

Learning Communities After School: The Extended Programme as a Space for Developing 21st-Century Competences

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Abstract

The extended programme in Slovenian primary schools (RaP) complements the compulsory curriculum and provides opportunities for holistic student development. This paper presents examples of practice based on reflective practice in a mixed group of fourth- and fifth-grade students participating in the extended programme. The activities included an initial analysis of students' interests, collaborative creation of behavioural guidelines, and the organisation of a toy exchange and borrowing system. Informal data were collected through student questionnaires, observation and reflective discussions. The findings indicate that involving students in co-decision-making increases their motivation, responsibility and engagement in collaborative activities. The extended programme provides a valuable environment for developing competences such as initiative, cooperation, critical thinking and responsibility. The paper highlights the importance of non-formal learning environments within the school context and demonstrates how the extended programme can support the development of competences needed in the 21st century.

Keywords: extended programme, learning community, non-formal learning, student participation, 21st-century competences

1 INTRODUCTION

In the Slovenian primary education system, the curriculum consists of two main components: the compulsory programme and the extended programme (RaP). While the compulsory programme includes subject-based teaching and formal learning activities, the extended programme aims to complement this structure by supporting the broader personal, social, and developmental needs of students. According to the national guidelines, the extended programme provides opportunities for learning beyond traditional classroom instruction. It allows students to participate in activities that promote creativity, social interaction, independent learning, and responsible participation in the school community. Through these activities, students can develop interests, strengthen interpersonal relationships, and gain experiences that are not always possible within the structured framework of formal lessons. This paper presents a

practical example of implementing such an approach in a group participating in the extended programme. The paper examines how involving students in decision-making and collaborative activities contributes to the development of responsibility, initiative, and cooperation. Recent developments in artificial intelligence are further transforming educational environments and emphasising the need for competences such as critical thinking, creativity, collaboration and responsible use of technology (OECD, 2024). These changes highlight the importance of flexible learning environments, such as the extended programme, where such competences can be developed through participatory and experiential activities.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The extended programme as a space for non-formal and interdisciplinary learning

Contemporary education increasingly emphasises learning environments that extend beyond traditional classroom instruction. Non-formal learning settings provide flexible and student-centred opportunities that support collaboration, experiential learning and personal development. Such environments complement formal instruction by allowing students to explore interests, interact with peers and actively participate in shaping learning activities (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; OECD, 2021).

In Slovenia, the Extended Programme (Razširjeni program – RaP) represents an important development within the primary education system. According to the *Curriculum for the Extended Programme in Primary Schools* (Zavod RS za šolstvo, 2023), RaP is designed as a flexible and interdisciplinary framework that complements the compulsory programme and supports pupils' holistic development. The programme emphasises student participation, collaborative learning and the development of transversal competences.

The curriculum also highlights the development of soft skills such as communication, responsibility and initiative, as well as the importance of learning to learn. Through flexible and project-based activities, pupils are encouraged to collaborate, reflect on their learning and engage in meaningful tasks connected to real-life situations.

2.2 Development of responsibility and initiative in early school years

The early years of schooling are an important period for the development of social and personal competences. During this stage, children gradually learn to cooperate with peers, take responsibility for their actions and participate in shared decision-making processes.

Research shows that learning environments which support student participation strengthen learners' sense of agency and ownership of learning (Biesta & Tedder, 2020; OECD, 2021). When students are encouraged to express ideas, propose solutions and participate in group activities, they are more likely to develop initiative and confidence in their abilities.

Within the extended programme, such opportunities can be integrated through collaborative planning, project-based tasks and reflection discussions. The RaP curriculum emphasises that pupils should gradually assume greater responsibility for organising activities and participating in group decisions (Zavod RS za šolstvo, 2023).

2.3 Critical thinking and entrepreneurial competence

Contemporary education systems increasingly emphasise competences that prepare learners for complex and rapidly changing societies. Among the most important are critical thinking, creativity, collaboration and entrepreneurial initiative (OECD, 2021).

