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**The Development of Social and Emotional Competence and
Resilience in Lower Primary Education**

DOI: 10.15476/ELTE.2026.008

THESES OF THE DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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Theoretical Background

Mental health is a state of well-being attainable at the biological, psychological, social, and spiritual levels, as well as the ability to experience and maintain positive states. An individual in a state of mental health is able to recognize their own abilities, work productively, cope with everyday stressors, and contribute to the development of their community (Vargha et al., 2020). Childhood is a crucial stage in the development of mental health, as this period involves cognitive, social, and emotional development that equips the individual with the competencies essential for achieving psychological well-being and fulfilling socially accepted adult roles (World Health Organization [WHO], 2025). The family plays a prominent role in achieving and supporting mental health, serving as the primary setting for social and emotional development in early childhood. However, following the start of institutional education, children spend a significant portion of their time in educational settings. Thus, educators have the opportunity to cultivate relationships based on trust and support, recognize in a timely manner if students need help, and intervene preventively to protect their physical and mental health (Fazel et al., 2014; Barry, 2019).

Worldwide, an increasing number of programs facilitating social and emotional learning (SEL programs) are being integrated into school curricula to support the social and emotional well-being and mental health of both students and educators (Wigelsworth et al., 2022). In the member states of the European Union, numerous best practices and programs have been introduced aimed at supporting mental health and well-being and preventing mental health problems (Cefai et al., 2021). However, in Hungarian primary schools, there are currently few SEL programs in operation that meet the evaluation criteria established by international organizations (e.g., CASEL) (Zsolnai et al., 2015).

The aim of our research is to adapt the early primary school (1st and 2nd grades) version of the RESCUR "Surfing the Waves" (Cefai et al., 2015, 2022) SEL program package, developed in Europe for kindergartens and schools. The RESCUR curriculum meets international expectations, can flexibly adapt to environmental characteristics, and, based on previous research (e.g., Cefai et al., 2018; Matsopoulos et al., 2020; Simões et al., 2021), is effective in supporting children's mental health by developing social and emotional competence and promoting resilience, while also strengthening school engagement. The implementation of the program was carried out in the first and second grades of 20 primary schools in Budapest to facilitate the kindergarten-to-school transition. During the research, we assessed the experiences, attitudes, and evaluations regarding the program among participating students (*N*

= 986), educators ($N = 53$), and parents ($N = 627$) using both qualitative (semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews, narrative diaries, open-ended questionnaire items) and quantitative (questionnaires) tools. Beyond examining the reception and practical effectiveness of the intervention, our fundamental goal was to explore what content and methodological modifications are necessary for the successful domestic adaptation of the curriculum. Thus, the final conclusions of the research do not solely pertain to the participants' evaluation of the program; they also provide practical guidelines for the domestic adaptation and implementation of an international SEL program package.

Presentation of the RESCUR "Surfing the Waves" curriculum

The RESCUR curriculum was created within the framework of the three-year *Lifelong Learning Programme Comenius Project* (2012–2015) through the collaboration of six European higher education institutions: the University of Malta (coordinator), the University of Crete (Greece), the University of Lisbon (Portugal), Örebro University (Sweden), the University of Pavia (Italy), and the University of Zagreb (Croatia). The fundamental philosophy of the program rests on the principles of social justice and inclusion, paying special attention to the specific needs of vulnerable groups (e.g., refugee, immigrant, ethnic minority, or children with disabilities). The aim of the program is to enrich students with competencies that are essential for coping with life's challenges, achieving academic success, thriving in social relationships, and maintaining emotional balance, thereby reducing early school leaving, academic failure, and social exclusion (Cefai et al., 2014).

The effectiveness of the program heavily depends on the quality of implementation; therefore, prior to commencing the program, educators participate in comprehensive training. During the training, they acquire knowledge of the theoretical concept and themes of the program, the practical execution of activities, and methods for establishing a positive classroom climate. In the spirit of a systemic approach, the program also aims to involve the students' families. The parents' manual supports the at-home consolidation of what children have learned in school and contributes to the development of the parents' own resilience and parenting competencies. Thus, the program connects the school environment and the family, ensuring that these support systems mutually reinforce each other to contribute to the children's development (Cefai et al., 2014; Matsopoulos et al., 2020).

