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DEPARTMENT OF PEDAGOGICAL CURRICULAR AND  
PROFESSIONAL STUDIES

# USING POVERTY SIMULATIONS TO TEACH ABOUT POVERTY

AN ACTION RESEARCH STUDY

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Supervisors:	Ernst Thoutenhoofd, Julie Bennett
Examiner:	Ylva Odenbring

# Abstract

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**Aim:** The purpose of this research study was to investigate the effect of a poverty simulation activity on 9th-grade students' understanding of poverty.

**Theory:** This study's theoretical framework was built on Dewey's theory of Experiential Education, Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle, and various critical approaches toward Experiential Learning and Education.

**Method:** This research study was designed as an educational intervention with elements of Action Research. A mixed-methods approach was applied, consisting of pre-test and post-test questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews. The analysis was done by using descriptive statistics and content analysis.

**Results:** While the pre- and post-questionnaire showed that students endorsed more structural explanations of poverty, the semi-structured interviews revealed that the students tended to overestimate the individual effort in getting out of poverty. The intersectional approach employed in the simulation did not prove to help avoid "othering" and instead, drew a line between "us" and the "others". Most students tended to relativize poverty, which they associated with negative phenomena such as alcoholism, homelessness, and abuse of the welfare system.

## Foreword

I have chosen the topic of social sustainability based on my personal experience and interests. Throughout my professional career, I have been intrigued by how experiential education and learning could be used to enhance different aspects of social sustainability. Experiential learning is often presented as a very powerful transformative tool. However, I have been wondering if experiential learning could also take us beyond our personal experiences, which are often determined by the social roles and opportunities that we have been granted in our lives. Can experiential learning become an effective tool in uncovering sources of inequalities and injustices in our society? This research study hopes to investigate some aspects of this complex topic.

I would like to express my sincere thanks to all the students who participated in this research study, for their active participation, motivation, and critical comments. And also to the school management and the teachers for their support throughout the whole action research study. I would also like to thank Kosha D. Bramesfeld, the author of the "C'est la vie" simulation activity, for granting open access to this engaging teaching resource.

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## List of Abbreviations

APROGEN	Alternative Educational Program for Gifted Children
AR	Action Research
ATP	Attitudes toward Poverty
CAPS	The Community Action Poverty Simulation
ESD	Education for Sustainable Development
MMR	Mixed Methods Research
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
OTRP	Office of Teaching Resources in Psychology
PPP	Purchasing Power Parity
UNESCO	The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UN	United Nations

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# 1. Introduction

In 2015, 193 countries of the United Nations agreed on the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be achieved by 2030 (UN, 2015). SDGs are built on three pillars of sustainable development - environmental, social, and economic, which were first identified in the Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987). Even though the agenda is sometimes criticized for being overly anthropocentric (Bolis et al., 2014), it remains one of the most widely known efforts to bring together the global community in pursuing a set of shared goals.

The first goal (SDG1), poverty eradication targets to “end poverty in all its forms everywhere”. SDG 1 is considered the greatest challenge for the global community and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development (Neto et al., 2022). Many development agendas are based on the concept of Maslow’s theory of needs and their sequential satisfaction, where after the physiological needs are satisfied (i.e., food, shelter, and water), safety, esteem, and self-actualization need also to be fulfilled (Rojas et al., 2023)<sup>1</sup>. Only after people’s basic needs are met are people able to actively address biophysical environmental concerns. For example, research has shown that poverty is a barrier to the implementation of green technologies, like solar panels or waste disposal technologies (Vallance, 2011). Therefore, SDG1 can be considered a prerequisite for many other SDGs since they can only advance after people’s basic needs are satisfied.

Elimination of poverty has become even more urgent after the COVID-19 pandemic when the economic situation of many people significantly deteriorated. While global poverty continued to decline from 10.1 percent in 2015 to 8.6 percent in 2018 as a result of the recent COVID-19 pandemic, there was a sharp increase to 9.2 percent in 2020. This increase represents the largest increase since 1990 (UN, 2023).

There have been various approaches used to study and understand poverty across societies and over time. While some rely exclusively on economic well-being, others on the lack of individual capabilities such as education or health to achieve a basic level of human well-

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<sup>1</sup> Various aspects of Maslow’s theory of needs have been criticized, including the sequential satisfaction of needs. Sequantialism led many development agencies to promote economic growth as the only effective instrument in fighting poverty. However, economic growth has proven to be an inefficient instrument to raise people’s well-being (Rojas et al., 2023).

being or the consequences of poverty such as social exclusion. Probably the most widely used definition of poverty is based on economic well-being, which defines poverty in quantifiable ways either on income, consumption, or welfare (Wagle, 2018). For example, since the World Development Report 1990, the World Bank applies a common standard in measuring extreme poverty in an attempt to reflect what poverty means for people in the poorest countries. The value is periodically updated based on purchasing power parity (PPP). Since 2022, Extreme poverty is measured as living on less than 2.15 USD a day, the value is based on 2017 PPPs (World Bank Group, 2022).

While economic approaches to poverty are widely used, they do not take into account the social, cultural, and political impact of poverty. Since 1998, the UN advocates for the human rights definition of poverty, which states that poverty is a violation of human dignity (OHCHR, n.d.). The right to be free of the burden of poverty should be seen as the most fundamental human right (Speth, 1998).

*Fundamentally, poverty is a denial of choices and opportunities, a violation of human dignity. It means lack of basic capacity to participate effectively in society. It means not having enough to feed and cloth[e] a family, not having a school or clinic to go to, not having the land on which to grow one's food or a job to earn one's living, not having access to credit. It means insecurity, powerlessness and exclusion of individuals, households and communities. It means susceptibility to violence, and it often implies living on marginal or fragile environments, without access to clean water or sanitation. (UN, 1998)*

For a comprehensive study of poverty, understanding why some people are poor is very important. Feagin (1975) researched the common beliefs among people about the causes of poverty. He identified three causes of poverty – individualistic, structuralist, and fatalistic. Individualistic beliefs place the responsibility for being poor on the shoulders of the poor people themselves. Poor people are believed to be lazy and lack ability or effort. Structuralist beliefs locate the causes of poverty in the social and economic systems, for example, lack of employment opportunities, and discrimination. According to fatalistic beliefs, poverty is caused by nonstructural supra-individual forces such as luck, chance, sickness, and so on (Hunt, 2002).

These causal attributions of poverty cannot be considered as a component of attitudes, but they are highly related to attitudes. And attitudes are important predictors of people's behavior (da Costa & Dias, 2015). Research has shown that negative stereotypes about the poor are related to the belief that individual factors are the main reason why people become poor (Cozzarelli et al., 2001, p. 209). Moreover, these causal attributions might have a direct impact on the image of the poor in society, which also reflects the level of support of the rest



of society for social welfare programs and other poverty eradication measures. The research by Kluegel (1987) demonstrated that in United States where in the 70s the main cause of poverty was associated with the individuals and their morals and behavior, the welfare system tended to be less generous. However, later research by da Costa & Dias (2015)<sup>2</sup> suggests a lack of relation between poverty perceptions and welfare system due to other values and cultural attitudes which might be involved.

While poverty is recognized as a major global issue, there is a lack of an integrated approach to addressing poverty in teaching. Some teaching methods might encourage students to adopt compassionate or sympathetic attitudes instead of more emphatic attitudes toward the poor. While compassion might incite the students to get engaged in heartwarming gestures or even resort to charity to alleviate the urgent needs of the poor, it does not solve the root causes of poverty (Segal, 2007). Others advocate for more experiential approaches providing students with an opportunity to get a direct experience with people living in poverty. Nevertheless, some experiential practices might lead to the marginalization of certain groups of students (Breunig, 2019) or to the reinforcement of social hierarchies, and patronization (Forbes et al., 1999, as cited in Mitchell, 2007). Therefore, as Green (2021) proposes, Experiential Learning should be addressed through social, economic, racial, and environmental justice lenses.

Hence, this thesis hopes to explore further the field of teaching about poverty by examining a concrete simulation tool on secondary school students in Slovakia. I believe that teaching about poverty should not be underestimated, as understanding poverty and its causes can help us in creating a more just and equitable society. In this sense, this research study, although not generalizable, hopes to provide an example of how education can contribute to a more just and sustainable society.

Regarding the structure of this research study, it is divided into an Introductory chapter including operational definitions of the term whose understanding is essential for navigating smoothly through the following pages, then a Literature Review and Theoretical Framework. As a main Theoretical Framework, I employ the theory of Experiential Learning and Education as developed by Dewey and later by Kolb and which are discussed in the first two subchapters. However, the last subchapter of the Theoretical Framework is somehow different from the previous ones. While the focus of the first two subchapters is to introduce a specific theory centered around one person, the focus of the last subchapter is to rather trace out various attempts to employ critical lenses in the theory of Experiential Learning and Education. The Theoretical Framework is followed by the chapter on Research

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<sup>2</sup> The research was based on 27746 individuals coming from 27 European Union countries and Croatia (candidate country at that time).

Methods where I introduce the methodological choices made in this research study. The analytical part consists of a chapter with the findings, which is followed by Discussion and Conclusions.

## 1.1. Research Problem and Statement of Relevance

Teaching about poverty might turn quite challenging, especially for more privileged students who do not have a direct experience with people living in poverty (Smith-Carrier et al., 2018, as cited in Gabarda, 2019). Students can be either provided with first-hand experience through programs such as service learning or community-based learning, or they can learn in a simulated environment through Poverty Simulations. Here, simulations provide a context that helps to compensate for individual experiences.

