Building Resilience Against Populism: The Crucial Role of Education in Promoting Human Dignity

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Abstract: In an era marked by the rise of populist movements, this article examines the role of education in reducing the effects of this phenomenon, particularly their often-detrimental impact on the concept of human dignity. The study investigates the ways incorporating 'education on human dignity' in the curricular activities can help counterbalance the divisive and sometimes dehumanising rhetoric of populism. The findings of the article point to the importance of education as a transformative force for making young minds able to critically assess and challenge the divisive narratives found in today's political landscape. In that context, the article discusses educational policies that could assist in fostering the realisation of human dignity in countries encountering the rise of populist ideologies. Finally, the article provides valuable insights and practical recommendations for educators and policymakers with the aim of ensuring that human dignity is viewed more holistically in education.

Keywords: ***populism, education, human dignity, democracy, high schools***

Introduction

Research suggests that young people are especially susceptible to populist ideologies (Noack & Eckstein 2023). According to Foa and Mounk (2019), it might be easy to claim that young people's disaffection with democracy is simply a case of apathy, where younger citizens are disengaging from mainstream political processes. However, a more concerning interpretation is also gaining traction: initially cynical or apathetic voters may become active supporters of

anti-establishment parties and candidates who overtly challenge the founding principles of a liberal democracy, such as freedom of speech, press independence and the rule of law. Consequently, rather than rejuvenating centrist politics, the eventual mobilising of younger demographics might exacerbate political instability. Studies show that liberal democracies faced with unprecedented challenges to their legitimacy must rededicate themselves to the important need to impart their values to the younger generation (ibid.).

The article has two objectives. First, it explores the possible connection between education on human dignity and the populism phenomenon. As a fundamental value, human dignity is often strongly jeopardised in certain instances of populism. As the quintessence of humanity and a cornerstone of democracy, the promotion of human dignity is imperative. Here, education emerges as a potential mechanism for counteracting populism's adverse effects. This article accordingly centres on 'education on human dignity', proposing various methods and activities capable of enhancing the understanding and appreciation of human dignity. The goal of education on human dignity is to cultivate awareness of the intrinsic value of every individual and to foster the highest level of respect for others. Empirical research suggests that educational experiences can influence the degree to which young people are drawn to populist ideologies, although findings are often ambiguous and reveal significant gaps in existing research, as Noack and Eckstein (2023) noted. To address these deficiencies, the present article explores the potential for combating the negative facets of populism, more specifically those threatening the human dignity concept, through education on human dignity and outlines directions for future studies examining the impact of such educational initiatives on populist attitudes among youth. Numerous studies have looked at the negative aspects of populism (Albertazzi & McDonnell 2008; Müller 2016, 2017; Galston, Hunter & Owen 2018; Halmai 2018; Urbinati 2019), while many others have pinpointed human dignity as the essence of democracy (Capps 2009; Chalmers & Ida 2007; McCrudden 2008; Dupré 2012, 2013; Kateb 2014; Kleindienst & Tomšič 2022), which is frequently undermined by populist tendencies. This is why the academic literature (Reardon 1995; Elbert 2000; Giesinger 2012; Sporre 2015; Bowie 2016; Hantzopoulos 2016; Masalesa 2022; Hoguane & Pinto 2023; Kleindienst 2024) also indicates the relevance of promoting human dignity in the educational process. Despite the extensive scholarship literature, a notable gap remains: Not one of these studies established a possible link between education on human dignity and the struggle to counter so-called hard populism. In response, this article focuses on the following research question: What does education on human dignity mean in the context of populism? This oversight in the literature suggests a critical area for future research that stresses the possible role of educational approaches in reinforcing democratic values and countering extreme populist movements. Rather than focusing on human rights education, which has an extensive body

of scholarship (Bajaj 2017), this article centres on human dignity, which, according to recent research (Kane, Killean & Tann 2024), serves as a goal, tool and foundational principle of human rights education. The contested nature of human dignity may provide opportunities to enhance human rights awareness and foster critical thinking skills within the framework of human rights education (ibid.). Reardon (1995) argues that human dignity is the central, generative principle driving human rights education.

Second, the article explores existing curricular approaches to education on human dignity. To that end, a qualitative study involving document analysis method as well as 16 semi-structured interviews with high school teachers from public and private high schools in Slovenia was conducted. The study sought to answer the research question concerning which curricular and extracurricular approaches are the most effective in educating students on human dignity in the view of teachers. While some studies (Kleindienst 2024) considered students' perceptions on this topic, our research fills a gap by examining how teachers view the matter. Teacher experience has already been explored in connection with human dignity curricula, particularly as a form of new socioemotional learning (Law 2024). This body of research suggests the need for future studies that include non-lesson-based strategies for incorporating socioemotional learning throughout the school day. These strategies might involve modelling desired behaviours during routine interactions with students, incorporating human dignity content into other subjects and integrating socioemotional elements into students' everyday interactions (ibid.). Our study extends this research by presenting a case study of Slovenia, focusing on both curricular and extracurricular approaches, a context that has not yet been explored in relation to this topic. In so doing, the study attempts to identify approaches educational institutions could take to offset the polarising and dehumanising language often associated with populism.

The phenomenon of populism

Populism is regarded as an essentially contested concept (Mudde 2017; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). Diamond (2019) states that populism has four primary characteristics: it is anti-elitist, anti-institutional, plebiscitary and ultra-majoritarian. According to Taggart (2000), populism may be compared with a chameleon since it changes to fit in with the local and ideological characteristics of its surroundings. In the political science, populism broadly refers to a range of political strategies, ideologies, styles and movements. It is often characterised as a *political style* (Moffitt & Tormey 2014; Block & Negrine 2017), especially with respect to its methods of communication (Jagers & Walgrave 2007) and persuasion (Kazin 1998). Populism typically avoids technical jargon, opting instead for slang and dramatic tactics to connect with everyday people

(Moffitt & Tormey 2014), expressing the core ideas through the media, speeches and other means (Kenny 2017; Eichengreen 2018). Prior and Van Hoef (2018) state that populism employs emotional reasoning and framing to incite anger and moral indignation against opponents and their followers. Some scholars depict populism as a *political strategy* harnessed by personalistic leaders to gain power through the support of large, mostly unorganised groups of followers. Populism can also be seen as a *(thin-centred) ideology*, separating 'the pure people' from the corrupt elite and advocating the general will of the people (Mudde 2007; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). In this perspective, populists often present or depict themselves as the genuine representatives of democracy, positioning themselves in opposition to the elites (Mudde 2007; Müller 2016), or as mass *movements* engaged in anti-establishment politics (Sikk 2009; Barr 2009). These movements claim that they represent 'the people', champion popular sovereignty and argue that their political agendas are entirely grounded in and derive their legitimacy from the people's will (Espejo 2012; Webber 2023). In summary, Donders (2020) notes that the common thread running through various definitions of populism is their anti-establishment and anti-elitist stance, with populist movements and parties claiming to represent the unheard voices of 'ordinary people' against the establishment and the elite (ibid.).