The curriculum consists of seven major themes and their organically related subthemes (Table 1), which progress toward increasingly complex levels in accordance with the students'

development. The subthemes are broken down into lessons that encompass the activities to be implemented in each session. Every lesson is available at both a basic and an advanced level so that educators can implement the program according to the developmental level of the students. The duration of each RESCUR session is 45–90 minutes, which is recommended to be split into two occasions. Each session begins with a brief, introductory mindfulness exercise that enhances children's alertness and attentional capacity (Eriksson et al., 2018). Following this introduction, the educator introduces the current topic through storytelling. The kindergarten and lower primary school age group is guided through the adventures by two mascots endowed with special traits: Sherlock, a purple squirrel wearing glasses, and Zelda, a hedgehog with broken spines. During storytelling, the use of puppets is recommended, which helps facilitate children's engagement and maintain their attention. The stories address issues that students may encounter in their daily lives, such as forming friendships, prejudice, bullying, failures, isolation, loss, or cultural diversity. The storytelling is followed by a discussion, during which the educator uses the reflective questions provided in the manual to help students process the story and connect it to their own experiences. The session concludes with practice-oriented, multisensory activities (e.g., drama games, arts and crafts, cooperative games, singing, topic-related worksheets, etc.). After each RESCUR session, students receive a take-home worksheet related to the current topic. These worksheets encourage both children and parents to continue practicing and consolidating the knowledge and skills learned in the classroom (Cefai et al., 2015, 2022).

Impact evaluations of the program have been conducted in the countries involved in its development. Based on the results, it can be stated that RESCUR contributes to the reduction of problems threatening children's mental health and to the improvement of academic outcomes. Furthermore, it has a positive impact on the development of resilience, communication skills, and prosocial behavior, as well as a favorable effect on teacher-student and parent-child relationships (Cefai et al., 2018; Carelli et al., 2020; Matsopoulos et al., 2020; Simões et al., 2021). These results are consistent with the findings of other studies that have examined school-based SEL programs from the perspectives of mental health and academic achievement (e.g., Durlak et al., 2011; Clarke et al., 2015; Oberle et al., 2016).

Table 1. Themes and subthemes of the RESCUR curriculum (Author's own work).

Developing Communications Skills	Establishing and Maintaining Healthy Relationships	Developing a Growth Mindset	Developing Self Determination	Building on Strengths: Self-Concept and Self-Esteem	Developing Self-Regulation	Turning Challenges into Opportunities
Effective communication	Healthy relationships	Positive and optimistic thinking	Problem-solving	Developing a positive self-concept	Maintaining motivation and attention	Dealing with challenges and adversity
Assertiveness	Collaboration, Empathy and Moral reasoning	Positive emotions	Empowerment and Autonomy	Enhancing self-esteem Using strengths in social interaction	Managing anger Managing anxiety	Dealing with sickness and disability Dealing with prejudice and discrimination Dealing with rejection Dealing with family conflict Dealing with loss Dealing with bullying Dealing with change and transitions

Research Objectives

The objectives of our research were as follows:

1. Exploring the perception, acceptability, and participants' experiences of the program:
 - Examining the experiences gained and attitudes formed regarding the program by the participating students, teachers, and parents.
 - Since SEL programs adapted to the cultural context have been proven to be more effective than interventions that do not align with the characteristics and needs of the environment (Cipriano et al., 2023), analyzing, based on the collected data, whether the RESCUR curriculum fits the domestic school environment, and identifying the program elements that require modification for more effective implementation.
2. Examining the classroom and family climate: Mapping whether the socio-emotional atmosphere of the classroom and the family climate change during the program. A safe and supportive environment, along with positive interpersonal relationships, are critical for the development of resilience (Cohen, 2013) and social-emotional learning (Schweig et al., 2019).

3. Examining how the results obtained in our research fit into the context of international assessments investigating the RESCUR program (Cavioni et al., 2018; Matsopoulos et al., 2020), identifying similarities and differences.

Research Questions

Deriving from our research objectives, our research questions can be categorized into three main groups:

1. Participants' perception of the program, its implementation, and the perceived changes in students' individual and social skills during the program

(a) How do 1st and 2nd-grade primary school students perceive the tasks and activities used in the program?

(b) According to the students' perceptions, what perceived impact did the program have on the changes in their individual, as well as social and emotional skills and abilities?

(c) How do teachers evaluate the implementation process of the RESCUR program? (Examining the feasibility of the program elements, preparedness, potential difficulties, and the tools used in the program.)