A simulation is an operating representation of central features of reality (Coppard and Goodman, 1977, as cited in Dorn, 1989). According to Prado et al. (2020), simulations represent an effective pedagogical method to teach the multidimensional and inter-temporal characteristics of the concept of sustainable development. They are especially useful in situations when the students lack exposure to a certain topic, as they provide a space for constructing them. Simulation activities are based the experiential learning, which can take place in a simulated environment as well as in a real-world setting (Kolb & Lewis, 1986).

While Poverty Simulations might turn out to be more effective than conventional teaching methods at emphasizing abstract concepts (Jessup, 2001), they have also been criticized for their lack of “critical attention to underlying biases, assumptions, and traditions of power“ (Brown & Roll, 2016, p. 255). Therefore, instead of raising awareness about important global issues like poverty, quite on the contrary, Poverty Simulations might perpetuate systems of oppression (Brown & Roll, 2016). Also, if Poverty Simulations are not implemented through a more critical lens, students might adopt a sympathetic attitude toward the poor instead of a more emphatic attitude (Segal, 2007).

Research has shown that Poverty Simulations might have a positive impact on students’ understanding of poverty, and might result in higher retention of knowledge, improved attitudes toward people living in poverty, and higher levels of empathy (Nickols & Nielsen, 2011; Noone et al., 2012; Patterson & Hulton, 2012; Vandsburger et al., 2010; Steck et al., 2011; Yang et al., 2014; Davidson et al., 2009; Strasser et al., 2013; Todd et al., 2011; Engler et al., 2020; Hitchcock et al., 2018; Sanko et al., 2021; Todd et al., 2011).

Apart from more empathetic attitudes, some Poverty Simulations also aspire to improve students’ understanding of the causes of poverty. This point seems to be quite important, because, as Cozzarelli et al. (2001) suggest, negative stereotypes about poor people are related to the individual attributions of poverty. However, the research remains inconsistent

regarding the effect of Poverty Simulations on the perceived attributions of the causes of poverty. While some research results show a change in participants' beliefs from individual causes of poverty to structural causes of poverty (Noone et al., 2012; Bramesfeld & Good 2015, and 2016; Engler et al., 2019; Engler et al., 2020), others, quite on the contrary, show no significant change in participants' beliefs. Participants retain their beliefs that poverty is caused by individuals themselves and not by structural inequality in our society (Nieves, 2018; Patterson & Hulton, 2012; Vandsburger et al., 2010).

In order to avoid replicating stereotypical views about poor people as lazy or incapable, special attention should be paid to how the simulation is designed and what message it transmits to the students. Hence, an intervention with the elements of Action Research; consisting of an educational intervention based on Experiential Learning complemented with a critical view on social justice and inequality is implemented in order to evaluate secondary school students' understanding of people living in poverty, more specifically their beliefs about the causes of poverty.

After a detailed revision of various simulation tools and the evaluation of their effectiveness, I decided to use a not well-known Poverty Simulation tool called "C'est la vie! The Game of Social Life" for my intervention. This tool, unlike all other poverty simulations, depicts inequality through the lenses of intersectionality (Bramesfeld and Good, 2016). My decision was motivated by the fact that intersectionality does not portray marginalized groups as homogenous, but through the examination of their intersecting identities, and therefore provides a deeper analysis of structural processes which aggravate their vulnerability (Saatcioglu & Canan, 2014). I assume that an intersectional approach employed in this poverty simulation might help the students to acknowledge the structural barriers faced by the poor people.

## 1.2. Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this study is to investigate if the Poverty Simulation "C'est la vie! The Game of Social Life" implemented in the secondary school class was effective in increasing students' understanding of poverty, including the structural causes of poverty. This study was framed as an educational intervention with elements of Action Research. The study used Mixed Methods Research (MMR) consisting of pre- and post-intervention questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, through which the following research questions were aimed to be answered:

Research Question 1: *What were the attitudes toward poverty of the 9th-grade students before and after the simulation activity?*

Research Question 2: *How do the 9th-grade students assess the effects of the simulation activity on their understanding of poverty?*

Even though the nature of this study (AR, small sample) does not permit generalizability or external validation (Fraenkel et al., 2019, p. 529), it can still serve as an example of how to teach about poverty, and it can become a starting point for further research. I believe that teaching with critical aspects will, on the individual level, help students to see poverty in its complexity, unveil its main causes, and become more emphatic. On the societal level, it can help to find more effective measures for poverty eradication, which is undoubtedly one of the prerequisites for achieving sustainable development.

### 1.3. Operational Terms and Definitions

To enhance clarity of this research study, below, I provide enumerate several approaching to defining poverty, explain different approaches to measuring attitudes toward poverty, and provide an explanation of simulation activities as an educational tool. All these terms are important in developing my main arguments set forth in this research study.

#### 1.3.1. Poverty

While there seems to be a general agreement on the importance of poverty eradication, there is little agreement on the definition of poverty. Laderchi et al. (2003) present four main approaches to the definition and measurement of poverty, each presenting its own construction of reality which then translates into different poverty measures.

1. *Monetary or economic approach* is the most commonly used approach. It identifies poverty as a shortfall in consumption or income from the poverty line (Laderchi et al., 2003). Wagle (2019) adds to the above-mentioned categories of consumption and income also welfare. These measures can be defined using absolute, relative and subjective concepts.

2. *Capabilities approach* is based on Sen's concept of capabilities which rejects monetary income as an indicator of well-being. Well-being is seen as the freedom of individuals to live the life they value. Poverty is defined as failure to achieve certain minimal or basic capabilities, while basic capabilities are defined as "the ability to satisfy certain crucially important functioning up to certain minimally adequate levels" (Laderchi et al., 2003, Sen, 2000).

3. *Social exclusion* goes beyond the first two approaches. A person with adequate economic means and capabilities can still be excluded from the economic, political, civic, and cultural activities that are embedded in the concept of human well-being (Wagle, 2019).

4. *Participatory approach* arose in reaction to criticism of conventional poverty estimates, including both monetary and capability approaches. Unlike conventional measurements, participatory poverty assessments takes into account the views of poor people themselves (Laderchi et al., 2003).

While some authors believe that poverty and its causes are well-defined concepts, especially by emphasizing its multidimensional nature (Alkire, 2013), others claim that there has been little progress in understanding poverty and defining its causes. According to Fisher (2018), these shortcomings arise from ideologically driven views of poverty, which, instead of acting in the interest of social justice, quite on the contrary, legitimize oppression. As an example, he states colonial legacies on the basis of improvements in health and education in many colonies. Fisher (2018) claims that the very conception of poverty is inherently political, and that poverty analysis tends to veil such politics with an illusion of scientific objectivity, which in turn allows the shifts in theory and practice to be hidden behind the principles of “charity and altruism”.

Examining poverty from a historical point of view, we can distinguish between two main paradigms – conservative and structural. The conservative paradigm is closely tied with the concept of “the culture of poverty”<sup>3</sup> introduced by the anthropologist Oscar Lewis, according to which poor people have psychological, moral, behavioral, and cultural pathologies or deficits (1966, as cited in Garrett 2018). This discourse, portraying people in poverty as damaged and as “Others”, prevailed in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which then became known as a deficit perspective or stigmatizing discourse.

While the focus of the conservative paradigm is on pathological behaviors, the focus of the structural paradigm is on societal inequality, which is understood in the terms of the conditions of the poor as well as the redistribution of wealth the society. Poverty as a structure of limited opportunities is particularly associated with certain groups of people, such as women or minority ethnic groups. Limited opportunities are usually translated into unsafe jobs, unhealthy and violent neighborhoods, low-quality schools, and health services (Garrett, 2018).

### **1.3.2. Poverty in Slovakia**

According to the report released by European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions, there were more than 800 000 people at risk of poverty or social exclusion

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<sup>3</sup> Anthropologist Oscar Lewis based his theorization on the empirical work in Mexico and Puerto Rico. The focus of his research was on behaviours and beliefs and how they can result in multigenerational poverty. He claimed that “design for living” is passed down from one generation to another. The “culture of poverty” which became known in 1960s fuelled a retrogressive perspective on welfare in the US (Garrett, 2018).

(AROPE) in Slovakia in 2021, which represents 15.6 % of total population in Slovakia<sup>4</sup>. AROPE indicator corresponds to the sum of persons who are either at risk of income poverty (12.3%), or severely materially and socially deprived (5.7%), or living in a household with a very low work intensity (3.9%).

Among the most relevant factors influencing the AROPE are age, gender, and geographical location. Regarding the gender, women in Slovakia are more susceptible to AROPE than men (1.1 % more). Looking from the age perspective, the report concludes that children are at higher risk of AROPE as compared to adults and elderly people. Although Slovakia belongs to the countries with the lowest levels of income inequality with Gini coefficient reaching 21.8%, there are significant economic and social disparities between the regions which are mostly linked to uneven economic development, infrastructure, lack of institutional background (Michálek & Sládekova, 2019)<sup>5</sup>. The lowest AROPE level is at Bratislava region (4.0 %), the highest is at Banská Bystrica region (19.1 %) and Prešov region (19.2%) (Štatistický úrad SR, 2022).