On one hand, many authors imply that the phenomenon of populism does not fit with a liberal democracy. Here, it is relevant to differentiate a democracy from a liberal democracy. In academic discourse, a democracy is frequently conceptualised in practice as a form of majoritarian democracy where the sovereign will of 'the people' is considered the paramount and often sole political influence of significance. Within the framework of a liberal democracy, the more adverse impulses of majoritarianism require a counterbalance through institutional and systemic safeguards for individual rights and for minority groups to uphold pluralist values. Many authors contend that a rejection of pluralism lies at the heart of populism (Müller 2016; Galston, Hunter & Owen 2018; Urbinati 2019) since it compromises the unity of the people and exalts them as an indivisible entity with shared values, desires and interests (Lavi 2022; Tomšič 2022). Populism often contests immigration policies and criticises pluralist values, thereby calling into question the significance of diversity and the rights of minorities (Donders 2020). Further, populism is also linked to the rejection of the traditional power division and elite-dominated political institutions like parliaments or courts (Stanley 2008; Tomšič 2022), frequently ignoring the rule of law (Albertazzi & McDonnell 2008; Müller 2016; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). According to Fabbrizi (2020), populism often poses a serious risk for a liberal democracy when diminishing or even eliminating the constitutional limits on the majoritarian hegemony. This shift disrupts the traditional checks-and-balances system, increasingly concentrating power in the executive branch at the expense of the legislative and judicial branches. Some authors

(Müller 2016; Weyland 2020) suggest that if populists gain sufficient power an authoritarian leadership might ensue, one that excludes those deemed not to be among the 'proper people'.

On the other hand, some authors contradict the opinions about the anti-pluralist aspects of populism, arguing that populism may in fact facilitate egalitarian practices (Frank 2017). Moreover, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) recognise inclusivity in the populism phenomenon, stating that populism can function as a democratically inclusive mechanism by actively engaging social sectors previously overlooked in other political engagements. Similarly, other scholars (Mény & Surel 2002; Laclau 2005) attribute populism with the potential to enhance institutions of political participation and improve the representative connection between politicians and citizens given its focus on vertical mechanisms of democratic accountability, such as elections and direct democratic mechanisms. Urbinati (2019) takes the argument further by stating that contemporary populism does not stem from any malevolent force and is instead an outcome of the representative and constitutional model of democracy that has provided for stable societies since the Second World War.

The contrasting negative and positive views on populism presented above can be better understood through the lens of 'hard' and 'soft' populism. This categorisation helps clarify the differing effects populism can have on democratic processes. Tomšič (2022) describes 'soft populism' as utilising populist rhetoric while adhering to constitutional norms such as the separation of powers and the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms. In contrast, 'hard populism' disregards these constitutional principles. Soft populism generally does not adversely affect a liberal democracy, whereas hard populism may pose significant challenges (ibid.). Similarly, Schmitter (2019) outlines the benefits held by populism like revitalising the political arena, breaking down rigid party systems, activating previously disengaged groups, and broadening political options. However, he also notes negative effects such as destabilising decision-making, fostering unrealistic expectations among citizens, sowing distrust in political systems, fostering exclusivity and intolerance, and leading to the professionalisation of politics. Tomšič (2022) argues that populism becomes particularly troubling when it is combined with personalised politics marked by a charismatic leader who makes decisions independently, often neglecting other branches of power. This concentration of power, along with a disregard for pluralist values, may culminate in semi-authoritarian practices, in turn undermining the rule of law, civil liberties and the control of media and civil society (ibid.). Turner (2024) notes that such issues become exacerbated when populism expresses racist sentiments against immigrants and refugees. Behaviours that fuel racial resentment, coupled with actions like rejecting multiculturalism, distrusting foreigners and showing hostility to racial groups and Muslims, contribute to a polarising 'Us vs. Them' dynamic (Norris & Inglehart

2016). Webber (2023) adds that populism can also be characterised by defining 'the people' through exclusionary traits like racism, religious intolerance, resistance to cultural and sexual diversity, and opposition to immigration, which contribute to a broader sense of grievance and vulnerability.

Human dignity within populist frameworks

After 1945, mentions of human dignity in international legal documents began to skyrocket, first appearing in preambles before gradually expanding to individual articles in documents. This sudden change emerged in reaction to the shocking number of civilian casualties and horrifying discoveries of the persecution of minorities during the Second World War (Chalmers & Ida 2007; Eckert 2001; McCrudden 2008; Dupré 2013). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights from 1948 may be seen as the culmination of the significant historical development of the human dignity concept (McCrudden 2008) and is the basis for many legal documents. The adoption of this declaration indicated the idea that human dignity and human rights are fundamental values which must be respected in the pursuit of any policy. Further, the declaration implies that human dignity and rights belong to all human beings and that all human actions must be conducted in line with human dignity (Capps 2009). The focus on human dignity rather than human rights in our study stems from the foundational role of dignity in underpinning the framework of human rights. While human rights are codified in international law and institutional frameworks, human dignity represents a more intrinsic and universal value that transcends legal codification. Human dignity serves as the moral and philosophical basis upon which human rights are constructed (Capps 2009; McCrudden 2008). Human dignity embodies an unchanging principle of the inherent worth of every individual (Dupré 2012). By focusing on human dignity rather than on human rights, our study also seeks to address the ethical and moral dimensions of populism that are often overlooked in human rights-based frameworks.

Despite extensive scholarly attention (Capps 2009; Chalmers & Ida 2007; Dupré 2013; Barak 2013; Düwell et al. 2014; Kateb 2014; Becchi 2019; Bussey & Menuge 2021; Scharffs, Pin & Vovk 2024), the theoretical discourse on human dignity is still fraught with inconsistencies, indicating the absence of a universally accepted definition (Bagaric & Allan 2006). Some authors view the idea of human dignity as so subjective and diverse that it is simply a hollow concept (McCrudden 2008). Despite the ambiguity surrounding human dignity, authors and legal documents still acknowledge that it has an intrinsic value and is a defining characteristic of something. This defining feature of human beings is not accidental; it is universal and equal for everyone (Gluchman 2017).