(d) To what extent do the participating teachers consider the RESCUR lessons integrable into the national curriculum?

(e) How useful do teachers find the RESCUR program? (Exploring the perceived impacts of the program on the changes in students' individual and social skills, attitudes towards continuing and recommending the program, as well as correlations with the teachers' personal data – e.g., age, years in the profession.)

(f) According to the students' parents, in what areas did their child's participation in the RESCUR program result in changes in the child's behavior?

2. The perceived impact of the program on the socio-emotional climate of the classroom and the family climate

(g) According to the teachers' perceptions, what perceived impact did the program have on the socio-emotional climate of the classroom?

(h) According to the students' perceptions, what perceived impact did the program have on the socio-emotional climate of the classroom?

(i) According to the parents' perceptions, what perceived impact did the program have on the family climate?

Comparison of the results with the findings of international studies:

(j) How do the perceptions of Hungarian students regarding the RESCUR program align with the results of the international study (Cavioni et al., 2018)?

(k) How do the perceptions of Hungarian educators regarding the RESCUR program align with the results of the international study (Cavioni et al., 2018)?

(l) How do the perceptions of Hungarian parents regarding the RESCUR program compare to the results of the international research (Matsopoulos et al., 2020)?

Research Framework and Methodology

The research was based on a mixed-methods approach, relying on the concurrent application of qualitative and quantitative methods. This approach provided numerous benefits for the study, as it allowed for a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The quantitative data provided objective and measurable information about the sample and the relationships between variables, while the qualitative data offered rich contextual insights into the underlying causes and processes (Johnson et al., 2007). The collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data occurred during the same timeframe in the research, and the results were integrated during the interpretation phase (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Based on the objectives and methodological design of the study, the research should be interpreted primarily as an implementation study and program evaluation, rather than an impact assessment. Consequently, the research did not involve a control group, nor did it employ a classical pre-post measurement design, as the primary objective of the study was not to quantify or explore causal effects. During the study, we focused on the domestic implementation of the international program, the process of its practical execution, the mapping of the conditions, as well as the subjective experiences and perceptions of the participants.

The study was conducted with the approval of the Research Ethics Committee of the ELTE Faculty of Education and Psychology (approval number: 2024/74).

Sample

Seventeen primary schools in Budapest participated in the study. The recruitment of the schools took place in early March 2024 using a semi-randomized method, with the most important criteria being geographical location and the type of maintaining authority. Taking these criteria into account, we approached state, church, and foundation-maintained schools in Budapest, striving to ensure that all types of schools were represented in the sample. The sample consisted of 26 first-grade and 31 second-grade classes (445 first-grade and 541 second-grade students), with a total of 986 students (496 boys, 490 girls). Furthermore, the research involved 21 first-grade and 32 second-grade educators (51 females, 2 males; age $M = 46.34$ years, $SD = 11.47$), as well as parents of 302 first-grade and 325 second-grade children (531 mothers, 78 fathers, 8 grandparents, 4 other—siblings, foster parents; missing data: 6).

Presentation of the School Intervention

On September 10–11, 2024, the educators participated in a preparatory workshop for the implementation of the program. The two-day online event was led by Professor Carmel Cefai, Director of the Centre for Resilience and Socio-Emotional Health at the University of Malta, who coordinated the development processes of the RESCUR "Surfing the Waves" curriculum. The workshop was conducted in English with Hungarian interpretation, and participants received a certificate upon completion of the training.

From early October 2024 to the end of May 2025, 45-minute sessions were held weekly in the participating classes. Every session began with a mindfulness activity lasting a few minutes, during which the students could tune into the session. Since the majority of the educators had previously indicated that they had no knowledge of practicing mindfulness, we made supplementary materials (short videos, manuals, mindfulness instructions designed for children) available to them via an online platform.

Following the mindfulness exercise, the educator introduced the current topic to the class by telling a short story. During the storytelling, the use of puppets is recommended; most educators implemented this, and in numerous classes, the students stepped into the roles of the storybook characters and brought the story to life together.

In several classes, educators set up a "RESCUR corner," which functioned as a reading and conversation space. Here, the educator read the stories aloud while the students listened, sitting either on the carpet or at their desks. According to the teachers, the children also fondly used these corners for conversations during breaks.