Apart from regional differences, many studies show that the Roma<sup>6</sup> are the most vulnerable population group in Slovakia threatened by poverty and social exclusion (Michálek & Sládekova, 2019; Kahanec et al. 2020, Rochovská & Rusnáková, 2018; Kende et al., 2017). The AROPE of Roma community reaches 87%, with levels several times more elevated than in general population (Kahanec et al., 2020). Roma face social exclusion in almost every aspect of their everyday life, including housing<sup>7</sup>, education<sup>8</sup>, health care and employment. Many of them have been trapped in a cycle of generational poverty with very weak upward social mobility between generations (OECD et al., 2019). As many as 54% of Roma in Slovakia self-reported being discriminated on the basis of their Roma origin in the last five years (Kahanec et al., 2020).

### **1.3.3. Measuring Attitudes toward Poverty**

Attitudes are considered important predicting factors of the ways in which people behave, especially when attitudes are held with a high degree of certainty, are formed by direct

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<sup>4</sup> The EU average of AROPE in 2021 was 21.7% corresponding to 95.4 million people (Eurostat, 2022).

<sup>5</sup> Regarding the disparities in regional values, we can observe a gap between Bratislava region with the lowest levels of Gini coefficient (19.3%) and Banská Bystrica region (24.5%) and Prešov region (23.5%) with the highest values of Gini coefficient indicating higher levels of income inequality (Štatistický úrad SR, 2022).

<sup>6</sup> According to the data from 2013, the Roma population in Slovakia amounted to 402 840 people which corresponds to 7.45% of the total population, being the third most populous ethnic group in Slovakia after Hungarians and Slovaks (Radičová et al., 2014, as cited in Rochovská & Rusnáková, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> According to The Atlas of Roma Communities, 18.4% of the total Roma population live in segregated settlements (Mušinka et al., 2014, as cited in Rochovská & Rusnáková, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> Roma students have been unjustifiably enrolled into ethnically segregated special schools and classes, which in 2014 resulted in infringement proceedings against the Slovak Republic by European Commission for discrimination based on grounds such as race or ethnic origin (Kahanec et al., 2020).

experience, and are stable and accessible (Kraus, 1995, as cited in Cozzarelli et al., 2001). Most of the measurements of attitudes toward poverty are based on attributions for poverty. Even though attributions are not a direct part of one's attitude, they are highly related to attitudes toward poverty (Cozzarelli et al., 2001). Attitudes toward poverty have multidimensional nature with attributions frequently based on two constructs – individualistic and structural (Yun & Weaver, 2010, p. 174). According to individualistic beliefs, poverty is caused by persons themselves, due to factors such as lack of ability, low intelligence, or laziness, whereas structural beliefs emphasize insufficiencies of the economic system including poor schools, low wages, and discrimination (Hunt, 2004). The third identified explanation for poverty is fatalistic, which characterizes poverty as being related to uncontrollable factors such as disability, sickness, or bad luck (Yun & Weaver, 2010).

Tools that assess attitudes toward poverty can be very helpful in the evaluation of teaching by assessing the impact of the teaching programs (Neto et al., 2022; Blair et al., 2004). The three constructs (individual, structural, and fatalistic) identified by Feagin (1972) have been widely used in a variety of measurements of people's attitudes toward poverty, for example in the 9-item Economic Success Scale to evaluate beliefs about reasons for economic success (Cryns, 1977), or in Golding and Middleton (1982)'s 12-item scale.

This research study employs the Attitudes toward Poverty Short Form, which is based on the Attitudes toward Poverty (ATP) 37-item Likert-type scale developed and validated by Atherton et al. (1993). Attitudes toward Poverty Short Form was simplified into a 21-item scale, showing reliability compatible with the original scale (Neto et al., 2022). The scale is based on three factors - Personal Deficiency, Stigma and Structural Perspective (Yun & Weaver, 2010).

#### **1.3.4. Simulation Activities**

To simulate refers to achieving the essence of something without reality (Barton, 1970, as cited in Dorn, 1989). Simulation is a teaching and learning technique that is used to introduce real-world experiences in a controlled environment (Simones, 2008, as cited in Gabard, 2019). Simulations involve activities where the players interact with each other by playing roles in a space representing reality or its part, and where players are constrained by a set of explicit rules (Dorn, 1989). The roles assigned to players usually represent people in the real world. The players usually seek to attain certain goals and are provided with restricted resources.

Simulation activities are based the experiential learning, which can take place in a simulated environment as well as in a real-world setting (Kolb & Lewis, 1986). If used in sociology, simulation activities can illustrate the structuralist perspective, the social construction of

reality, social stratification, ethnocentrism, inequality, and the social imagination (Dorn, 1989). They might be useful in contexts where a specific group of people lacks exposure to a certain topic, for instance, poverty. People from higher social classes or who have been granted more privileges might not be exposed to any contact with people in poverty or marginalized in other way, therefore might hold a stereotypical view of poverty and its causes.



## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Teaching about Poverty

Most of the research about teaching poverty concerns teaching at universities. Even though addressing poverty has become a priority at universities, especially American universities, there is a lack of an integrated approach. Because of its complexity, poverty can be addressed through different subjects of the curriculum, however, it also risks not being addressed at all (Austin, 2007, as cited in Blaire, 2011).

Teachers who teach about poverty should make some important choices. Firstly, if they wish to address global poverty or poverty within one specific country. Secondly, how will be the underlying causes of poverty approached – is it an economic problem or it is an issue of individuals or culture (Blaire, 2011)?

Segal (2007) believes that to be able to effectively address the issue of poverty, social empathy should be developed. It is important to point out that social empathy is different from sympathy or compassion. If we adopt a sympathetic or compassionate attitude, we usually feel bad and sorry for people being poor. Therefore, we are motivated to help, which might alleviate our bad feelings by resorting to charity. However, charity does not solve the root of the problem, on the contrary, it only addresses the consequences and the most urgent needs with no long-lasting impact.

Social Empathy can help us to understand the experiences of marginalized, oppressed, and poor people by building on a three-tiered model. This model is composed of three elements – exposure, explanation, and experience. Firstly, students should be exposed to differences among people through the media or theoretical information, however, the most effective way is to have an occasion to interact directly with these groups of people. Secondly, students should seek an explanation of the differences between themselves and others. In the last step, students should have a chance to participate in the day-to-day lives of poor people, which helps them truly understand what it means to be poor (Segal, 2007).

Blaire and Santos suggest two main approaches to teaching about poverty – “strongly academic” and “strongly experiential” (2015, p. 117). The “Strongly academic” approach emphasizes the use of empirical data, census reports, and scholarly approaches with an emphasis on political and economic policies. Assignments in such courses usually include

analysis of data and the impact of policy changes. The “Strongly experiential” approach refers to direct exposure to the experience of poverty through volunteering or service programs. Assignments in such programs usually include participation and keeping of journals, reflection papers, and discussions about students’ experiences. There is usually an emphasis on empathizing with those living in poverty (Blair & Santos, 2015; Blair, 201).

Nevertheless, a “Strongly experiential“ approach such as service learning might fail to address the structural causes of social problems. Instead of generating empathy toward poor or oppressed people, such approaches only create sympathy which might motivate the students to get engaged in acts of charity, but not in any pro-democratic actions calling for social change. Therefore, Blair & Santos (2015) argue that teaching about poverty should not be done as an expression of goodwill to help the poor, but rather as a necessity to equip the students with the ethical orientation that challenge the basic assumptions of neoliberal economics contributing to the growing inequalities. To be able to do so, an integrated academic and experiential approach is needed.

Similarly, Bush and O'Dell (2018), suggest that teaching about poverty should not be seen only as an academic matter, but also as a social, political, and personal concern. Teaching about poverty should fulfill three conditions. Firstly, students should be engaged in dialogue about inequality and poverty analyzing the societal structures, secondly, they should be engaged either in personal or simulated experiences about poverty and inequality which helps them to foster empathy. Lastly, students should have the opportunity to identify the oppressive social contexts in which inequality is embedded and also search for alternatives for change. They conclude that poverty and inequality should be taught in a dialogical and experiential way. In dialogical teaching the division between the teacher and student is blurred, teachers discuss problems with students to identify meaning and means of overcoming the limiting situations (Shor, 1993, as cited in Bush & O'Dell ,2018).

Cai (2021) agrees that it is important to establish a dialogue with the students about some of the problematic concepts of poverty education, for example, “helping the poor“. A dialogic critical pedagogy would create a space to problematize students’ understanding of “helping the poor“ as a charitable act by drawing upon Hytten’s social justice concept of help or by drawing upon Freire’s concept of critical pedagogy. He also underlines students’ need of understanding the value and limitations of these approaches in order to think more critically about poverty and to strive for sustainable development.

### **2.1.1. Teaching about poverty and ESD**

The literature on ESD does not address directly teaching about poverty, however, it does address the overreaching concept of inequality. Although there is an agreement about the necessity of eradicating poverty and inequality (WCED, 1987), as Knutsson (2020)

suggests, the relationship between inequality and ESD is an under-researched topic. Knutsson`s research focuses on how ESD can accommodate the differences between the wealthy and needy in assigning them roles in their search for SD. He concludes that ESD risks of reproducing “inequality and unsustainable ways of living rather than creating conditions for sustainability” as it assigns different roles and responsibilities to the rich and poor (Knutssn, 2020, p. 662).

