in Slovenia reported lower perceptions of student-teacher relations than students in Croatia (Slovenia: $M = 47.02$, $SD = 10.77$; Croatia: $M = 49.48$, $SD = 10.05$), with both means slightly below the international average. Moreover, Slovenian immigrant-background students reported greater exposure to civic learning than their Croatian peers, whereas Croatian immigrant-background students reported more openness in classroom discussions and greater participation in civic activities. Bivariate correlations show similar patterns for immigrant-background students in both countries.

Table 1.
Descriptive statistics and correlations between variables.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	47.02	10.77	49.48	10.05	1.00	0.45**	0.50**	0.39**	0.09	0.51**	0.12
2	45.88	11.76	49.82	11.18	0.19**	1.00	0.26**	0.45**	0.19**	0.40**	0.28**
3	46.17	10.78	47.34	10.72	0.63**	0.15	1.00	0.26**	0.12	0.36**	-0.02
4	51.17	12.47	45.23	10.31	0.26**	0.29**	0.23**	1.00	0.22**	0.50**	0.21*
5	48.51	11.02	49.58	8.03	0.01	0.20**	0.06	0.14**	1.00	0.13	0.16
6	49.26	10.40	47.70	9.14	0.59**	0.18**	0.53**	0.32**	0.11**	1.00	0.22*
7	1.47	0.50	1.52	0.50	0.02	0.27**	-0.03	0.07**	0.06	-0.03	1.00

*Notes: Means and standard deviations for Slovenia are in the first two column followed by means and standard deviations for Croatia. ** $p \leq 0.01$; * $p \leq 0.05$. S_OPDISC—students' perceptions of openness in classroom discussions; S_INTACT—students' perceptions of student interaction at school; S_CIVLRN—student reports about civic learning at school; S_INFDEC—students' beliefs about their influence on decision-making at school; S_SCHPART—students' participation in civic activities at school; S_STUTREL—students' perceptions of student-teacher relations at school. Numbers of variables in the table: 1 – S_STUTREL; 2 – S_OPDISC; 3 – S_INTACT; 4 – S_CIVLRN; 5 – S_SCHPART; 6 – S_INFDEC; 7 – S_GENDER.*

We estimated two linear regression models to examine predictors of student-teacher relationships among immigrant-background students in Slovenia and Croatia. In both models, gender was included as a control variable, and all continuous predictors were entered simultaneously. The Slovenia model (Table 2) accounted for 49% of the variance in students' perceptions of student-teacher relationships. Students' perceived influence on decision-making at school (S_INFDEC; $\beta = 0.35$, $p < .05$) and student interaction at school (S_INTACT; $\beta = 0.44$, $p < .05$) were significant positive predictors, whereas participation in civic activities at school (S_SCHPART; $\beta = -0.08$, $p < .05$) emerged as a negative predictor. In Croatia, the model (Table 3) explained 41% of the variance in the dependent variable; perceived influence on decision-making (S_INFDEC; $\beta = 0.31$, $p < .05$), student interaction (S_INTACT; $\beta = 0.30$, $p < .05$), and openness in classroom discussions (S_OPDISC; $\beta = 0.20$, $p < .05$) were all positive predictors. No other predictors were statistically significant in either model.

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Table 2.
Linear regression model for immigrant-background students in Slovenia.

	β	$SE(\beta)$	t	p
Intercept	8.50	2.29	3.70	0.000
S_OPDISC	0.06	0.04	1.38	0.169
S_INFDEC	0.35	0.03	10.42	0.000
S_CIVLRN	0.04	0.03	1.32	0.186
S_INTACT	0.44	0.04	12.44	0.000
S_SCHPART	-0.08	0.03	-2.63	0.009
S_GENDER	0.63	0.62	1.02	0.307
Adjusted R^2	0.49			
F-statistic	101.80			
DF	69.00			

Notes: S_OPDISC—students' perceptions of openness in classroom discussions; S_INTACT—students' perceptions of student interaction at school; S_CIVLRN—student reports about civic learning at school; S_INFDEC—students' beliefs about their influence on decision-making at school; S_SCHPART—students' participation in civic activities at school; S_STUTREL—students' perceptions of student-teacher relations at school.

Table 3.
Linear regression model for immigrant-background students in Croatia.