After listening to the story, the educator initiated a discussion with the students using the guiding questions provided in the manual. Every student had the opportunity to share their experiences, perspectives, and ideas related to the topic. The students and the educator could reflect on each other's thoughts, delve into the given subject, and learn about their peers' opinions and ways of thinking, which contributed to a multifaceted approach to the topic and to getting to know one another.

The discussion was followed by practical activities, which could be a topic-related worksheet, a cooperative activity, a team game, arts and crafts (drawing, painting, modeling clay, cutting and pasting, etc.), drama games, singing, or dancing. The teacher's manual provides recommendations for practical activities to be conducted with the students for every lesson; however, teachers were allowed to deviate from this if the tools, location, or other conditions necessary for the given session were unavailable.

Further practice of the skills learned in school was facilitated through at-home assignments, which the parents received from the educator either via email in PDF format or printed on paper.

Throughout the school year, the students collected their work and worksheets in a folder, which allowed for the tracking of their progress and the documentation of the learning process.

Measures

Teacher Questionnaire

To explore the educators' experiences with the program, we employed a researcher-developed online questionnaire (46 items). The instrument focused on examining the program's impacts, implementation challenges, and its integrability into the domestic school curriculum. Aligning with the mixed-methods strategy, the questionnaire contained both quantitative (demographic data, Likert scales, closed-ended questions; e.g., "Did you feel prepared to implement the program after the online training?") and qualitative elements (open-ended questions requiring detailed elaboration; e.g., "What topics would you have liked to hear about in more detail during the online training?"). The reliability of the three main subscales of the questionnaire was

assessed using the Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The results demonstrated high internal consistency in all three cases:

Students' perceived individual and social change subscale: Cronbach's alpha = 0.982, N = 34.

Change in teacher-student relationship subscale: Cronbach's alpha = 0.980, N = 37.

Change in relationships among students subscale: Cronbach's alpha = 0.978, N = 38.

Student Questionnaire

The opinions of the 6- to 8-year-old students were assessed using a researcher-developed, 14-item, age-specific, paper-based questionnaire. Adapted to the developmental characteristics of this age group, we used a visually supported, three-point Likert scale (where responses were indicated by whole apple, half apple, and apple core symbols). The voluntary, self-report questionnaire focused on the enjoyment of the lessons, the evaluation of different activities, future participation intentions, and the changes perceived by the students in themselves and the classroom community (e.g., "I feel that what I learned in the RESCUR lessons helps me treat others with kindness and respect."). The subscale measuring students' perceptions of their individual and social development demonstrated high internal consistency: Cronbach's alpha = 0.843, N = 870.

Parent Questionnaire

To examine the caregivers' perspectives and the at-home impacts of the RESCUR program, we used a researcher-developed, paper-based questionnaire. The instrument allowed for both quantitative and qualitative data collection. The first block recorded demographic background data, followed by a quantitative section consisting of eight main items (and additional sub-items) measured on a Likert scale (e.g., "Did the information received during the RESCUR program—such as the parent manual and completing at-home worksheets with your child—help you cope with parenting-related difficulties?"). In the final section of the questionnaire, four open-ended questions provided an opportunity for the detailed elaboration of qualitative experiences (e.g., children's at-home accounts of the sessions, the elements of the program deemed most useful, and suggestions for improvement). The reliability of the subscale measuring parental involvement in the program and the implementation of home activities was found to be good: Cronbach's alpha = 0.807, N = 535. The internal consistency of the subscale examining parental perceptions regarding children's social and emotional development also proved to be high: Cronbach's alpha = 0.891, N = 512.

Semi-Structured Interview

To assess the baseline classroom socio-emotional climate prior to the implementation of the program, we conducted a 23-item semi-structured interview among the educators. The instrument focused on students' social relationships (making friends, aggression, prosocial behavior, peer acceptance), educators' classroom management and disciplinary methods, and the quality of the teacher-student relationship (e.g., "How often do you have the opportunity to talk with students about non-school-related topics?").

Focus Group Interview

To gain a deeper understanding of the subjective experiences regarding the program, we conducted focus group discussions with volunteering first-grade ($N = 11$) and second-grade ($N = 7$) students, as well as parents ($N = 4$). The student interviews focused on classroom experiences, the everyday application of the learned conflict resolution and emotion regulation techniques, and changes in the classroom climate. The parent interviews examined the at-home impacts of the program, family communication evolving in the wake of the completed assignments, and the degree of parental involvement (e.g., "Did it happen that during or after completing the worksheets, a topic came up that you had not previously discussed with your child? What was it like to talk about these topics?").