Walrenius (2022) investigates the teaching practice of ESD and points out to the lack of criticism of ESD of the current capitalist system, which is blamed for being the main cause of poverty and inequality in today`s society. He argues that in order to understand the systemic foundations and root causes of the contemporary problems, ESD should incorporate some aspects of the critical perspectives of ecopedagogies. While both ESD and ecopedagogy emphasize critical thinking, for ESD critical thinking refers to “think critically about and (beyond) what experts say” (Rieckmann, 2018a, p. 41 as cited in Warlenius, 2022), unlike for ecopedagogy, where the critical perspectives are at its center. Ecopedagogy draws on a tradition of critical theory that focuses on power structures (Warlenius, 2022, p.149). Dismantling the power structures are crucial in creating more just society free of any kind of oppression.

### **2.1.2. Teaching about Poverty in Slovakia**

In Slovakia, according to the official state curriculum, the topics of inequality, social justice, and poverty might be included in the thematic unit of People and Society, which is the umbrella term for the three subjects; History, Geography, and Civic Education. Nevertheless, the implicit topic of poverty is missing from the state curriculum. The state curriculum only prescribes thematic units with learning objectives. The schools are responsible for achieving these learning objectives; however, the specific content and implementation depend on the decision of every school's management. In Civic Education, two thematic units which are the closest to the issue of poverty and which might include the topic of poverty are “Social and political tension in society“ and “Volunteering and charity“ (ŠPÚ, 2022). If poverty is included in the second thematic unit, it might most probably be introduced through the lenses of sympathy and compassion by acknowledging the importance of helping the poor, without a more critical approach toward social justice.

## **2.2. Poverty Simulations**

Nowadays, a variety of Poverty Simulation tools differing in their nature (on-site or online) and complexity are available, for example, “Beat the Bourgeoisie” (Norris, 2013), “Oxfam Hunger Banquet“ (*Host an Oxfam Hunger Banquet*®, n.d., Northrup, 2020), Tabletop Simulation “Dwell” (Matters at Play, Sanko et al., 2023), digital game “Spent“ (*SPENT*, n.d.), online game “Free Rice” (UN WFP, n.d.), “Poverty Simulation in Second Life”

(Menzel et al., 2014), and “Welcome to the State of Poverty” (Strasser, 2013 et al., Nickols & Nielsen, 2011). The most widely used as well as the most researched Poverty Simulation is “Community Action Poverty Simulation”, so-called CAPS (The Poverty Simulation - Poverty Simulation, 2022). In a classroom environment, more simple and less time-consuming forms of simulations can be implemented, such as “Budget Exercises” (Garoutte & Bobbitt-Zeher, 2011; Carreiro & Kapitulik, 2010) or “The Paper Bag Game” (The Christian Aid, n.d., Davidson et al., 2009).

Most of the research about poverty simulations concentrates on the evaluation of the effectiveness of a specific poverty simulation tool, especially the effectiveness of CAPS which is the most researched poverty simulation tool (Merlin-Knoblich et al., 2022; Engler et al., 2020; Engler et al., 2019; Hitchcock et al., 2018; Hsieh et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2014; Noone et al., 2012; Steck et al., 2011; Todd et al., 2011; Vandsburger et al., 2010). Though, several research studies also compare the effectiveness of two different poverty simulation tools, namely CAPS and Oxfam American Hunger Banquet (Northrup et al., 2020), CAPS and Tabletop Simulation Dwell (Sanko et al., 2021), and the digital game Spent and Free Rice (Hernández-Ramos et al., 2019).

Poverty simulations have mostly been employed in the teaching of graduate and undergraduate students of public health and health services (Sanko et al., 2021; Hitchcock et al., 2018; Hsieh et al., 2018; Vandsburger et al., 2010; Strasser et al., 2013), nursing (Northrup et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2014; Menzel et al., 2014; Patterson & Hulton, 2012; Noone et al., 2012), sociology and psychology (Bramsfeld & Good, 2016; Steck et al., 2011; Garoutte & Bobbitt-Zeher, 2011; Fisher, 2008; Coghlan & Huggins, 2004). There is a lack of research available focusing on the impact of poverty simulations on high school or secondary school students. Since most of the research is on CAPS, created by the Missouri Community of Jefferson City, it focuses on the population of the United States. Therefore, I decided to focus my research on secondary school students in Slovakia, where no similar research has yet been implemented.

Regarding the benefits of poverty simulations, several studies have demonstrated improved general views toward poverty and people living in poverty. More specifically, participation in the Poverty Simulation positively influenced participants’ attitudes toward poverty and increased awareness of the difficulties faced by people living in poverty (Nickols & Nielsen, 2011; Noone et al., 2012; Patterson & Hulton, 2012; Vandsburger et al., 2010), including an enhanced awareness of the social and material conditions of poverty (Steck et al., 2011). Also, students’ negative feelings toward people living in poverty were reduced (Yang et al., 2014; Davidson et al., 2009; Nickols & Nielsen, 2011; Noone et al., 2012; Patterson & Hulton, 2012; Strasser et al., 2013; Todd et al., 2011). Poverty Simulations have proved to

be effective in promoting the retention of knowledge and improving perceptions toward people living in poverty (Steck et al., 2011; Engler et al., 2020; Hitchcock et al., 2018; Sanko et al., 2021; Todd et al., 2011). Moreover, they elicited more empathy for people in poverty (Hitchcock et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2014; Strasser et al., 2013; Nickols & Nielsen, 2011; Vandsburger et al., 2010). Nevertheless, other authors seem to be more reserved evaluating the effectiveness of Poverty Simulation tools, both physical and virtual, stating that they have some power to transform students' cognitive and affective domains, but deny the possibility of any radical changes in the attitudes toward poor people (Menzel et al., 2014).

While research shows that the general views toward poverty were mostly improved, it reveals inconsistent results regarding the attributions of poverty. Some researchers claim that Poverty Simulation is an effective strategy to modify participants' attributions related to causes of poverty (Bramesfeld & Good, 2015 and 2016; Noone et al., 2012; Engler et al., 2019; Engler et al., 2020). Nickols and Nielsen (2011) found out that simulation only helped students understand some structural barriers and softened their opinions regarding structural causes. However, other research shows that Poverty Simulations did not have a significant impact on students' attributions about the causes of poverty (Nieves, 2018; Patterson & Hulton, 2012; Vandsburger et al., 2010). Hitchcock et al. (2018) proved improvements in students' ability to think critically about poverty, which does not necessarily prove students' ability to attribute poverty to structural causes.

Another inconsistency in the research regards the willingness of the students to take action. While some students were motivated to get more involved with impoverished communities (Patterson & Hulton, 2012), others found that the change in attitude did not motivate them to get more engaged with poor populations (Davidson et al., 2009).

Besides the inconsistency in the effectiveness of Poverty Simulation tools, Browne and Roll (2016) warn that if Poverty Simulations are not implemented with intention and critical considerations, they can perpetuate the systems of oppression, as they tend to overlook the biases, and assumptions of power. Therefore, they suggest that Poverty Simulations should consider teacher-student power relations and the students' personal experiences related to poverty in contrast to constructed experiences through the simulation activity. Also, Merlin-Knoblich et al. (2022) suggest that poverty is a complex problem impacting many different groups of marginalized people, such as immigrants, people of colour, people with disabilities, and so on. Therefore, an intersectional approach should be further examined.

In light of the above-mentioned criticism, "C'est La Vie: The Game of Social Life" is designed as an experiential simulation activity employing intersectionality as its main framework (Bramesfeld & Good, 2016). The activity explores the questions of privilege,

oppression, and inequality. The intersectional approach helps to avoid “us versus them” dichotomies, which often come to play in discussions between students with more privileged and marginalized identities. (Banks, Pliner, & Hopkins, 2013, as cited in Bramesfeld & Good, 2016, p. 294). Even though the simulation activity does not focus specifically on the issue of poverty, the students get a chance to reflect on this topic from a broader perspective and reflect on the role of privilege and oppression in maintaining systems of inequalities.

The author of “C’est La Vie: The Game of Social Life” conducted a study with a sample of 55 students of community and social psychology. The research used pre-test and post-test evaluation through open-ended questions and rating scale items. It revealed that students acknowledged some categories of privileged and marginalized identities, focused more on structural causes of social problems, and reported higher acknowledgment of structural inequality (Bramesfeld & Good, 2016). Based on these research results, I believe that understanding the broader context of structural inequalities might enable students to view poverty as one of the many social problems occurring due to structural causes. Hence, this research study will explore further the potential of using “C’est La Vie: The Game of Social Life” for teaching about poverty.

## 3. Theoretical Framework

### 3.1. Experiential Education and Experiential Learning

Experiential Education and Learning are sometimes used interchangeably, however, there is a distinction. Experiential learning is informal, “one can learn through experience in any number of contexts and curriculum situations”. Experiential education “involves a broader and more systematic pedagogical process” (Roberts, 2016, as cited in Varker and Small, 2021, p. 14). Over the last decades, Experimental Education has gained considerable recognition, which has led to its popularity, wide use, and also increased specialization into numerous sub-fields, such as study abroad and global immersion programs, outdoor education programs, community-based learning (both domestic and global service-learning), internship and work-integrated learning, undergraduate research experiences, global engagement, and a variety of other high-impact learning programs (Green, 2021; Varker and Small, 2021).

#### 3.1.1. Dewey’s Legacy

Origins of Experiential Education date back to John Dewey. Dewey in his theory of education positions himself between “traditional” and “progressive” education, critically examining both. Traditional education assumes that the world will not undergo any changes, it will always be somewhat similar to the past, which according to Dewey, makes it too sturdy and static of a concept (Dewey, 1963, p. 19). Progressive education, on the other hand, fails to recognize the connection between the past and present experience (1963, p. 23).