The inner self forms the foundation of human dignity, but the nature of that dignity is variable and has evolved over time. In many early cultures, dignity was

attributed only to a select few, often warriors who demonstrated a willingness to risk their lives in battle. In other contexts, dignity was tied to one's membership in a larger group with shared memories and experiences. Conversely, some societies regard dignity as an inherent attribute of all human beings, rooted in their intrinsic worth as individuals with agency (Fukuyama 2018). Dignity is an 'ethos' rooted in the value accorded to human life, in the identification of shared qualities and in interrelationships (Barilan 2012). Numerous perspectives on dignity within moral and political philosophy support the human scope thesis, which asserts that dignity is attributed to human beings (Griffin 2008; Tasioulas 2013; Waldron 2012; Killmister 2020). According to the view that human dignity is inherent simply because one is a human being, the way others treat an individual should not substantially affect their sense of dignity. From this perspective, human dignity remains intact regardless of the treatment of individual by others (Somerville 1971). This could lead to the conclusion that it is impossible to strip someone of their human dignity, thus questioning the need for legal protections for it. Yet, this raises a contradiction: If human dignity cannot be compromised, why then are there numerous legal measures safeguarding it? How do we reconcile this with international human rights laws designed to protect human dignity? Human dignity should accordingly be considered to comprise two dimensions: initial and realised dignity (Kleindienst 2017). Initial dignity refers to the inherent and respectable status or intrinsic value every individual holds simply by being human. It can be described as a non-relational value of the human being since it is intelligible and independent of any interpersonal relations (Zylberman 2018). This dimension of human dignity is metaphysical, rooted in human nature, sets humans apart from other species and exists universally across different contexts and times. Realised dignity, in contrast, pertains to the extent to which an individual's dignity is actualised. It highlights that while all humans possess initial dignity, not all experience realised dignity to the same degree. Realised dignity is variable, temporary and subject to fluctuation, reflecting different levels among individuals. The loss of dignity typically refers to a reduction in one's realised dignity (Kleindienst & Tomšič 2022). Finally, realised dignity can be described as the inner sense of dignity (Fukuyama 2018) which seeks recognition. It is not enough that I have a sense of my own worth if other people do not publicly acknowledge it or, worse yet, if they denigrate me or do not acknowledge my existence. Self-esteem arises out of esteem by others (ibid.).

As an organisational structure, democracy prioritises both initial and realised human dignity, thereby preserving the core essence and identity of individuals while promoting their development towards self-realisation. Human dignity is at once a fundamental component and the ultimate objective of a constitutional democracy (Dupré 2012). Democracy is instituted to both safeguard and enhance human dignity and, conversely, the creation of democratic institutions

is based on the principle of human dignity, driving these institutions to advance their foundational values and cultural underpinnings. Given that human dignity encompasses the ability for autonomous decision-making, with a consideration for oneself and others, it establishes a solid foundation for individual engagement and oversight in the democratic process. Human dignity is also essential for the sustainability of a democratic system, forming the basis for collective self-governance where citizens are equal, free and actively involved.

In the context of populism, a review of the literature reveals two contrasting perspectives. On one hand, scholars argue that the appeal of populism is rooted in two fundamental human needs – the need for certainty and the need for dignity (Kruglanski, Molinario & Sensales 2021) – and that populist narratives in their various versions offer empowerment and promise a way to significance and dignity (Fiedler 2021). Similarly, Abdelal (2020) highlights that anti-systemic populist revolts in France and the United States were driven less by economic concerns and more by feelings of being left behind, stemming from a perceived loss of dignity and respect. A humiliated group seeking restitution of its dignity carries far more emotional weight than people simply pursuing their economic advantage (Fukuyama 2018). According to Anderson (2018), conceptions of dignity animate our populists and shape their sense of political right and wrong. On the other hand, existing literature (Singla & Vishnivetz 2024) suggests that dehumanisation, including the erosion of human dignity, is inflicted, among other factors, by populism. Human dignity is often seen as the first value to be undermined through exclusionary rhetoric and divisive policies. Rostbøll (2023) argues that all forms of populism provide esteem and honour respect for one group in society in ways that are incompatible with the democratic norm of awarding equal respect for the dignity of each and every citizen. As acknowledged by left-wing populists like Laclau and Mouffe, populist rhetoric homogenises an otherwise diverse group to construct a collective identity of the people (Laclau 2005). According to Mckibben (2020), populism represents an attack on a person's dignity; by normalising hate and disrespect for persons or groups in society, populism presents a clear threat to two basic principles underpinning democracy: pluralism and recognition-respect. Populist movements frequently challenge the universality of human dignity by elevating the interests of 'the people' above those of marginalised groups, thereby eroding the pluralist foundations of democracy (Müller 2016; Donders 2020). Consequently, addressing human dignity directly enables a more holistic critique of populism, as it encompasses both the moral implications and societal consequences of populist ideologies. According to Fukuyama's (2018) definition of identity politics as a demand for dignity, the demand for recognition of one's identity is a master concept that unifies much of what is going on in world politics today. This has direct implications for how we should deal with populism in the present.

According to Fabbrizi (2020), populism poses several problems, notably in its stance on constitutional governance. First, it becomes an issue when populists undermine the authority of constitutional or supreme courts, which are designed to protect against the overreach of majoritarian legislative and executive powers. Second, populists often argue that the legislative branch, deriving its legitimacy solely from electoral processes, should not be restricted by a higher constitutional authority. Third, populist constitutionalism argues that the constitution should not be seen as a law that transcends majoritarian politics, but as a product of political conflict and competition (ibid.). One of the key principles at risk with such a populist approach is human dignity, which posits that every individual possesses inherent worth and merits respect. Still, it is vital to recognise that 'hard' populism chiefly impacts what is known as 'realised dignity', which is inherently unstable and subject to change. Realised dignity varies among individuals, reflecting differences in the level of dignity each person experiences. In contrast, initial dignity remains untouched by external influences like populism. This type of dignity is intrinsically tied to human existence and immune to degradation or loss. It is universally inherent to all individuals, intrinsic and unalienable, meaning that it remains intact and inviolable regardless of any circumstances (Kleindienst & Tomšič 2022). It is essential to underscore that despite its immunity to external factors, initial dignity remains paramount because it constitutes the cornerstone of the democratic system from which all other democratic values and principles emanate. This inherent dignity lays the ethical and moral groundwork that underpins the principles of democracy, acting as a bulwark against the erosion of fundamental human rights and freedoms, and sustains a culture of mutual respect, which is a precondition for the flourishing of a democratic society that achieves a proper level of realised dignity. By steadfastly upholding initial dignity, democratic systems can more effectively counteract the simplifications and exclusions often propagated by populist rhetoric, thereby cultivating a more inclusive and robust political landscape.

Moreover, drawing on Laclau (2005) and Betz and Oswald (2022), the analysis of populism should commence on the individual level, suggesting that populism rises when individuals' aspirations are neglected within the current democratic structures, often due to a deficiency in political elite responsiveness. It is critical to understand that the populism–human dignity relationship is not merely antagonistic but can also be synergistic, particularly in the context of 'soft populism'. This form of populism, which respects constitutional boundaries while utilising populist rhetoric, might not only challenge the status quo but also foster broader inclusivity in the political discourse. Such inclusivity could serve to elevate previously marginalised voices, thereby enriching democratic deliberation and possibly leading to a more responsive and representative governance structure. Babones (2018) asserts that populism mandates the political

elite to acknowledge and respect the dignity of the electorate. He emphasises that for democracy to function effectively it is crucial for esteemed experts to earnestly consider the 'mundane' opinions held by ordinary citizens. It may consequently be inferred that soft populism, which employs populist rhetoric while adhering to constitutional norms such as the separation of powers, fundamental rights and freedoms, is in alignment with the concept of human dignity.