Narrative Diary

To track the implementation process of the program, we utilized narrative diaries with the involvement of four first-grade and three second-grade educators. Based on the criteria used in the study by Cavioni et al. (2018), the participants evaluated the most successful and least well-functioning elements of the sessions, which ensured comparability with international data.

Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaire-based data collection with educators took place in May 2025 via an online platform. Participation was voluntary and anonymous; participants received an individual code via email. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with second-grade educators between September and October 2024, and with first-grade educators between January and February 2025, half a year after the start of the school year. This timing allowed the educators to get to know the students and develop a clear picture of the classroom community's dynamics and the interactions among the students. The narrative diaries were kept continuously throughout the school year by volunteering educators ($N = 7$) and were submitted to the lead researcher via email in June 2025.

The voluntary, anonymous (using individual codes) questionnaire-based data collection with students took place in the schools in May and June 2025. Only students whose parents or caregivers consented to all aspects of the study participated in the research. The focus group discussions with students were held in a classroom setting at a pre-arranged time with the teacher. We conducted two separate discussions: with first-grade students ($N = 11$) on May 21, 2025, and with second-grade students ($N = 7$) on June 3, 2025. No audio recording was made during the interviews.

The distribution and collection of the paper-based parent questionnaires took place with the assistance of the educators in May 2025. Parents received an individual code, ensuring that data analysis was conducted using anonymized data. The focus group discussion with parents ($N = 4$) took place online via Zoom on May 20, 2025; no audio recording was made during the interview.

The statistical analysis of the quantitative data was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 28.0 software. Since the majority of the variables in the database were on an ordinal scale and the assumptions of normality were not met in several cases, we typically applied non-parametric procedures (at a significance level of $p < .05$). To examine group differences (e.g., grades, educators' preparedness) and distributions, we used the Mann-Whitney U test, the Kruskal-Wallis H test, and the chi-square test. Exploring relationships between variables (e.g., correlations between program implementation and demographic data) was conducted using Spearman's rank-order correlation, while internal differences were examined with the Wilcoxon signed-rank test. To identify the dimensions of student development, a principal component analysis (PCA) was performed, and the results were analyzed using an independent samples t -test.

During the processing of the textual data, we applied both inductive and deductive qualitative content analysis in alignment with the research questions.

Inductive analysis: When exploring the domestic specificities of the program, we generated a coding system and categories directly from the data, and then compared the results with the findings of previous international RESCUR studies (e.g., Cavioni et al., 2018). The examination of changes in the classroom climate was conducted using data and methodological triangulation (the combined analysis of interviews, diaries, and questionnaires).

Deductive and hybrid analysis: When examining parental experiences, we applied a hybrid approach. As a first step, we coded the data along the predefined categories of the Greek study

by Matsopoulos et al. (2020) to ensure international comparability; subsequently, new, specific aspects emerging in the Hungarian data were classified into inductive categories.

Results

Participants' perception of the curriculum, experiences related to implementation, and perceived changes in students' skills during the implementation of the program

1.) Students' experiences and attitudes: Based on the data from the student questionnaires and focus group interviews, the most popular program elements among the students were the stories (79.3%), play-based activities (75.9%), and guided discussions (75.3%). The results highlighted the prominent role of puppetry; the presence of puppets significantly increased the popularity of the stories, providing a psychological safety net for the safe, externalized expression of difficult emotions (Bernier & O'Hare, 2005). The perception of mindfulness exercises, which require quiet immersion, proved to be the most divisive (59.9%), which can be explained by the novelty of the method within the domestic educational culture (Budis, 2023). According to the students' self-reported assessment, the most significant changes during the program occurred in the areas of social acceptance (67.9%), self-confidence (66.8%), and respectful behavior (66.6%), which was also corroborated by the focus group narratives. A comparison across grades and genders confirmed that first-grade students and girls evaluated the program activities and the perceived changes significantly more positively.