Entrepreneurial competence refers to the ability to recognise opportunities, generate ideas, take initiative and collaborate with others in achieving common goals. The European *EntreComp* framework identifies creativity, initiative and responsibility as key elements of this competence (European Commission, 2020).

Learning environments that encourage project-based learning and collaborative problem solving can effectively support these skills. Through planning activities, proposing ideas and evaluating outcomes, pupils develop initiative, responsibility and the ability to work together toward shared goals.

Recent research also highlights that the development of critical thinking and responsible decision-making is particularly important in the context of increasing use of artificial intelligence in education (OECD, 2024).

2.4 Learning communities in school environments

The concept of learning communities has become increasingly important in contemporary educational research. Learning communities are characterised by shared goals, collaboration, mutual support and ongoing reflection among participants (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020).

In such environments, learning is understood as a social process that develops through dialogue, cooperation and shared problem solving. Schools that encourage collaborative learning often report higher levels of student engagement and stronger social relationships (Fullan et al., 2020; OECD, 2021).

The extended programme provides favourable conditions for the development of such communities. Because activities are less constrained by formal curricular requirements, teachers can implement participatory approaches that emphasise cooperation, dialogue and shared responsibility among pupils.

2.5 Practical implications for the extended programme

Despite the growing emphasis on transversal competences and collaborative learning, schools often face challenges in translating these principles into everyday practice. Non-formal learning environments within schools can provide valuable opportunities for developing social, personal and entrepreneurial competences through collaborative activities.

In Slovenia, the Extended Programme (RaP) represents an important step toward more holistic and interdisciplinary learning. The *Curriculum for the Extended Programme in Primary Schools* (Zavod RS za šolstvo, 2023) emphasises student participation, interdisciplinary activities and the development of soft skills. As the programme is gradually being introduced in schools, it is particularly important to present practical examples of its implementation.

3 CONTEXT AND DESCRIPTION OF IMPLEMENTED ACTIVITIES

The examples presented in this paper are based on practical experiences from the implementation of activities within the Extended Programme (RaP) in a Slovenian primary school. The activities were carried out in a mixed group of pupils participating in the extended programme, consisting of 22 pupils: 18 fourth-grade pupils and 4 fifth-grade pupils.

The activities were implemented during the regular time allocated to the extended programme over a period of several months, from October 2025 to March 2026. During this time, several structured activities were designed with the aim of encouraging collaboration, student participation and the development of personal and social competences.

The planning of activities was guided by the principles of the Curriculum for the Extended Programme in Primary Schools (Zavod RS za šolstvo, 2023), which emphasises interdisciplinary learning, active participation of pupils and the development of transversal competences. Particular attention was given to creating opportunities for pupils to express ideas, collaborate with peers and participate in planning and evaluating group activities.

The examples presented in this paper illustrate how such activities can support the development of responsibility, initiative and collaboration among pupils. The focus of the paper is therefore not on measuring outcomes but on describing selected activities and reflecting on their educational potential within the context of the extended programme.

3.1 Data collection and reflection process

The activities were accompanied by qualitative data collection, including short student questionnaires, systematic observation of participation and group dynamics, and reflective discussions after activities. The collected data were analysed descriptively by identifying recurring patterns in students' behaviour, engagement and interaction. The aim was not to produce statistically generalisable results but to gain insight into how participatory activities influence students' experiences within the extended programme.

4 EXAMPLES OF ACTIVITIES IN THE EXTENDED PROGRAMME

4.1 Identifying students' interests

The first step in the process was to identify students' interests and expectations. Students completed a short questionnaire with questions such as:

- What would you like to do during the extended programme?
- What activities do you enjoy the most?
- What tasks do you have to complete during the extended programme?
- What activities do you dislike?