According to Dewey, experience is a crucial element in the educational process, it should be the “means and goal of education” (1963, p. 89). It is formed by continuity and interaction – continuity refers to how past and present experiences influence future experiences, while interaction refers to how one's current situation influences their experiences (1963, p. 44). The main challenge of education based on experience is to choose the kind of present experiences that “live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences” (1963, p. 26). Here, Dewey emphasizes the role of an educator, who should not only be aware of how the environment shapes the experience but should also recognize which environmental factors are conducive to developing experiences leading to the growth of the students (1963, p. 39).

According to Dewey, experience sparks students' curiosity, and also enables them to become more proactive in their learning process (1963, p. 38). Therefore, experience can also serve as an important motivational factor in students' learning path. Another motivational factor is the purpose, which should be developed according to students' needs and interests. Students should take an active part in creating the purpose of their learning together with the teacher who keeps evaluating students' past and present experiences and helps the students to develop a formative plan (1963, p. 71).

It should be noted that mere experiences are not enough to reach educational goals. For experiences to become educative, they need to be complemented by the subject-matter of facts, information and ideas (1963, p. 87). Therefore, Dewey suggests introducing an interdisciplinary curriculum, which would enable students to interact with a variety of different information sources and multiple subjects, which would then expand into new experiences enabling students to grow.

### **3.1.2. Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle**

Building on John Dewey's contribution to the field of Experiential Education and psychologist Kurt Lewin's contribution to training and organization development, David Kolb developed the theory of the Experiential Learning Cycle, which is one of the most famous manifestations of Experiential Learning (Tomkins & Ulus, 2016).

Kolb defined learning as a "process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (2015, p. 49). His intention was not to propose a new alternative to behavioral and cognitive learning theories, but rather a "holistic integrative perspective on learning that combines experience, perception, cognition, and behavior" (Kolb, 2015, p. 31).

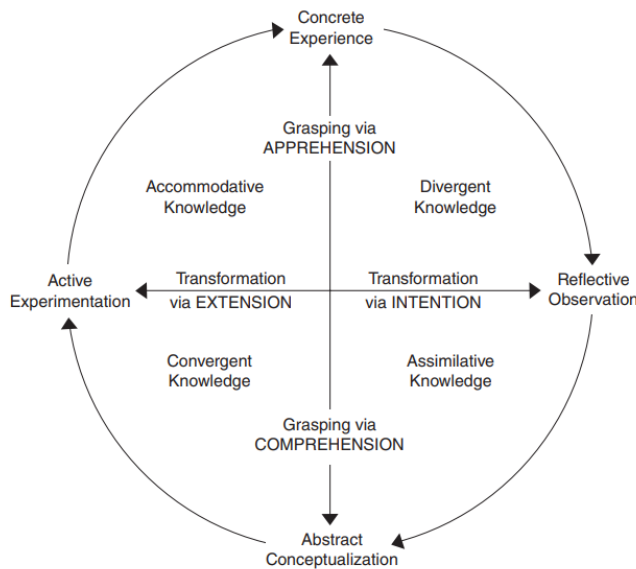
According to Kolb, the learning process is based on two basic structural dimensions – prehension and transformation dimensions. The prehension dimension includes two dialectically opposed modes of grasping experience – through direct apprehension of immediate concrete experience and indirect comprehension of symbolic representations of experience. The transformation dimension includes two dialectically opposed modes of transforming experience through intentional reflection (intention) and extensional action (extension). Here, extension refers to an active interaction with the external world. Interaction between apprehension, comprehension, intention, and extension results in four different kinds of knowledge. Experience grasped through apprehension and transformed through intention results in divergent knowledge. Experience grasped through comprehension and transformed through intention results in assimilative knowledge. Experience grasped through comprehension and transformed through extension leads to



accommodative knowledge. Lastly, experience grasped by apprehension and transformed by extension leads to accommodative knowledge, see Figure 1 (2015, p. 67 - 68).

**Figure 1**

*Structural Dimensions Underlying the Process of Experiential Learning and the Resulting Basic Knowledge Forms (Kolb, 2015, p. 68)*

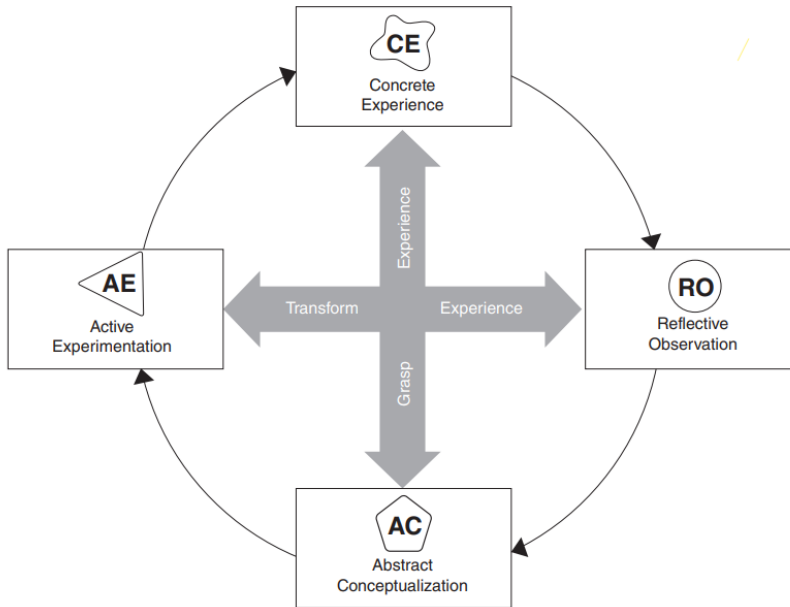


Kolb claims that learning, similarly to knowing, needs to fulfill two conditions – “a grasp or figurative representation of experience” and “transformation of that experience”. Therefore, only perception of the experience is not enough for learning to happen, there needs to be some kind of representation of experience and that representation needs to undergo a transformation, while both conditions should have equal status (Kolb, 2015, p. 68).

The Experiential Learning Cycle has been widely adopted in formal education as well as informal educational institutions. It is often simplified into four stages – concrete experience needs to go through a reflective observation, then follows abstract conceptualization, and finally, the new concepts need to be tested through active experimentation (2015, p. 44), see Figure 2). Many poverty simulations are claimed to be based on the four stages of Kolb’s Experiential Learning Cycle (Merlin-Knoblich, 2022; Sanko et al., 2021; Browne & Roll, 2016; Steck et al., 2011).

**Figure 2**

*The Experiential Learning Cycle* (Kolb, 2015, p. 51)



### 3.1.3. Critical Approaches to Experiential Learning and Education

While Experiential Learning is believed to be a powerful concept, it has been criticized by some for “essentializing and narrativizing experience as a knowable resource to be exploited in the service of rationalistic and utilitarian notions of knowledge”. These views have suppressed “transgressive identities and meanings” and the pre-Cartesian view of experience as “embodied, communal, and fruitfully incoherent” (Michelson, 1996, as cited in Fenwick, 2000, p. 244). Moreover, Experiential Learning often ignores issues of identity, politics, and discursive complexities of human experience. Fenwick calls for the need to disrupt and resist “reductionist, binary, individualized” notions of Experiential Learning by proposing five alternative perspectives of Experiential Learning (2000, p. 244) which are the following:

1. Reflection - a constructivist perspective
2. Interference - a psychoanalytic perspective rooted in the Freudian tradition
3. Participation - from perspectives of situated cognition

4. Resistance - a critical cultural perspective
5. Co-emergence - from the enactivist perspective emanating from neuroscience and evolutionary theory

Critical cultural perspective represents those perspectives in Critical Pedagogy, Feminist theory, Poststructural Theory, and Postcolonial Studies which reflect the issues of power. According to this perspective, learning in a particular cultural space is shaped by discourses that often create dualistic categories such as men/women, which reflect the unequal distribution of power. These discourses lead to excluding the “others”. Educators should become aware of their role in power relations and the production of meaning and help their students to be able to reflect critically on their roles within the complexity of power structures, while learners should learn how to “trace the politics and constraints of the contexts of Experiential Learning” (Fenwick, 2000).

Building on Kolb’s Experiential Learning theory, Biren et al. (2003) propose a different theoretical model of Experiential Learning which they refer to as “engaged learning for democracy and justice”. Apart from Kolb’s theory, it also draws from multicultural education, critical pedagogy, and Freireian dialogic education. Their research shows that Experiential Learning and Teaching have the potential for raising the critical consciousness of students and increasing structural inequalities.

Breunig (2019) notes that Experiential Education includes implicit and explicit dominant norms which often lead to implicit bias - the unconscious attribution based on our past experiences associated with an individual or a group. Sometimes, these implicit social and cultural messages may be reflected in teaching as a “hidden curriculum”. The research has shown that outdoor experiential education transferred messages to the students valuing men over women and physical skills over intellectual, social, and emotional (Warren et al., 2018, as cited in Breuning, 2019, p. 12). She warns that unexamined Experiential Education practices might lead to the marginalization of certain groups of students. Therefore, she proposes adopting an intersectional approach to disrupt the concept of oppression and privilege in outdoor education (Breunig, 2019).