2.) Educators' perception of the program and implementation challenges: The data collection among educators ($N = 53$) highlighted the main structural and methodological challenges of the domestic implementation. The execution showed an "attrition" pattern: the vast majority of educators (81.1%) successfully implemented the first RESCUR theme, and the second theme was also covered by a significant proportion (73.6%). Over the course of the school year, a total of three themes were implemented most frequently (37.7%), while only 5.7% of the sample was able to complete the entire curriculum (all seven themes) due to a lack of time. The results showed that the integration into the timetable plays a decisive role in the execution of the intervention and the sustainability of the program.

The after-school time slot was deemed unsuitable for implementation by 81.8% of the educators ($p < .001$); in contrast, implementation during morning lessons proved to be significantly more successful. The sessions held within the framework of (and at the

expense of) ethics classes were evaluated as appropriate by 75% of the teachers ($p = .019$). However, the most ideal framework (100% satisfaction, $p = .022$) was unequivocally when the school administration provided an independent, dedicated RESCUR lesson for the sessions in the timetable. The significance of this is supported by the fact that appropriate integration into the timetable shows a moderate, significant positive correlation with the educators' willingness to continue the program ($r = .305$, $p = .027$), while it indicates a positive trend approaching the level of significance concerning their willingness to recommend the program to colleagues ($p = .053$).

Evaluating student development on a five-point Likert scale, educators primarily perceived changes in the dimensions of expressing one's own feelings ($M = 3.83$), social acceptance ($M = 3.82$), and communication skills ($M = 3.80$). Our correlation analyses demonstrated that the perception of the program's usefulness is linked to teachers' perceived preparedness for implementation (e.g., development of communication skills – teacher preparedness: $r = .418$, $p = .004$).

We identified the theoretical focus of the preparatory online training and the lack of practical modeling as barriers to implementation, which resulted in pronounced teacher uncertainty regarding the facilitation of the novel mindfulness exercises. In addition, the linguistic-structural fragmentation of the supplementary materials and the manual, as well as the adaptation of the tasks for the first-grade age group (who cannot yet read or write), caused serious difficulties, stemming from the difference between domestic and international school enrollment ages (European Commission, 2020).

Based on the educators' accounts, parental involvement in at-home assignments represented one of the weakest points of the program (in 56.6% of the classes, less than 10% of the students completed the at-home tasks). However, teacher feedback revealed that only two-thirds (66%) of the educators forwarded the parent manual, and 62.3% sent the assignments home.

As a significant finding of our research, we identified the impact of class composition on student development as perceived by educators. According to the data, the presence of foreign students showed a significant positive correlation with the perceived development in numerous areas, such as communication skills ($r = .380$, $p = .009$), empathy ($r = .451$, $p = .002$), and anxiety management ($r = .428$, $p = .007$), which confirms the multicultural and inclusive power of the program's universal language (e.g., puppets). Conversely, a

higher proportion of students with special educational needs (SEN) showed a negative correlation with seven developmental indicators (e.g., making friends: $r = -.397, p = .008$). The results highlighted that the program's strong verbal focus may impose excessive cognitive load on children with special educational needs (e.g., those living with speech and language disorders or autism). Therefore, in their case, it is necessary to combine the intervention with targeted, small-group support, as well as adaptations that reduce verballity and provide increased visual support.

3.) Parents' perceived changes in students' behavior: More than 50% of the parents experienced improvement in their child across all examined dimensions (e.g., communication, problem-solving, managing difficult emotions). According to the parents, the most robust change was observed in relationship skills (72.8%) and communication (71.9%). Based on the parental evaluations, girls showed significantly greater change in problem-solving ($U = 39,698.00, Z = -2.09, p = .037$), which aligns with age and gender socialization characteristics (Merrel & Gueldner, 2010).

Participants' perceived impact of the program on the classroom's socio-emotional climate and the family climate

4.) Changes in the teacher-student relationship and educators' self-reflection: The synthesis of quantitative and qualitative data confirmed the manifestation of Jennings and Greenberg's (2009) "Prosocial Classroom" model; educators experienced the greatest degree of development not in the students' behavior, but in their own attitudes and the deepening of their relationships. The highest mean scores were observed in the dimensions "I got to know the students better" ($M = 4.05$) and "My relationship with the students changed in a positive direction" ($M = 3.87$) (evaluated on a five-point scale). The most comprehensive contribution to the improvement of the teacher-student relationship quality came from the "Turning Challenges into Opportunities" theme, which showed a significant positive correlation with nine items. The development of a psychologically safe climate (Wanless, 2016) was indicated by the fact that students dared to ask the educator for help more frequently, although this was primarily limited to school and academic problems ($M = 3.05$) rather than at-home issues ($M = 2.47$) ($Z = -3.53, p < .001$). As an important finding of our research, based on the educators' perceptions, we identified the impact of the classes' demographic heterogeneity on the classroom climate. A higher proportion of foreign students positively correlated with the changes of relationships across several dimensions; however, a higher proportion of

students with SEN negatively correlated with multiple dimensions of both teacher-student and peer relationships.