Education on human dignity and its interplay with populism

Education extends beyond the simple acquisition of information and knowledge. It functions as a conduit via which students can discover their self-identity, integrate fundamental values, develop personal responsibility and understand their distinct view on the world and identity (Saveikaitė 2014). Scholarly sources (Kristovič, Kristovič & Pangrčič 2023) advocate a holistic approach to education, suggesting that educational endeavours should foster the complete development of each individual by encompassing cognitive abilities, emotional sensitivity, aesthetic appreciation, personal accountability and spiritual values. Research (Desjardins 2015) indicates that, especially in the 21st century, following the rapid evolution and diversification of methods for generating and accessing knowledge, academic learning should be closely linked with the cultivation of students' values, goals, social roles and worldviews. Hoguane and Pinto (2023) suggest that humans can only fully realise their potential through educational processes, showing that an individual's development is profoundly influenced by the educational opportunities they are given.

Various scholars (Reardon 1995; Elbert 2000; Giesinger 2012; Sporre 2015; Bowie 2016; Hantzopoulos 2016; Masalesa 2022; Hoguane & Pinto 2023) believe that education plays a considerable role in promoting and protecting human dignity. The concept of human dignity is deeply embedded in the framework of human rights education. Educational activities that centre on human dignity have been identified as a tool for fostering understandings of human rights. This is evidenced in the range of curricula around the world that use human dignity to explore human rights (Kane, Killean & Tann 2024). Both academic literature (Reardon 1995) and international policy documents (Brander et al. 2023) emphasise its centrality. Research (Webster 2022) has indicated that human dignity could serve as a bridge for conveying human rights concepts to diverse audiences. Within this context, integrating human dignity into the educational process is seen as essential. Education that focuses on human dignity not only fosters critical thinking and tolerance but also equips future generations with the skills for peaceful conflict resolution. We subscribe to the concept of 'education on human dignity' (Kleindienst 2016), which is structured as three distinct segments. The first is education about human dignity. This component involves understanding the theoretical aspects of human

dignity and its relationship with the fundamental elements of a democratic political culture, using both explicit and implicit teaching methods. The second is education through human dignity. This focuses on experiential learning and active participation in both educational settings and community activities, including extracurricular activities, educational trips and project-based learning. While it relies on a practical teaching approach, it generally stresses more subtle (implicit) teachings of human dignity. The third is education for human dignity. Mainly occurring within classroom interactions, this section encourages reflective discussions and deliberations among students, utilising interactive techniques, creative assignments and problem-solving activities. It blends theoretical knowledge with practical teaching methods and includes both explicit and implicit elements. Ideally, this educational approach is the most effective when it builds on a solid theoretical foundation of human dignity enhanced by extensive experiential learning. Thus, this type of education provides students with the tools needed to explore the complex aspects of human dignity and cultivates a culture of respect for oneself and others (Kleindienst 2024). In 2017, the Human Dignity Curriculum, a new socioemotional learning curriculum, was introduced and piloted in various school settings across different countries (Law 2024). In human dignity curriculum students engage in a range of active learning activities, such as theatre skits, to explore, understand and express their personal interpretations of concepts like responsibility, honesty and creativity in their everyday lives. This innovative curriculum helps students recognise that understanding their own human dignity, as well as the dignity of others, is a foundational aspect of their personal identity as they develop a more inclusive worldview (Lansdown 2020). Teachers' attitudes toward the curriculum were largely positive. The research indicates that teachers prefer curricula that are focused, comprehensive, flexible and efficient, with lesson plans that provide clear instructions, prompts and engaging activities (Law 2024). This type of study has not yet been conducted in Slovenia, making this article a valuable contribution by focusing on a case study of Slovenia, a distinctive context characterised as a new democracy, as elaborated in the next chapter. By examining the integration of the concept of human dignity into curricular and extracurricular activities within the Slovenian context, this research seeks to address a significant gap in the existing literature and to explore the potential of education on human dignity in fostering socioemotional learning in this specific educational setting.

Existing research on pedagogical strategies highlights the importance of fostering critical thinking and active engagement to address the challenges posed by populism. The understanding of human dignity in educational contexts has already been explored within healthcare education settings. Macaden et al. (2017) demonstrate that equipping students to navigate the complex interplay of factors that promote or hinder dignity – routinely encountered in

practice – requires deep engagement with the concept of dignity. This involves not only understanding the underlying theory but also connecting conceptual knowledge to practical contexts, such as through experiential learning. Their study concludes that education on human dignity must occupy a well-defined place within curricula (ibid.). Additionally, existing research suggests the importance of participatory approaches in education, where students co-design curricula that reflect their perceptions of dignity (Macaden et al. 2017). These approaches include using educational materials and tools that enable students to engage in dignity 'learning' through processes of recognition, observation, experience, reflection and renewal. Moreover, storytelling has been identified as a powerful pedagogical tool (Brakke & Houska 2015), promoting moral and ethical development by fostering empathy and understanding of diverse experiences (Al-Hawamleh 2019). This approach is particularly relevant for topics such as human dignity in the context of populism. Furthermore, according to the students, human dignity should not be treated as a 'one-off' topic, addressed in a single lecture – for example, during the first year – and then disregarded. Instead, student nurses emphasise the importance of ongoing reflection and consideration of dignity as essential for both their personal and professional development (Macaden et al. 2017). This aligns with the concept of humanising pedagogy, which emphasises that the full development of the person is essential for humanisation. The journey toward humanisation is both an individual and collective effort aimed at cultivating critical consciousness. By fostering critical reflection and action, teachers can transform the structures that hinder both their own and others' humanness, thereby facilitating liberation for all. In this context, teachers hold the responsibility of promoting a more fully human world through their pedagogical principles and practices, embedding dignity not merely as a theoretical concept but as a lived reality within the educational experience (Salazar 2013). By employing pedagogical strategies within the context of education on human dignity – such as participatory learning, storytelling and critical reflection – teachers can equip students with the tools needed to resist the dangers of populism. This approach not only deepens students' understanding of dignity but also empowers them to advocate for the realisation of their own dignity and the dignity rights of others in a complex societal landscape.

Research framework

The research presented in this article encompasses a case study of Slovenia. We decided to conduct this research based on case study as the in-depth understanding gained from case studies provides particularly rich material for developing theoretical ideas (Ragin 2007). Slovenia is an example of a country with a short democratic tradition. Slovenia underwent democratisation during the third wave of democracies (Huntington 1993) and, as a post-communist country,

falls among the 'new democracies'. In new democracies, a democratic political culture is considered to be an especially important factor for the existence of a democratic system, along with the formal presence of democratic institutions (Norris & Inglehart 2016; Diamond 1999). Many scholars point to the instability of post-communist democratic systems (see, for example, Przeworski 1991). Diamond (1999) argues that governance norms in new democracies were not well established, making power susceptible to abuse. The reality is that post-communist countries in Europe face not only the process of democratic consolidation but also their development in an environment where rapid technological advancement and new communication practices are transforming the way politics is conducted. These countries are dealing with the integration of citizens into (democratic) politics, which is more individualised, fragmented and commercialised than ever before (Pettai 2007). This makes Slovenia a highly interesting case study for the purposes of our research.