To illustrate an example, “challenge by choice” is a common educational practice in outdoor education, which allows the students to determine their level of participation in different activities. However, such practice allows making assumptions about their abilities (tipping a canoe), and comfort in participating in some activities (being blindfolded). Therefore, educators implementing such an activity should consider different levels of individual agency and power dynamics within the groups. The students should be thought to consider the intersecting identities “to understand how their privilege enables them the opportunity to

make choices in a manner that those whom are already marginalized or oppressed do not” (Arao & Clemens, 2013, as cited in Breuning, 2019).

Also, service learning as one of the approaches to Experiential Education has been criticized for reinforcement of social hierarchies, patronization, and deficits-based approach to community service (Forbes et al., 1999, as cited in Mitchell, 2007). Unlike traditional service learning, critical service learning fills this gap by questioning the distribution of power in society, and by aiming at developing authentic relationships between the students and the community members (Mitchell, 2007). The social justice orientation of critical service-learning shifts the focus from charity to social change (Boyle-Baise & Langford, 2004, as cited in Mitchell, 2007).

Likewise, Peterson (2015) conducts an inquiry into the concept of study abroad programs and what the commitment to justice and sustainability means for its participants He advocates for applying critical thinking, and grounding students’ behavior in ethical considerations.

The above-mentioned examples show different attempts to incorporate critical lenses into Experiential Education. These rather isolated attempts were complemented by special issues of the *Journal of Experiential Education* (2019, Vol. 42) with a focus on social justice, which is according to Warren an “imperative in Experiential Education” and of *Experiential Learning & Teaching in Higher Education* (2021, Vol.4: No.2) focusing on the theme of “Exploring the Relationship between Experiential Learning and Social, Economic, Racial, and Environmental Justice”. In the latter, Green proposes to employ an “imagination for justice” in Experiential Learning and Teaching, which would bring forward the ethical concerns and would be addressed through social, economic, racial, and environmental justice lenses (Green, 2021, p. 4).

## 4. Methods

### 4.1. Overview of the Research Design

This research study was designed as an educational intervention with elements of Action Research (AR). Mixed Methods Research (MMR) was applied, which took the form of pre-test and post-test questionnaires and semi-structured interviews.

#### 4.1.1. Action Research

AR concerns actions and the transformation of people's practices, it has been employed in various fields, including education, social, and health services. While Elliott emphasizes the improvement of quality of actions within social situations of AR (Elliott, 1991, as cited in Altrichter et al., 2000), Kemmis and McTaggart place emphasis on the improvement of rationality and justice of educational practices within collective self-reflective inquiries undertaken by participants in social situations (1988, as cited in Kemmis, 2010). Moreover, AR shatters the traditional division between the academic researcher and so-called subjects of research by including the participants in the research process (Herr & Anderson, 2005). The participants are no longer labeled as "outsiders" but take on a more active role of "insiders" whose insights are valued within the research. Since the topic of this research study is social-justice-oriented, AR's emphasis on justice is one of the main reasons why this specific method was chosen as a methodological framework.

Another reason is the interconnectedness of theory and practice in the AR projects (Herr & Anderson, 2005). The results of the AR are directly implemented into the teaching practice, which is then evaluated and informs the theoretical framework of the following stage of the AR cycle. Therefore, the results of this AR project can become beneficial relatively soon not only for the teacher and students but the whole school community.

Traditional AR is usually implemented in several cycles, enabling the researcher to keep improving the existing practice over time. The cycle is usually composed of several stages, including investigating the current situation, introducing changes, monitoring the impact of changes, and analyzing and interpreting data to generate actionable knowledge. After analyzing the data, the researcher might get back to the second stage of introducing changes and then repeat the whole cycle again (Given, 2008). In this sense, AR requires time and dedication, which might span over the scope of my Master's thesis. Considering the time

constraints, the scope of this research study needed to be limited to only one single cycle finishing with a list of recommendations for the following future cycles (see section 6.2.).

Regarding external validity or generalizability of the research results, AR projects are quite limited in this aspect (Fraenkel et al., 2019). Hence, it is more reasonable not to talk about the generalization of the research results, but rather about their possible transferability from one setting to another, more specifically from a sending context (of this research study) to a receiving context (of a new research study) (Herr and Anderson, 2005), which would make my research study still a valuable contribution in the educational field.

#### **4.1.2. Mixed Methods Research (MMR)**

MMR involves the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods in a single study, which might help to clarify and explain relationships between the variables (Fraenkel et al., 2019). For the purpose of this research study an explanatory design of MMR was chosen. Firstly, a quantitative method was carried out to obtain results, then a qualitative method was used to refine the quantitative findings. Both types of data were analyzed separately, while qualitative analysis was used to expand on the quantitative results (Fraenkel et al., 2019).

In the field of ESD, MMR is often employed since it can bridge different disciplines by providing a synergistic approach to research design in which different methods inform one another. Mixed methods tend to be used to compare quantitative and qualitative results, validate and explain quantitative data, or enhance an experimental study (Renaumo & Pipere, 2011).

## **4.2. Participants**

This study was conducted at Komenského School in Trenčín, Slovakia (to keep anonymity, the name of the school and its location were changed). The initial contact with the school management was done with a help of my mother who works as a teacher and it well familiarized with the educational context of Slovakia.

The school has nine grades with an enrolment of approximately 400 students spread over 26 classes. Most of the students come from Trenčín town and from the neighboring villages. Komenského School is the oldest school in Trenčín dating back to the 14th century. It is also considered to be the most prestigious school in the district of Trenčín especially because it offers a special Aprogen program for children with high intellectual capacities. Currently, every grade counts with one Aprogen class, where students are enrolled through special entrance exams.

Aprogen refers to the Alternative Educational Program for Gifted Children and was introduced into schools in Slovakia in 2007. The program is designed for students from 6 to

15 years old who follow the official state curriculum with an additional curriculum aimed at enhancing their knowledge, skills, and capabilities (Projekt Aprogen, 2020).

Research shows that there might be a positive correlation between highly gifted students and the socioeconomic situation of their families (Mazzoli, Smith & Cambell, 2016). It is assumed that students coming from higher socioeconomic classes might have lower exposure to poverty and related topics. Hence, for the purpose of this study, students from the 9th grade belonging to the Aprogen program were enrolled. Out of 23 students, 21 students agreed to participate in the study and completed the pre-test and post-test questionnaires. The nature of this research study restricts the sampling to purposive sampling since AR often focuses on only a particular group of individuals, therefore the sample and population are identical (Fraenkel et al., 2019).

### 4.3. Research Role and Participation

While in traditional research methodologies, a researcher is often seen as an educated outsider studying the so-called “subjects of research” (Herr and Anderson, 2005, p. 18), AR challenges this power dynamics, by shifting the role of “subjects of research” into the role of insiders participating directly in the research. In this research study, students in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade were invited to become an integral part of the research, firstly by taking part in the simulation activity, then by offering their feedback and ideas on how to improve the activity, and lastly by taking an active role of facilitators of the same activity (in the next AR cycle).

For this research study, a research community was formed from the 9th-grade students, two social science teachers, another Aprogen teacher (a critical friend)<sup>9</sup>, and me. I took on diverse roles throughout different stages of this study. Firstly, by having informal discussions with one of the social science teachers to identify an area of teaching practice that could be improved. Then by researching educational activities which might be appropriate for this specific age group. After having decided together on the poverty simulation, we sought the approval of the school management for the implementation of AR. After the planning stage, I took a role of a facilitator and with the support of the social science teacher, we implemented the poverty simulation and a debriefing session. After the simulation, I conducted interviews with the students about their understanding of poverty and their opinions about the simulation. Together with the research community, we discussed the possible improvements to the simulation activity.

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<sup>9</sup> It is desirable for AR practice to utilize external validators or consultants who are commonly referred to as critical friends. They are usually peers or colleagues who are willing to debrief with the researcher his/her practice, collaboratively reflect on the meaning-making, and ask questions to make explicit what the researcher knows (Herr & Anderson, 2005).

To ensure both the democratic and dialogic validity of AR, some researchers suggest that AR should be done as a collaborative inquiry, while others recommend engaging a critical friend who provides input throughout the whole process (Herr and Anderson, 2005). I decided to engage an Aprogen teacher as a critical friend, who assisted throughout the whole AR project and offered valuable comments regarding the data collected as well as suggested improvements for the following AR cycle.

#### 4.4. Research Process

This research study covers only the first cycle of the whole AR project aiming at the improvement of teaching strategies regarding the topic of poverty, oppression, and privilege. Below, I would like to outline the stages of the AR project:

- A) *Informal conversations* - through informal discussions with one of the social science teachers it was suggested that students lack empathy toward others, especially if these others come from disadvantaged social and economic backgrounds or have disabilities. Poverty and disabilities were identified as potential topics for the AR project.
- B) *Planning of the AR project* – after a deeper reflection, the topic of poverty was chosen. Then different educational activities were researched until poverty simulations were identified as a suitable tool.
- C) *Educational intervention* – several poverty simulations were considered. Finally, “C’est la vie. The game of Social Life“ was selected together with the social science teacher. The poverty simulation was translated and prepared according to the online methodology. After all teaching materials were prepared, the simulation activity was implemented and then followed by a debriefing session. Three days before the simulation pre-test questionnaires were distributed and collected. The same day, right after the simulation post-test questionnaires were distributed and collected.
- D) *Interviews with the students* – a random sample of 3 students was chosen for the interviews. These 3 students chose voluntarily a friend who participated together with them in the interview.
- E) *Reflections* – after a deep analysis of the questionnaires and the interviews, the results were shared with the research community. The results were discussed over several sessions.
- F) *Suggested improvements* – After the reflective sessions, improvements to the following AR cycle were suggested.