5.) Changes in peer relationships: Based on student self-reports, 67.9% of the students perceived an improvement in the acceptance of differences, and 66.6% in treating others with respect. This was also confirmed by the educators' observations (e.g., acceptance: $M = 3.48$ on a 5-point scale). The category "Cohesion and paying attention to each other" (35 mentions) identified during the content analysis verified that interactive tasks (e.g., pair work, group work) facilitated the inclusion of marginalized students. It is an important result that the decrease in physical aggression showed a significant relationship with the "Developing Self-Regulation" theme ($r = .327, p = .035$), which proves that the mitigation of conflicts stemmed not merely from rule compliance, but from the strengthening of internal self-regulatory functions and verbal reconciliation strategies (e.g., apologizing).

6.) Changes in the family climate: The majority of parents (64.1%) reported a positive change in the family climate. The thematic at-home assignments opened up new communication channels, enabling the discussion of difficult topics previously considered taboo (e.g., fears, conflicts, losses). A significant difference ($Z = -4.80, p < .001$) was found between the perceived improvement in the climate and the perceived help received with specific parenting difficulties. This may indicate that RESCUR's impact is stronger or more quickly noticeable in initiating conversations and shared experiences than in providing support for solving parenting problems, which would likely require more in-person parent consultations. The irregular distribution of at-home assignments (only 62.3% of educators provided these fully) and the lack of parental feedback highlighted that to maximize the at-home transfer effect, it is necessary to establish a more structured and continuous teacher-parent partnership in the future.

Comparison of the results with the findings of international studies

7.) Comparison of student and educator experiences with the Italian (Cavioni et al., 2018) results: Comparing the Hungarian data with the study by Cavioni et al. (2018) highlighted the universal appeal of experiential pedagogical elements (stories, games) among early primary school students. Qualitative results in both countries confirmed that the program successfully created the safe space necessary for emotional sharing (e.g., "we learned to trust" / "no one laughed"). Based on educators' perceptions, the pattern of changes was similar; in both countries, the qualitative improvement in prosocial behavior, cooperation,

and the teacher-student relationship was the most spectacular. However, a marked difference was observed in the proportions of perceived development. Italian educators reported improvement in an exceptionally high proportion (e.g., cooperation: 93.9%), while Hungarian evaluations were more modest (49.1%). Alongside methodological differences, this discrepancy can be explained — based on the theory of Vieluf et al. (2012) — by culture-dependent pedagogical norms and differences in the hierarchy of educational systems. Both samples identified a lack of time as the main barrier to implementation, which, coupled with the lack of a dedicated time slot in Hungary, posed an even more pronounced problem.

8.) Comparison of parental involvement with the Greek (Matsopoulos et al., 2020) results: The comparison of Hungarian parental experiences with the Greek study by Matsopoulos et al. (2020) confirmed that, regardless of culture, the program successfully supports the family climate in becoming more harmonious. The correlation patterns were similar in the two countries, with the strongest relationship found between the help provided for parenting difficulties and the improvement of the family climate (Hungarian: $r = .70, p < .001$; Greek: $r = .75, p < .001$). The content analysis revealed significant differences in the depth of parental reflections. Greek parents described the changes experienced in their children using pedagogical concepts (e.g., assertiveness, decision-making), whereas the Hungarian narratives were dominated by the surface elements of the program (puppets, stories) (31.1%). This difference can be attributed to the lack of information during the domestic implementation; citing parents' overload, Hungarian educators often did not provide the Parent Manual and the at-home assignments, so families did not receive an adequate conceptual framework to understand the intervention's goals. Furthermore, in the Greek sample, at-home assignments were tools for quality parent-child interaction, whereas Hungarian parents often perceived them as an increase in school burdens. The results highlighted that during future domestic adaptation, it is essential to provide parents with more structured, experience-based information and to build the school-family partnership more consciously.