The research was conducted in the Goriška region. Data from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia (2022) show that the region is inhabited by 118,202 individuals, representing around 6% of the country's total population. Spanning 2,325 square kilometres, Goriška region accounts for 11.47% of Slovenia's total territory and comprises thirteen municipalities. In the 2022/23 academic year, the region had a total of 4,240 secondary school students (Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia 2023). Among the eleven secondary schools offering nationally accredited programmes, seven provide both general and technical secondary education, as specified by the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport. The focus of our research was restricted to general high schools within this framework.

We selected a purposive sampling method. The findings based on this purposive sample are not generalisations that apply to the entire population but are specific to our studied purposive sample (Engel & Schutt 2009), which represents a limitation of our research. Our empirical research considered high school teachers from the Goriška region. This cohort comprised teachers from two public high schools and one private (Catholic) high school. We conducted a total of sixteen interviews – ten with public high school teachers and six with their counterparts at the private institution. The central research question guiding this research, as mentioned in the introduction, was further divided into three research sub-questions: a) *How frequently and in what manner do high school teachers mention and integrate the concept of human dignity into the teaching process? b) Do they convey knowledge about human dignity explicitly or implicitly? c) Which curricular approaches and activities do teachers perceive as the most effective for educating students on human dignity*?

The research utilised a qualitative methodology, specifically semi-structured interviews. Given that the objective was to capture as comprehensive and profound an understanding of the studied issue as possible, we deemed the inter-

view method especially suitable. The interview is widely recognised as one of the most effective means by which researchers strive to comprehend their subjects (Fontana & Frey 1994). Semi-structured interviews facilitated adherence to the core focus of our research through the use of roughly predefined questions or themes (Galletta 2013). This approach also provided the possibility of either skipping over or adding questions and asking more sub-questions, ensuring openness to a broad spectrum of data concerning the area of study beyond the aspects that initially piqued our interest (Mesec 1998). Considering that education on human dignity remains a largely under-researched issue, we prepared for the eventuality of unanticipated responses, which might prompt further inquiries or the exclusion of certain preconceived questions. Consequently, we found the method of semi-structured interviews to be eminently suitable for this investigation. Throughout the study, we employed an eclectic approach to the research problem, while keeping our focus firmly on the principal research question. Teachers of history (all four grades), sociology (second and third grades), philosophy (fourth grade), Slovenian language (all four grades), and religion and culture (all four grades) from general high schools in the Goriška region were invited to participate in the research.

Document analysis: Research results and interpretation

This study employed a document analysis method, examining the curricula of five subjects: Slovenian language, philosophy, sociology, history, and religion and culture. The selection focused on subjects thematically connected to human dignity.

Subjects

1. Sociology
    - Explicit mention of dignity: Human dignity is not explicitly mentioned in the sociology curriculum.
    - Implicit mention of dignity: The theme is reflected through
        - Socialisation and identity formation, emphasising the respect for diverse cultural and social identities.
        - Discussions on social inequalities, addressing how stratification impacts individual value and roles in society.
        - Democracy and the rule of law, which indirectly promote awareness of the dignity of all citizens as a foundation of democratic principles.
    - Example: The chapter on social inequalities includes an analysis of the impact of social exclusion on individuals and groups.

2. History
   - Explicit mention of dignity: Human dignity is not explicitly mentioned in the history curriculum.
   - Implicit mention of dignity: The theme appears through
     - Emphasis on historical movements for human rights and social justice.
     - Understanding historical processes grounded in equality and freedom as fundamental human values.
   - Example: The coverage of civil rights movements highlights how the principles of human dignity were pivotal in driving social change.

3. Philosophy
   - Explicit mention of dignity: Human dignity is not explicitly mentioned in the philosophy curriculum.
   - Implicit mention of dignity: Addressed in discussions on ethics, moral responsibility and concepts of human nature as the foundation of respect for individuals.
   - Example: Examination of Kantian ethics, which underscores the idea of humanity as an end in itself.

4. Slovenian Language
   - Explicit mention of dignity: There are no direct mentions of human dignity in the Slovenian curriculum.
   - Implicit mention of dignity: Reflected in the promotion of respect for the language and cultural heritage as a basis for expressing and preserving human identity and integrity.
   - Example: Literary works exploring themes of solidarity, equality and human value.

5. Religion and Culture
   - Explicit mention of dignity: Human dignity is not explicitly mentioned in the curriculum.
   - Implicit mention of dignity: Indirectly addressed through
     - Personal and social values: Emphasising respect for others and fostering interfaith dialogue.
     - Theological concepts: Linking dignity to broader discussions about human value and responsibility.
     - Tolerance and coexistence: Promoting understanding and acceptance across cultural and religious differences.

- Examples:
  - Interdisciplinary integration: Development of intercultural and interfaith dialogue in connection with history and philosophy to deepen students' understanding of dignity.
  - Practical application of faith: Activities exploring religious rituals and symbols, teaching students to respect the practices of others and indirectly promoting dignity.
  - Values of solidarity and coexistence: Projects on solidarity and discussions on social exclusion provide practical experiences of how dignity can be realised in everyday life.

The theme of human dignity is not explicitly addressed in any of the analysed curricula. Instead, it is implicitly integrated into various subjects through related themes such as social values, ethics, human rights, solidarity and respect for diversity. Sociology and philosophy offer rich opportunities for implicit discussions on dignity through their focus on social justice, ethical frameworks and human behaviour. History and Slovenian language approach dignity within broader cultural and societal contexts, examining historical milestones and literary works that indirectly emphasise its importance.

Furthermore, the comparative research (Kleindienst 2021) indicates the relevance of the impact of state regulations on the promotion of human dignity. The fact that Californian private high schools are less constrained by federal, state and local regulations and standards (than California public high schools, which are more strongly bound to such regulations and standards) allows curricula in private high schools to be more flexible than in public high schools. This is partly due to the fact that private high schools are not funded by the state. Since Catholic private high schools in California hold greater autonomy in curriculum design than their public school counterparts, they are characterised by a greater degree of including topics on human dignity than public schools (ibid.).

In contrast, Slovenia, both in public and private high schools, is strongly bound by national guidelines when designing curricula, leaving limited room for autonomy in curriculum development. As a result, the inclusion of topics such as human dignity is largely dictated by the centralised educational framework, reducing the ability of individual schools to adapt or expand their curricular offerings to address such themes more comprehensively.

Semi-structured interviews: Research results and interpretation

In this section, we present the results of the semi-structured interviews conducted with secondary school teachers, along with an interpretation of their responses. The findings provide insights into how teachers address the theme of human dignity in their teaching practices and the challenges they encounter.

For a more structured presentation of the interview questions and a summary of responses, refer to Annex 1 of this article.