The results of the questionnaire were analysed and presented to the students. Together, we discussed how the group could improve the atmosphere and organize activities that reflect students' interests.

4.2 Creating group guidelines

Students were first asked to answer the following questions:

- What bothers you in the group?
- What do you like about the group?

They emphasised kindness, willingness to help and calm behaviour as the most desirable behaviours, while screaming, taking without asking and speaking disrespectfully about others as the least desirable behaviours.

Then they prepared a poster which was divided into two parts:

- What I expect from others?
- What I can do to contribute to a positive atmosphere?

Students wrote their ideas, illustrated the posters, and presented their proposals to the group. The posters later served as shared guidelines for cooperation and respectful behaviour.

4.3 Student-led classroom event: Toy exchange and borrowing activity

One of the students' ideas was to organise a toy exchange and borrowing activity. The activity had both social and organisational aspects and encouraged students to think about fairness, responsibility, and cooperation.

Students planned the event together by determining:

- which toys could be brought,
- which items were not appropriate,
- where and when the exchange would take place.

To support responsible borrowing, students created a simple borrowing record that functioned as an agreement between two students. The record included the name of the toy, the borrowing period, and the signatures of both students.

After the event, the group held a reflection session to evaluate the activity.

5 OBSERVATIONS FROM PRACTICE

Observations during the activities indicated increased student engagement and participation. Students expressed enthusiasm when they realised that their opinions influenced the organisation of activities. Several students who were initially less active began to contribute ideas during group discussions. For example, one student proposed organising the toy exchange activity and later took responsibility for preparing the borrowing records. Other students volunteered for roles such as organising materials and recording group decisions.

The collaborative discussions also contributed to a calmer and more cooperative group atmosphere. Students appeared more motivated to follow the agreed guidelines because they had participated in creating them. One challenge identified during the implementation was limited time, as students also needed to complete homework, have meals and participate in outdoor activities. Despite this limitation, the planned activities were successfully implemented.

6 DISCUSSION AND LIMITATIONS

The activities described in this paper are consistent with the goals of the Curriculum for the Extended Programme (Zavod RS za šolstvo, 2023), which emphasises interdisciplinary learning, student participation and the development of transversal competences. The results suggest that involving students in decision-making processes can significantly enhance their engagement and sense of responsibility. When students participate in shaping their learning environment, they develop a stronger sense of ownership and motivation. The activities described in this paper also supported the development of several competences associated with 21st-century learning. These include collaboration, initiative, problem-solving, and responsible behaviour. The toy exchange activity, for example, required students

to think critically about fairness and responsibility while also planning and organizing an event. Such activities reflect elements of entrepreneurial competence, particularly initiative and collaborative problem-solving. The role of the teacher in this process shifted from a traditional instructor to a facilitator and mentor. Instead of directing every step of the activity, the teacher guided discussions, supported decision-making, and ensured a safe and respectful environment. These findings support previous research emphasizing the value of participatory learning environments and student voice in education and suggest that even small shifts toward participatory practices can significantly influence group dynamics and students' sense of belonging.

This paper has several limitations. The observations are based on a single group of pupils in one school, which limits the generalisability of the findings. In addition, the data are primarily based on qualitative observations and reflections, without systematic measurement of learning outcomes. Future studies could include multiple groups and more structured data collection methods to provide a more comprehensive evaluation of the extended programme.

7 CONCLUSION

The extended programme represents an important opportunity to support students' holistic development within the school environment. By integrating participatory and collaborative activities, it can become a space where students develop social, personal, and cognitive competences. The example presented in this paper demonstrates that involving students in planning activities and shaping group guidelines can enhance motivation, cooperation, and responsibility. Such approaches contribute to the creation of a learning community where students actively participate in their own learning process. Future implementations could further expand these activities by including collaboration with other groups in the extended programme or by developing longer-term student-led projects. This highlights the potential of the extended programme as an important space for pedagogical innovation within primary education.

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