	β	$SE(\beta)$	t	p
Intercept	9.83	4.03	2.44	0.016
S_OPDISC	0.20	0.09	2.39	0.018
S_INFDEC	0.31	0.08	3.83	0.000
S_CIVLRN	0.07	0.10	0.70	0.488
S_INTACT	0.30	0.08	3.88	0.000
S_SCHPART	-0.05	0.09	-0.57	0.568
S_GENDER	-0.18	1.61	-0.11	0.911
Adjusted R^2	0.41			
F-statistic	39.98			
DF	66.00			

Notes: S_OPDISC—students' perceptions of openness in classroom discussions; S_INTACT—students' perceptions of student interaction at school; S_CIVLRN—student reports about civic learning at school; S_INFDEC—students' beliefs about their influence on decision-making at school; S_SCHPART—students' participation in civic activities at school; S_STUTREL—students' perceptions of student-teacher relations at school.

Table 4 presents a comparative overview of the predictors of immigrant-background students' perceptions of student-teacher relations (S_STUTREL) in Slovenia and Croatia. The results reveal both similarities and differences in how aspects of democratic school and classroom culture contribute to these perceptions across the two national contexts. Consistently, students' perceptions of student interaction at school (S_INTACT) and their

perceived influence on school decision-making (S_INFDEC) emerged as robust, significant predictors in both countries. Notable differences were observed for other predictors. In Croatia, openness in classroom discussions (S_OPDISC) was a significant predictor, whereas this was not the case in Slovenia. In contrast, participation in civic activities (S_SCHPART) was a significant predictor in Slovenia but not in Croatia. The remaining predictors were not significant in either country.

Table 4.
Comparison of predictors in Slovenia and Croatia.

Predictor	Significant for immigrant-background students in Slovenia	Significant for immigrant-background students in Croatia
Students' perception of openness in classroom discussions	No	Yes
Students' perceptions of student interaction at school	Yes	Yes
Student reports about civic learning at school	No	No
Students' beliefs about their influence on decision- making at school	Yes	Yes
Students' participation in civic activities at school	Yes	No
Student gender	No	No

5. DISCUSSION

The present study examined how features of democratic school and classroom culture relate to student–teacher relationships among immigrant-background students in Slovenia and Croatia—two neighboring countries with different proportions of immigrant-background students. The findings indicate both similarities and differences in predictors across the two countries. Students' perceived influence on decision-making at school emerged as a significant predictor in both contexts, underscoring the role of democratic school and classroom culture in establishing positive student–teacher relationships (Tzankova et al., 2021). It is likely that teachers who encourage student participation in decision-making are perceived as more supportive, thereby, in turn, strengthening student–teacher relationships. Additionally, student interaction at school was a significant positive predictor in both countries, emphasizing the role of peer relationships in fostering positive student–teacher interactions, consistent with prior research (Kiuru et al., 2015). However, country-specific differences were observed: openness in classroom discussions was a significant predictor only in Croatia, whereas participation in civic

activities was a significant predictor only in Slovenia. These patterns suggest that contextual factors may shape the mechanisms through which democratic school culture is associated with students' perceptions of student-teacher relationships. Overall, the findings reinforce the importance of both democratic school practices and peer interactions in promoting positive relationships between immigrant-background students and their teachers.

The results align with prior work showing that student-teacher relationships are embedded in the broader social ecology of classrooms and schools (Endedijk et al., 2022). Peer interactions appear to influence how students interpret teacher behavior and their relationships with teachers, suggesting that supportive classroom climates foster not only student engagement but also relational trust. This is especially relevant for immigrant-background students, who may initially feel marginalized or disconnected in the school environment (Dežan & Sedmak, 2023). Encouraging positive peer relationships thus acts as a protective factor, reducing experiences of social exclusion and supporting emotional and academic adjustment (Schachner, Schwarzenhal, Moffitt, Civitillo, & Juang, 2021). The connection between peer and teacher relationships further supports the idea that immigrant-background students benefit most when teachers intentionally cultivate inclusive classroom climates that support all students.