At the outset of the research, we investigated the frequency and manner in which the teachers mention and integrate the theme of dignity in their lessons, and whether they conveyed knowledge about human dignity explicitly (directly) or implicitly (indirectly) during class sessions. The teachers' responses revealed that human dignity is seldom mentioned explicitly within school content; instead, it is predominantly referred to implicitly, with thirteen of the sixteen interviewees included in the study confirming at least the implicit incorporation of the human dignity theme into the educational process. Further, among those, three interviewees made explicit references to human dignity – two from the private school and one from the public school – each of whom also utilised both explicit and implicit methods to address the subject of human dignity during lessons. This approach is exemplified by the following statement made by an interviewee:

> In my lessons, I explain that dignity means never doing to someone else what you wouldn't want done to you. Dignity is about being human. Origin doesn't matter – we're all equal. We also link this to the philosophy of Christianity, the foundations of Western societies. Even though I sometimes address the term dignity directly, I don't always use the term, but rather talk more about being human as a humane being. We also discuss this during class hours, like about helping each other out, fostering a culture of kindness, respect. (Teacher at a public high school, Slovenia, Interview 3)

The research findings reveal that the teachers involved in the study chiefly employ an implicit method of imparting knowledge about human dignity. This approach is particularly evident within the high school subjects history, Slovenian language, philosophy, sociology, psychology, and religion and culture. The latter is only conducted at the private school included in the research. The presence of implicit education about human dignity is illustrated by the following teacher statements:

> Human dignity as a concept kinda pops up indirectly in history and sociology, you know, a bit blurry, and in philosophy too. (Teacher at a private high school, Slovenia, Interview 11)

> We don't really have this term in the curriculum, and it's not mentioned, so it's not really talked about as such, but I gotta say we do talk a lot about stuff that indirectly covers this concept. (Teacher at a public high school, Slovenia, Interview 13)

The last statement is crucial because it highlights that the curricula do not explicitly address the topic of human dignity, a fact confirmed by all of the interviewees. The private school in Slovenia included in the research, aside from offering the subject religion and culture, follows almost the same curricula as public schools. Therefore, we did not anticipate significant differences between public and private schools in the area of education about human dignity before conducting the research. References to human dignity are thus absent from the curricula at both the private and public schools involved in the study, suggesting that any incorporation of this theme is generally the result of individual teacher initiative, as shown by the following statement by an interviewee: 'I feel like it's largely left to the teacher's discretion how important or unimportant this is... it really depends on how you, as a teacher, feel it's important to highlight this to the students' (Teacher at a private high school, Slovenia, Interview 4). The research also reveals that the high school teachers feel considerable autonomy in this regard: 'Fortunately, in philosophy, it's up to the teacher's preference what to focus on' (Teacher at a public high school, Slovenia, Interview 7).

During the interviews, we inquired about the content via which implicit education on human dignity is conducted. The most prevalent topics the teachers associate with human dignity (either explicitly or implicitly) include:

Psychology: This involves discussions on interpersonal relationships, communication, experiments in psychological science, associated human rights violations, prosocial behaviour and emotions.

Slovenian Language: The analysis of literary texts, focusing on recognising their ethical dimensions and evaluating those aspects.

History: Topics covered include ancient democracy, the concept of slavery (from patriarchal to Oriental and classical Roman, extending to modern forms of slavery related to human dependency and the degradation of human dignity), the Enlightenment, bourgeois society theories, wars, revolutions, the rule of law, separation of powers and undemocratic political systems.

Sociology: Exploration of the dignity of the body, social inequality, poverty, religion, war, norms and values, friendship, human rights and euthanasia.

Philosophy: Focuses mostly on ethics.

Religion and Culture: This subject covers topics such as humanity created in the image of God, human rights, the uniqueness of the human being and personal freedom. The subject of religion and culture is not offered at public high schools in Slovenia. Still, one can find examples of practices regarding the implementation of similar school subjects in other countries (Sweden, Norway, England, France) where students receive education in the field of religions, commonly referred to as religious education (for example, see Sporre 2015).

During the research, considerable attention was paid to the perspectives of three teachers who underscored the inadequacy of the fact that education on human dignity was solely implicit and revealed the need for explicit instruc-

tion on the subject. Further, one interviewee observed that simply mentioning human dignity directly is insufficient and does not produce positive outcomes. Instead, a more profound theorisation of human dignity is essential. Absent such depth, it is advisable to refrain from mentioning human dignity in teaching altogether because this superficial approach can produce more negative than positive effects. This viewpoint is exemplified by the following statement by a teacher:

> Just throwing out the word 'dignity' isn't gonna cut it. We gotta dig deep into it, or not bother at all, otherwise, we teachers just look like a bunch of phonies. (Teacher at a public high school, Slovenia, Interview 5)

This statement shows the difficulties students encounter in grasping the concept of human dignity, as also evidenced by the remarks of six interviewees. For instance, one noted:

> In history class, we talk straight up about how dignity gets violated in wars, revolutions, concentration camps, and the massacres after a war. But just dropping those facts doesn't mean the students really get what dignity is all about. (Teacher at a public high school, Slovenia, Interview 6)

This observation corroborates the previously noted inadequacy of merely explicitly mentioning human dignity, which proves to be insufficient for students to fully understand the concept.

In summary, explicit education about human dignity within high school subjects is infrequent and occurs only in a limited number of instances; the dominant method is the implicit transfer of knowledge in this field. This inclusion of human dignity topics in school subjects is slightly more stressed in the private school involved in the study than in the public schools. One reason cited by some teachers for avoiding explicit mentions of human dignity during lessons is their own lack of understanding of the true meaning of human dignity or insufficient knowledge about this concept. Teachers often implicitly convey the importance of human dignity through various examples which in their view is the simplest method due to their uncertainty about 'what would be understood under the concept of human dignity' (Teacher at a public high school, Slovenia, Interview 5). Theorising about human dignity is perceived by teachers as challenging: 'If I had to present the concept of human dignity in a lesson in a way that is just theoretical, I don't know if I could do that now. I wouldn't be able to' (Teacher at a private high school, Slovenia, Interview 14). We may conclude from this that the first step in the effective education of students about human dignity is not merely incorporating this topic into school content, but initially educating teachers on the concept of human dignity, its significance, relevance

and developing teachers' competencies regarding possible ways of transmitting knowledge about this concept.

The interview responses suggest that some teachers consciously eschew most forms of education on human dignity, both explicit and implicit. Even though these cases are infrequent, they were exclusively observed in the public schools, not the private school involved in the study. Deliberate avoidance of all forms of education on human dignity was identified among three interviewees who responded quite negatively to inquiries about whether they ever directly or indirectly mention the concept of human dignity in their subjects. One of these interviewees asserted that incorporating human dignity into educational content is completely irrational. He argued that teaching about violations of values, ethics, human rights and related themes essentially amounts to moralising, which is not received positively by students:

> How am I supposed to explain that human dignity is a value when it isn't? I can't theorise about something that is being devalued and trampled before everyone's eyes
>
> ... Talking about human dignity comes off as moralising. You end up sounding like someone who is appalled and complains, and that's fundamentally not a good thing to do. (Teacher at a public high school, Slovenia, Interview 7)

The last statement was made by a high school philosophy teacher and is relatively surprising. Given that human dignity is a quintessential philosophical concept (Riley 2019) deeply intertwined with numerous topics within the subject of philosophy, it would be both logical and appropriate to integrate it into the teaching of philosophy. Another interviewee, expressing a similar sentiment, even described teaching about human dignity as irresponsible:

> To talk and teach about human dignity in a world where it is completely trampled would be cynical and irresponsible. How can I talk about dignity in a world where many people have trampled their own dignity and that of others, yet they are still top politicians and business leaders? (Teacher at a public high school, Slovenia, Interview 8)

Teachers who consciously avoid addressing human dignity in their teaching may not do so out of a lack of interest or understanding of the topic but due to a profound scepticism about its relevance or feasibility in the contemporary world. This scepticism often stems from a perceived disconnect between the ideals of dignity and the socio-political realities students encounter. In contexts where students view discussions of dignity as abstract, moralising or even hypocritical – especially when juxtaposed with the systemic contradictions they observe

in society – teachers may feel ill-equipped to present the concept in a way that resonates authentically. Teachers may struggle to reconcile the aspirational nature of dignity with the pervasive violations of this principle in global systems, politics and even local communities. Such violations, often widely publicised, can lead to cynicism among students, who may question the sincerity of discussions about dignity in a world where it is so frequently undermined.