Summary of the Results

Our results, drawing on the subjective perceptions of teachers, students, and parents, suggest that the RESCUR program effectively supported the unfolding of intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies among 1st and 2nd-grade students. The success of the program's

domestic implementation was fundamentally determined by the applied experiential pedagogical methodology (stories, puppetry), the structural frameworks (integration into the school timetable), and the educators' perceived methodological preparedness.

Based on experiences, the socio-emotional climate of the classrooms, group cohesion, and acceptance among students developed favorably during the RESCUR program; however, the dynamics of these changes were closely linked to the student composition of the classes. According to parents' feedback, the program primarily supported the deepening of family communication and the creation of quality time in the home environment, while, in their assessment, it provided less direct help in handling specific upbringing difficulties.

The comparative analyses confirmed the cross-cultural, universal role of the RESCUR program in creating psychological safety and developing social relationships. Compared to international findings (Italian and Greek studies), the Hungarian data highlighted specific implementation barriers (e.g., shortcomings in information transfer, lack of time stemming from the characteristics of the educational system, and the increased overload on families).

Conclusions, Limitations, Practical Applicability, and Future Research Directions

The results of our research confirmed that the internationally developed RESCUR "Surfing the Waves" resilience curriculum is a relevant, gap-filling, and effective tool in the Hungarian public education environment as well. However, for the program to become an integral part of domestic mental health prevention, a multi-level, system-specific adaptation is required.

The most important conclusion of the research is that social and emotional learning cannot be treated merely as an supplementary pedagogical task in schools. The developmental impact of the program could truly prevail if the management of the given schools integrated it into the curriculum and provided it within a dedicated time slot, thereby avoiding the overload of educators and students.

Preparatory training for future implementation must shift from a theoretical focus toward practice-oriented, modeling-based education. During implementation, the continuous mentoring of teachers is essential, as is the involvement of school psychologists in managing the emotional burdens experienced by educators.

The language and structure of the teacher manuals must be aligned with Hungarian pedagogical traditions. It is of utmost importance to differentiate the universal, whole-class program; successfully including students with SEN requires increased visual support, making instructions

more explicit, and providing targeted, small-group assistance. At-home assignments must be freed from performance pressure; instead of the classic "homework" nature, the focus should be placed on shared, play-based quality time, which necessitates active, two-way communication between the school and the parents.

When interpreting the results, several methodological limitations must be considered. The research was conducted using a cross-sectional, post-test design without the inclusion of a control group, which limits the drawing of causal conclusions regarding the program's mechanism of action (Anderson-Cook, 2005). The sampling was restricted to institutions in the capital; therefore, due to the characteristics of the sample, the results cannot be generalized to the entire Hungarian primary school population. In addition, the self-report measures used during data collection (in the case of 6- to 8-year-old students, parents, and educators) carry the distorting effects of subjectivity and social desirability bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003), furthermore, selection bias and the teacher effect must also be taken into consideration.

Based on the research findings, we have initiated the adaptation work and have implemented several changes so far, such as: (1) we structurally revised the teacher's manual for better clarity; (2) we completed the full linguistic adaptation, correcting translation errors and elevating the wording of the stories to a literary level; (3) we adapted the classroom worksheets to age-specific characteristics, omitting numerous abstract or writing-intensive tasks and replacing them with drama games, pair, and small-group activities; (4) we redesigned the home activities, which now feature a brief parental guide to clearly outline the skills currently being developed; (5) and finally, we simplified the language of the parents' guide to make the content easily accessible and comprehensible for all families.

Following the incorporation of the adaptation proposals identified by the present research, it is worthwhile to extend the studies in the following directions: To increase validity, the effectiveness of the domestic version needs to be tested in a quasi-experimental design involving a control group, utilizing pre- and post-measurements with standardized instruments, as well as longitudinal follow-ups examining long-term effects. We plan to extend the program to the kindergarten age group and to 3rd- and 4th-grade students. Given the high importance of resilience development, the intervention should be investigated beyond the school context, also among children in residential child protection services (children's homes, group homes). An important direction for future research is to examine the extent to which the implementation of the RESCUR program impacts teachers' mental well-being and the prevention of burnout.

Author's Publications Related to the Topic of the Dissertation

Winkler, Zs., Lazsádi, Cs., & Zsolnai, A. (2026).¹ Promoting Resilience in Early School Years.

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¹ Note: in press.

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