The consistent significance of student voice—as reflected in perceived influence on decision-making at school—further reinforces the importance of democratic structures within schools. Students who feel their opinions matter and who are included in decision-making processes tend to report more positive relationships with teachers (Conner et al., 2024; Quinn & Owen, 2016). This highlights the need for participatory pedagogies in which student agency is actively supported. In Slovenia in particular, where past research suggests that student involvement in decision-making remains limited (Mithans, Ivanuš Grmek, & Čagran, 2017), this finding is noteworthy. Schools seeking to strengthen student-teacher relationships for immigrant-background students should not only encourage student voice but also ensure that student input is taken seriously and translated into meaningful classroom or schoolwide action (Mager & Nowak, 2012).

Differences in significant predictors between the two countries underscore the importance of context-sensitive approaches. In Croatia, openness in classroom discussions significantly predicted positive student-teacher relationships, whereas this was not the case in Slovenia. Although open dialogue has been linked to increased civic engagement and tolerance (Maurissen, Barber & Claes, 2020), its effectiveness may depend on how inclusive and culturally responsive such discussions are. In more ethnically homogeneous settings, or in classrooms where cultural diversity is underacknowledged, immigrant-background students may feel excluded from these conversations or lack the confidence to participate fully (Schachner, Noack, Van De Vijver, & Eckstein, 2016). As noted by Banks (2024), civic education that does not integrate diverse cultural perspectives may unintentionally alienate students with immigrant backgrounds, limiting the relational benefits of such pedagogical strategies.

Interestingly, participation in civic activities at school was a significant predictor only in Slovenia, and it was negatively associated with perceptions of student-teacher relationships. While the association was small, its direction warrants attention. One possible explanation is that civic activities in Slovenia are still largely aimed at the majority population—emphasizing civic documents and the constitution (Južnič, 2014; Šimenc, 2012)—with less focus on marginalized groups. As suggested by Zhang (2018), such activities may inadvertently trigger identity dissonance among immigrant-background students, particularly if they feel pressure to conform to the majority. In this light, civic

education should be carefully designed to be inclusive, student-centered, and culturally responsive, consistent with J. A. Banks's (2011) conception of multicultural education.

From a practical perspective, these findings highlight the need for teachers and schools to intentionally promote inclusive forms of democratic education. Professional development in intercultural competence and inclusive pedagogy can help teachers better support diverse learners, particularly in navigating sensitive classroom discussions or civic learning activities (Romijn, Slot, & Leseman, 2021). By doing so, teachers can foster more positive student–teacher relationships with immigrant-background students through elements of democratic school and classroom culture. In line with a whole-school approach (Cavanagh, McDowell, Connor Bones, Taggart, & Mulhall, 2024), schools are encouraged to promote student voice, peer collaboration, and critical engagement across the curriculum—not only within civic education. Moreover, student–teacher relationships should be viewed as co-constructed by teachers and students through everyday classroom practices, shaped not only by individual behavior but also by a broader culture of participation, inclusion, and respect.

These results also point to several important limitations. First, the analysis relied on student self-report data, which may introduce bias relative to objective indicators of behavior. Second, the operationalization of democratic school and classroom culture was limited to constructs included in the ICCS 2022 framework, which, while robust and reliable, may not capture all relevant dimensions of the construct. Third, observed similarities and differences in predictors are specific to the national contexts of Slovenia and Croatia and may differ when using student-level ICCS data from other countries. Future research could build on this work by incorporating teacher perspectives and mixed-methods designs to probe the mechanisms underlying these statistical associations in greater depth.

6. CONCLUSION

Fostering positive student–teacher relationships for immigrant-background students depends not only on teacher behaviors in isolation but also on the democratic culture of classrooms and schools. Two strategies—supportive peer interactions and perceived influence on decision-making—emerge as reliable, actionable levers for strengthening student–teacher relationships among immigrant-background students in both Slovenia and Croatia. In contrast, open classroom discussions and civic participation appear context-dependent within the ILSA framework employed here and likely require culturally responsive implementation to resonate with immigrant-background students. As classrooms diversify, careful attention to the design and enactment of democratic practices is essential for building inclusive, supportive learning environments for all students.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was made possible by the funding received from the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (ARIS), project L5-4571 (Odnos osmošolcev v Sloveniji in Evropi do migrantskih tematik – podatki raziskave IEA ICCS 2009, 2016 in 2022) and the Ministry for Education - Slovenia (No. C3350-25-431004).

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