To address these challenges, it is essential to integrate the broader societal context into educational discussions on human dignity. Teachers should not shy away from systemic violations of dignity; rather, these instances should serve as critical entry points for discussion. By framing such violations as opportunities for analysis, teachers can empower students to explore the underlying causes and implications of dignity's erosion. For instance, examining historical and contemporary examples of dignity violations – such as systemic inequality, discrimination and abuses of power – can help students understand the structural dimensions of dignity and its potential for restoration through individual and collective action.

Moreover, fostering an open dialogue among teachers about the complexities of teaching human dignity is crucial. Professional learning communities or interdisciplinary workshops could provide platforms for teachers to share their experiences, strategies and challenges. These spaces would allow teachers to collaboratively develop pedagogical approaches that balance theoretical exploration with practical relevance, ensuring that discussions about dignity are neither overly abstract nor dismissively simplistic.

Addressing students' scepticism is equally important. Teachers might consider grounding their discussions in relatable, real-world scenarios that highlight both the fragility and resilience of dignity. For instance, exploring narratives of individuals or groups who have fought to uphold their dignity in the face of adversity can humanise the concept and inspire critical reflection. Such narratives not only make the topic more accessible but also challenge students to think critically about their own roles in fostering a culture of dignity.

From the foregoing, we can place the reasons for the absence of (particularly explicit) education on human dignity in high schools in three core categories. First, from an organisational perspective, a central reason for the lack (both explicit and to some degree implicit) of such education is the exclusion of the theme of human dignity from high school curricula. The interviews also reveal that teachers possess considerable discretion in deciding whether to integrate the topic of human dignity into their lessons. A significant barrier here is the existing shortage of class hours, which hampers the possibility of delivering sufficiently in-depth instruction on the required curricular content. It is important to acknowledge that mere curricular modifications would not necessarily lead to substantive changes in this area. Simply including human dignity in curricula will not ensure that the instruction will be any more than

rote teaching. A meaningful transformation in this area calls for embedding the importance of educating about human dignity in the consciousness and ethical foundations of teachers.

Second, some teachers shy away from explicitly mentioning and deeply theorising about human dignity due to their own misunderstandings of the concept. The term 'dignity' is frequently employed so vaguely that its mention rarely prompts reflection on its true meaning. Owing to this confusion, many teachers opt to subtly hint at the significance of human dignity through various examples rather than by directly addressing it. Effective solutions could involve comprehensive training for teachers on the concept of human dignity.

Third, a minority of teachers avoid both explicit and implicit education on human dignity, viewing it as moralising. These interviewees believe that by teaching about human dignity they inadvertently discredit themselves as students may see them as moralists or as individuals who lament and criticise the contemporary politico-social circumstances. These teachers regard human dignity as a concept which is so devalued that it exists solely in theory and cannot be applied in practice. The disconnection between theory and practice, which impedes the actualisation of theoretical principles, thus leads these teachers to eschew education on human dignity, considering it to be both cynical and irresponsible. This third reason is specific to public school education, noting that no analogous rationale was observed at the private school, likely due to the already deep integration of moral principles and values within the education, atmosphere and ethos of the Catholic private school included in the study.

The research shows that in certain rare cases at both private and public schools in Slovenia explicit mentions of human dignity are made during secondary education. Nevertheless, there is generally an almost complete absence of direct theorising on human dignity. This concept is often associated with content that encompasses an ethical dimension. The most common method of explaining the meaning of human dignity in the schools included in the study is through examples. Notably, these explanations typically do not rely on current examples from contemporary social practice (as students might mainly encounter in the media), but through historical events (for instance, in history), literary texts, myths (for instance, in Slovenian language) and similar sources. This suggests that the implicit mode of education on human dignity dominates. Surprisingly, at some schools the meaning of human dignity is least frequently explained (both explicitly and implicitly) in subjects that, in principle, are closest to this content, such as philosophy. The findings reveal a high level of autonomy among high school teachers in selecting educational content, which could hold negative implications for education on human dignity. Consequently, there is a risk that students may only encounter the theme of human dignity to a limited extent in their secondary education, thereby diminishing their opportunity to fully understand this concept.

Based on the analysis of the interviews, particularly the statements of eight respondents, it is evident that presenting and conveying real stories of individuals who have endured severe violations of their (realised) dignity is considered to be one of the more effective educational approaches and methods. This assertion is supported by the statement of a teacher below:

> With this story, I achieved something that rarely happens in class – students listened for 40 minutes without stirring. The story really touched them. Daily teaching about ways of living only triggers cynical remarks from students, the waving of hands, or they don't even listen. (Teacher at a public high school, Slovenia, Interview 10)

In this context, nine teachers highlighted inviting guest speakers from practical fields as a good way of capturing the students' attention and as a more effective method for educating on human dignity. One teacher explained this in the following way:

> It seems to me that such topics at least momentarily resonate with students when a certain guest comes to the class. Recently, for example, we had a young man from a care and work centre visit us. He had suffered a stroke due to a misguided lifestyle, drugs and alcoholism. We are well aware of how such patients are stigmatised in today's society, which is a clear violation of human dignity. This young man is now recovering. He is still legally incapacitated, but is undergoing treatment with the help of professionals. (Teacher at a public high school, Slovenia, Interview 2)

Among the least effective methods is presenting human dignity in a political context, as confirmed by twelve of the sixteen interviewees. This principally refers to the depiction of human dignity within the framework of democratic political discourse, presenting human dignity as the essence of democracy, especially in connection with any political topics. Due to the growing distrust in political institutions and the negative connotations of political actions among students, teachers perceive political topics as unnecessary and unhelpful because current political actions are believed to be intertwined with low functional integrity. Teachers note that students view the political system as inefficient, with political actors tailoring their decisions and actions to their immediate benefits rather than governing as they should; politics is seen as far removed from its intended purpose. This attitude among youth has also been identified by other studies (Foa & Mounk 2019) that indicate dissatisfaction among the young and their apathy regarding democracy and mainstream political processes. Therefore, according to teachers, education on human dignity is more effective when initially discussed as something with a strong personal connotation, i.e.

presenting human dignity as the essence of every human being, as something that belongs to every individual simply because they are human. Educational approaches need to engage students' emotions and their personal life sphere in general through discussions on relevant topics. This conclusion is supported by the statements of twelve of the sixteen interviewees.