## 4.5. Intervention Activity

C'est la Vie: The Game of Social Life is an experiential simulation activity designed by Kosha Bramesfeld to teach about privileges and structural inequality from an intersectionality perspective (Bramesfeld & Good, 2016). The activity comes with open access, more detailed information, and resource materials were published by the Office of Teaching Resources in Psychology (OTRP, n.d.; Bramesfeld, 2015).

The whole activity consisting of the strategy game and a debriefing discussion takes around 2 – 3 hours. Every student gets a character profile with basic information about the character's gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, citizenship status, presence or absence of disability, and economic situation. The original game includes 64 unique character profiles. For the purpose of this research study, 21 profiles (matching the number of students) were chosen and translated. Some of the profiles were adapted to the situation in Slovakia, for example, race and ethnicity, so that the characters would get closer to the reality of the students in Slovakia<sup>10</sup>. Characters belong to different social classes based on the amount of money and bonus credits they receive at the beginning of the game. The bonuses represent social privileges, therefore characters with more privileged identities receive more bonus credits.

The game facilitator leads the students through the game using a PowerPoint presentation with displayed scenarios. Students have to make decisions about their character's housing, education, work, health, and so on. Each decision has certain consequences affecting their character's future development, for example, access to education or better-paid jobs. Many decision scenarios require students to make trade-offs between money, experience, wellness, and bonuses. Characters from privileged social groups have generally more choices to choose from, characters from marginalized social groups, on contrary, have fewer choices and their decisions have further-reaching consequences. During the game, characters with the right to vote can participate in the collective vote to decide about other characters. The collective votes demonstrate how intersecting systems of privilege contribute to structural inequality (Bramesfeld & Good, 2016).

At the end of the game, students count their remaining credits, which enables them to evaluate their quality of life and make a comparison with other students. The game is followed by a class discussion where the students have an opportunity to express their opinions, share their impressions about the game, and are encouraged to make links to real life.

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<sup>10</sup> Characters of Hungarian, Roma, Czech, Ukrainian, and Polish origin were incorporated into the game, representing some of the ethnic minorities in Slovakia.

## 4.6. Data Collection

Three days after the recruitment of the participants and collecting their parental consent letters, they were asked to answer the pre-test paper questionnaire. Prior to the questionnaires, participants were informed that participation in this research study was voluntary and anonymous and that they may withdraw from the study at any point they wished. The post-intervention questionnaires were distributed after the simulation activity. In-person interviews were scheduled a week after the simulation activity. All data was stored on an external hard disk and the files were password protected.

### 4.6.1. ATP Questionnaire

Quantitative questionnaires were based on a short form of the 37-item Attitude toward Poverty (ATP) scale developed and validated by Yun and Weaver (2010). ATP is based on the three constructs referring to three different poverty explanations – individualistic, structural, and fatalistic developed by Feagin in 1972. The three constructs have been widely applied and modified by several researchers until the 37-item Attitude toward Poverty (ATP) was developed by Atherton 1993 (Yun and Weaver, 2010).

For the purpose of this research study, I decided to use an alternative short form of the ATP, which includes 21 items with compatible levels of reliability with the original 37-item ATP scale (Yun and Weaver, 2010). It is based on a 5-point Likert scale (i.e., 1 - strongly agree to 5 -strongly disagree). The ATP Short Form measures diverse attitudes towards poverty and poor people by examining three different factors – personal deficiency, which is covered in 7 items, stigma covered in 8 items, and structural perspective which is reflected in 6 items.

The individualistic subscale indicates that the person believes that poverty is due to factors such as lack of ability or lack of effort. The participants are asked to rate their agreement with statements such as “Poor people are different from the rest of society” and “Poor people are dishonest.” The stigma subscale measures stigma toward individuals living in poverty such as being lazy or increased fraud. It includes statements like “Poor people think they deserve to be supported“. The structural perspective measures to what extent the respondent believes that poverty has structural causes. Should it be society`s responsibility to support people living in poverty? This subscale includes items like: “People are poor due to circumstances beyond their control” or “Poor people are discriminated against” (Yun and Weaver, 2010).

### 4.6.2. Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews, sometimes equated with qualitative interviewing (Brinkmann, 2020, p. 438), were conducted a week after the intervention to get a deeper understanding of students` perceptions of poverty as well as their impressions of the simulation. The

interview questions (see Annex 2) were drafted and then tested by interviewing a critical friend who offered valuable feedback. Six interviews were done in pairs, and the whole process was audio recorded for the purpose of later data analysis. The format of two-person interviews was chosen mainly because dynamic social interaction may provide more spontaneous expressions than occur in individual interviews (Brinkmann, 2020). Afterward, the results were analyzed to see how they can complement the results obtained in the quantitative questionnaires.

I have decided to use semi-structured interviews as opposed to structured interviews, after having considered the following aspects. Firstly, qualitative interviews can provide significant space for a deep conversation and potentially uncover new perspectives brought by the interviewees (Bryman, 2016). Also, they allow one to depart from a list of prepared questions and ask new questions following up on the answers of the interviewees. In this sense, they are much more flexible in their structure with a higher possibility for uncovering new aspects of the discussed topic.

The interviews were done in person, as face-to-face interviews give away much information in terms of body language, gestures, facial expressions, and emotional signs like trembling, anger, or smile (Brinkmann, 2020). The interviews were transcribed within a week in order to be able to make notes on the body language and the atmosphere during the interview.

#### **4.6.3. Observations and Research Diary**

During the simulation activity as well as the facilitated discussion, observations were made. Similar to the semi-structured interviews, the discussion was recorded in order to be used in the research analysis. To be able to keep track of my observations, I kept a research diary where I made notes on my thoughts, students' reactions, recommendations of the teachers, and the most important outcomes of the sessions with my critical friend. These notes were used timely and were especially helpful in the process of analysis.

### **4.7. Data Analysis**

#### **4.7.1. Analysis of the ATP Questionnaire**

Pre- and post-intervention questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The responses from the pre-test were compared to the responses from the post-tests in order to determine if there was a change in participants' attitudes toward life in poverty.

The questionnaires used Likert Scales ranging from 1 to 5 regarding their understanding of life in poverty, where strongly agree was coded with a score of 1, agree with a score of 2, neutral with a score of 3, agree had a score of 4 and strongly agree had the highest score of 5. Increased score for the first 15 questions (personal deficiency and stigma) means improvement. As for the questions 16 to 21 (structural perspective), decreased score means

improvement. Changes in attitudes were calculated for all individual ATP Short form items as well as for all three factors.

Although the sample used was very small, the t-tests can be calculated for samples between 20 – 30 respondents to find out if the values are statistically significant or not (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2014). Moreover, the t-test can be used if the data is normally distributed and the variances of two groups are approximately equal. To test if the data was normally distributed, Shapiro-Wilk W test for normal data was used. In both cases, the pre- and post-intervention data have a normal distribution. To test if the variances were homogenous, Variance ratio test was used. The test proved that both variances were homogenous. The Wilcoxon rank-sum test, also known as the Mann-Whitney U test, usually used for very small samples was also run. The values were similar to the values of the t-tests.

#### **4.7.2. Analysis of the Semi-structured Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were analyzed using content analysis which is a process of categorizing the qualitative data into conceptual categories to identify consistent patterns. (Given, 2008). As Herr and Anderson (2005) suggest, content analysis is a common approach to qualitative inquiry in AR and it can be useful methodology to evaluate understanding of attitudes (Fraenkel et al., 2022).

Firstly, all interviews were audio recorded and then manually transcribed in their entirety. Although manual transcription was a lengthy process, it provided me with an opportunity for additional reflection over the meaning of the data. The data was analyzed in Slovak language and only then the chosen excerpts were translated into English. The translation was made by me. The data was analyzed manually with the help of grouping in Microsoft Excel and drawing diagrams (by hand). The word frequencies (see table 2) were checked for correctness by using Voayant online tool.

The analysis of the interviews followed the 3-step process recommended by Roulston (2014):

- 1. Reducing data to locate and examine phenomena of interest*

Firstly, the data was closely examined with regard to the theoretical framework and the research questions. It was reread several times in order to “distill the essence or meaning of participants` descriptions” (Roulston, 2014, p. 304). In practical terms, I highlighted the relevant parts to reduce the data. This process was repeated several times to make sure that any meaningful data is omitted.

- 2. Reorganizing, classifying, and categorizing data*

The interview transcripts were divided into segments. Then, I looked for general patterns by reassembling and reorganizing the data. Different segments were

compared while special attention was paid to the links between them. In this process I was helped by color highlighting and diagram drawing to visualize the links and represent initial understanding. Then the words/ideas were regrouped into larger categories to develop assertions about my research interest. Again, this process was done iteratively to revise preliminary ideas and to recheck if any data might discount preliminary assertions (Roulston, 2014, p. 305; Given, 2008, p. 120).

### 3. *Interpreting and writing up findings*

After the data was organized into four thematic categories, I used direct quotations from interview transcripts to support my assertions (Roulston, 2014, p. 305). Finally, the results of the interviews were examined in relation to the results from the questionnaires.

It is essential to mention that while implementing the content analysis of qualitative data, special attention was paid to the perspectives which as a researcher I might have brought to my analytic work (Given, 2008). See section 6.3. for more details on researcher's reflexivity.