However, while there has been a noted decline in trust in political institutions, this does not preclude the possibility of making meaningful connections between policies that protect the most vulnerable and wider discourses on human dignity. Such integration is both possible and desirable, as it encourages a deeper understanding of how systemic factors influence personal experiences and vice versa. Policies aimed at protecting vulnerable populations provide tangible examples of how the concept of human dignity can be operationalised at the societal level. For instance, anti-discrimination laws, inclusive education initiatives and support systems for marginalised groups serve as frameworks that uphold dignity. These policies demonstrate how political institutions can translate abstract principles into actionable protections, reinforcing the idea that human dignity is not just an ethical ideal but also a societal commitment. The example of the guest speaker referred to in this article illustrates how personal narratives can bridge the gap between individual dignity and systemic support. This guest, who had overcome significant life challenges with the help of institutional frameworks, exemplifies how policies designed to assist vulnerable groups can restore and uphold dignity. Expanding on this example, teachers could highlight the interconnectedness of personal stories and the broader political systems that enable recovery and inclusion.

Conclusions

Populism often undermines human dignity through exclusionary practices and rhetoric that marginalise certain groups while homogenising others to create an imagined collective identity. The emphasis on the will of 'the pure people' versus the 'corrupt elite' often leads to the erosion of pluralism and democratic norms. By embedding human dignity into educational frameworks, schools can provide students with the intellectual tools to recognise and critically evaluate such narratives. By fostering critical thinking, socio-emotional learning and a deeper understanding of dignity as an intrinsic and universal value, education becomes a transformative force in building resilience against the erosion of democratic principles.

The potential for education on human dignity to mitigate the negative impacts of populism lies in its ability to reinforce democratic principles and promote a culture of mutual respect. By embedding these principles in the education system, societies can cultivate a more informed, empathetic and resilient citizenry capable of sustaining the democratic ideals that uphold human dignity

and counter the divisive forces of populism. As the normative architecture of democracy derives from the concept of human dignity, the institutions of this very type of political setting are designed to protect the dignity of its people. The relationship between the institutional system and the cultural platform of society is thus mutually reinforcing (Kleindienst & Tomšič 2022). Future research should explore the longitudinal impacts of human dignity education on students' political attitudes and resilience against populist ideologies.

The study reveals that the concept of human dignity is seldom explicitly mentioned in the high school process in Slovenia. This finding is in line with the educational trend where abstract concepts like dignity are taught indirectly (Saeverot 2022) – that is, they are often embedded within broader ethical or historical discussions rather than being addressed directly. The implicit approach allows teachers to weave the concept of dignity into various subjects without dedicating specific lessons to it. While beneficial in providing a holistic view, this method might lead to varying levels of understanding among students depending on the teacher's interpretation and emphasis on the concept.

The preference for implicit education on human dignity might stem from several factors. First, the concept's abstract nature can make it challenging to teach directly. Teachers may feel more comfortable embedding discussions of dignity within concrete examples, such as historical events or literary texts where the concept can be contextualised. Still, this approach has its limitations. Without explicit discussions, students may fail to grasp the full significance of human dignity, reducing it to a peripheral issue rather than a central ethical principle. This means that for a more comprehensive understanding, there is a need for both explicit education and innovative teaching methods that resonate emotionally and personally with students. Addressing these educational challenges can significantly enhance students' grasp of human dignity, preparing them to appreciate and uphold this fundamental principle in their personal and societal interactions.

The effectiveness of real-life stories and guest speakers highlights the importance of contextual and experiential learning. These methods make the concept of dignity tangible and relatable for students. For instance, hearing firsthand from individuals who have had their dignity violated personalises the issue, making it more impactful than abstract discussions. This aligns with educational theories stressing that the importance of emotionally engaging students in schoolwork has positive affects towards school work in general and been found to be related to overall development in adolescence (Appleton, Christenson & Furlong 2008; Debnam et al. 2014).

The low effectiveness of teaching dignity within a political context may be attributed to the current socio-political climate. The rising distrust in political institutions and perception of political actions as self-serving make students cynical about political discussions. This result is consistent with existing re-

search (Foa & Mounk 2019), which reveals dissatisfaction and apathy among young people regarding democracy and political topics. Among other things, this points to the danger of young people's susceptibility to populist ideologies, as noted in other studies (Noack & Eckstein 2023). This suggests that if education on human dignity is to be more effective, it must be separated from the negative connotations associated with contemporary politics and instead be rooted in universally relatable human experiences.

To conclude, the research findings lead to several good practice suggestions in the field of education. First, there is a need for comprehensive *training for teachers* on the concept of human dignity. Teachers should be equipped with both theoretical knowledge and practical strategies to teach this concept explicitly and effectively. This could include workshops, seminars and the development of teaching materials that focus specifically on human dignity. Second, opportunities exist for *curriculum improvements*. While integrating human dignity into existing subjects is beneficial, room should also be given for explicit discussions. Curriculum developers might consider incorporating dedicated modules or lessons on human dignity that can provide a foundational understanding before integrating it into broader topics. Third, *engagement through stories and invited speakers* should be at the forefront. Schools should utilise real-life stories and invite guest speakers to discuss issues related to human dignity. This approach not only captures students' attention but also helps them see the real-world relevance of what they are learning. Additionally, given the identified cynicism concerning political discussions, teachers should find *ways to discuss human dignity that circumvent political biases*. Focusing on universal human rights and ethical principles rather than contemporary political scenarios could reduce students' resistance and add to their engagement. However, teachers should embrace systemic violations of dignity as essential entry points for meaningful discussion. These instances, though challenging, provide valuable opportunities for students to critically examine the underlying structures and forces that perpetuate inequality, discrimination and oppression. By directly addressing such violations, teachers can move beyond surface-level discussions, fostering deeper understanding and engagement with the concept of dignity. By encouraging students to grapple with contradictions and complexities, teachers can transform scepticism into a valuable tool for deeper understanding and active participation in societal change.

To deepen our understanding of how students internalise the concept of human dignity, future research should prioritise qualitative methodologies, such as focus group discussions. These methods can yield valuable insights into students' perceptions, experiences and the cognitive and emotional processes through which they engage with the concept of human dignity.

Additionally, comparative studies are recommended to explore how different education systems and curricula address human dignity and their effective-

ness in countering populist rhetoric. This could include comparisons between countries with varying levels of populist influence and differing educational approaches. This research is limited by its focus on a case study of Slovenia. While the in-depth exploration of the Slovenian context provides valuable insights into the integration of human dignity in educational curricula, it is important to acknowledge that the findings cannot be generalised to other countries or educational systems. The unique socio-political and cultural characteristics of Slovenia may shape the outcomes in ways that differ from those in other contexts. Future research should consider comparative studies across multiple countries to better understand the broader applicability and variability of these findings.

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