## 4.8. Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were led by responsive ethics as defined by Amundsen and Msoroka (2021). Also, the recommendations of the Swedish Research Counsel (2017) were taken into consideration throughout the research process. Below, I would like to outline some of the ethical considerations implemented into this research study.

Firstly, the school management was informed about the intended AR project. After the approval of the school principal was granted and I signed the school's standard confidentiality agreement, the agreement with students' participation was sought from their parents and/or guardians through parental consent letters (see Annex 1). The parents were informed about the purpose of the study and about their right to withdraw their children from the research study at any point. Even though the consent letters are a fundamental ethical concept, they are rarely requested by students. Therefore, before the AR project, the students were provided with an explanation of the project to be able to make an informed decision about their participation. They were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw from the project at any time (Campbell & Groundwater-Smith, 2007). The students were reassured of their rights several times in course of the AR project.

Regarding the collected data, they were only stored on my personal computer, with no online access. The data were not shared with any third parties, nor published elsewhere, they were only used for the purpose of this research study. In order to keep the anonymity of the students participating in the interviews, their real names were not used and instead,

nicknames were allocated. Also, a fictitious name of the school including its location was chosen to protect the privacy of the whole AR team and the school management (Kemmis et al., 2013).

Besides the above-mentioned fundamental ethical considerations, I would like to highlight a few other important points about the study.

The choice of AR was partially led by ethical considerations. Some researchers claim that Western research has failed to address the rights of participants “to contribute, critique, and evaluate research” (Amudsen & Msoraka, 2019, p. 576). In the light of this critique, AR fills the gap by implementing research in partnership with participants who are considered “insiders“ taking an active part in the research (Iphofen and Tolich, 2018). The AR nature of this research enabled the students to directly participate in the whole process of the research – they were involved in data collection as well as in the evaluation.

Since poverty is a sensitive issue, special attention was paid to creating a safe environment for the students. This way, students felt more comfortable sharing their opinions and past experiences with the subject matter. In the debriefing discussion, the discussion facilitator tried not to influence the students towards adopting certain views and beliefs, instead, a plurality of opinions and freedom of choice was sought.

An important aspect to bear in mind regarding semi-structured interviews is the question of power and the researcher’s positionality. While semi-structured interviews are sometimes regarded as a progressive approach to social research thanks to their dialogical form which might be interpreted as a synonym for mutuality and egalitarianism, giving voice to different groups of people including marginalized groups (Kvale, 2006), Kvale criticizes them by saying that referring to an interview as a dialogue might be misleading and instead, draws our attention to the problematic relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee where “claims for participation might disguise the exertion of power“ (Kvale, 2006, p. 482 - 483). He concludes that the interview embeds a “hierarchical relationship with an asymmetrical power distribution of interviewer and interviewee“, where the interviewer holds the monopoly of interpretation of the content of the interview (Kvale, 2006, p. 484).

In order to limit the unequal power structures between the interviewer and the interviewee, the interviewees were informed of their right not to answer the questions, to question the interviewer, or even to withdraw from the interview. In order not to misinterpret and misanalyse students’ answers, students were given a chance to comment on the interviewer’s analysis and conclusions (Kvale, 2006).

## 5. Results

### 5.1. ATP Questionnaire

Out of 21 students who agreed to participate in the AR, the same number completed the pre- and post-test questionnaires. The results show a difference in attitudes after participating in the Poverty Simulation. More precisely, there was an improvement in 16 items out of the total of 21 items. A close examination of the three domains of Personal Deficiency, Stigma, and Structural Perspective showed, that there was a 3% increase in the mean (3.33 to 3.42, the increase means improvement) of the Personal Deficiency domain, which can be interpreted that after the intervention fewer students believed that poverty is caused by individualistic factors such as lack of ability or effort. There was an 8% increase in the mean (2.95 to 3.13, the increase means improvement) of the Stigma domain, which means that after the intervention fewer students believed that poor people live in poverty because of their negative characteristics such as laziness, or tendency to fraud. In the Structural Perspective domain, there was a change of 24% (2.98 to 2.25, a decrease means improvement). However, the only statistically significant change was in the domain of Structural Perspective. This result means that more students believed that poverty has structural causes.

Analysis of separate items suggested that attitude improvement was found in five out of seven items in the Personal Deficiency domain. The highest percentage change was found in item number 6 “I believe poor people have a different set of values than other people have”, no improvement was found in items number 4 “Poor people act differently” and 5 “Children raised on welfare will never amount to anything”. Regarding the Stigma domain, attitude improvement was found in five items out of eight. The highest percentage change was found in item number 13 “Unemployed poor people could find jobs if they tried harder”, no improvement was found in items number 8 “There is a lot of fraud among welfare recipients”, number 9 “Some “poor” people live better than I do, considering all their benefits”, and number 10 “Poor people think they deserve to be supported”. The structural domain showed attitude improvement in all six items, while the percentage difference varied from 16% to 31%. In the first two domains, any items were found statistically significant. In the last domain of Structural Perspectives, four items out of six were statistically significant.

Taking a closer look at all five items with negative values in the first two domains, we can see that four out of five statements with a negative value were related to the money, benefits, or other forms of support received by the poor through the welfare system. More specifically, item number 5 in the Personal Deficiency domain “Children raised on welfare will never amount to anything” makes a direct reference to the welfare system. The items number 9, 10 and 11 “Some poor people live better than I do, considering all their benefits”, “Poor people think they deserve to be supported” and “Welfare mothers have babies to get more money” reflect a belief that the poor take advantage of the welfare system or that they take the welfare benefits for granted. Nevertheless, it is important to note that none of these items was associated with statistically significant values.

**Table 1**

*ATP Short Form results*

Statement		Pre-test Mean	Post-test Mean	Difference in %	p value
<b>Factor 1: Personal Deficiency</b>					
Increased value = improvement					
1	Poor people are different from the rest of society.	2,67	2,86	7%	0,599
2	Poor people are dishonest.	3,76	4,00	6%	0,171
3	Most poor people are dirty.	3,38	3,71	10%	0,273
4	Poor people act differently.	2,71	2,48	-9%	0,397
5	Children raised on welfare will never amount to anything.	3,81	3,24	-15%	0,049
6	I believe poor people have a different set of values than other people have.	3,14	3,71	18%	0,174
7	Poor people generally have lower intelligence than nonpoor people.	3,81	3,95	4%	0,576
Overall score		3,33	3,42	3%	0,5044
<b>Factor 2: Stigma</b>					
Increased value = improvement					
8	There is a lot of fraud among welfare recipients.	2,38	2,76	16%	0,214
9	Some “poor” people live better than I do, considering all their benefits.	3,71	3,52	-5%	0,599
10	Poor people think they deserve to be supported.	2,81	2,67	-5%	0,624
11	Welfare mothers have babies to get more money.	3,43	3,33	-3%	0,649
12	An able-bodied person collecting welfare is ripping off the system.	2,86	3,14	10%	0,367
13	Unemployed poor people could find jobs if they tried harder.	2,00	2,52	26%	0,061
14	Welfare makes people lazy.	3,05	3,52	16%	0,125



15	Benefits for poor people consume a major part of the federal budget.	3,33	3,57	7%	0,309
Overall score		2,95	3,13	8%	0,1941
<b>Factor 3: Structural Perspective</b>					
Decreased value = improvement					
16	People are poor due to circumstances beyond their control.	3,33	2,57	-23%	0,042
17	I would support a program that resulted in higher taxes to support social programs for poor people.	3,62	2,71	-25%	0,002
18	If I were poor, I would accept welfare benefits.	2,62	1,81	-31%	0,013
19	Poor people should not be blamed for their misfortune.	2,86	2,00	-30%	0,003
20	Society has the responsibility of helping poor people.	3,33	2,62	-21%	0,061
21	Poor people are discriminated against.	2,10	1,76	-16%	0,232
Overall score		2,98	2,25	-24%	<0.05

## 5.2. Interviews

### 5.2.1. Between Simulation and Reality

Even if this simulation tool depicted fictional characters, students were able to make connections to their everyday realities. When Martina was asked what she appreciated the most about the simulation, it was its closeness to reality.

*It was pretty good to see that everyone had different opportunities in life, which makes it pretty realistic. Those with more money can afford more, which means that they have more chances. The poorer ones have to think more about their choices. Everybody has different opportunities, and that's true in life as well. It was real life.*

Martina said that the omnipresent illness felt very realistic, at any point in the simulation activity, and for different reasons, the characters could get sick, which had a strong influence on their life. For Barbora, the language difficulties some of the foreign citizens might have encountered constituted a very realistic element of the activity. She associated the language difficulties with the current situation caused by the war in Ukraine, which led to many migrants seeking new life opportunities in Slovakia. Barbora said that their school had several new students from Ukraine, and some of them spoke neither Slovak nor English, which made them hard to get new friends and follow the classes.

*Language. A lot of people who come to Slovakia now, or even a few classmates we have from Ukraine, have a big disadvantage because of the language. They can't be educated in our language [Slovak]. Also, the immigrants can't vote*

*because they don't have Slovak citizenship yet. Maybe even in hospitals, they meet with problems.*

Eduard and Kristián felt that voting during the simulation reminded him of real life. As Eduard explained, people with voting rights got to decide about people who were not entitled to vote. A group of people was deciding about the fate of the rest of the group. Even Eduard felt in his everyday life that he needed to follow the decisions of others, for example, his parents or other classmates in the class. While for Eduard it felt unfair that some people's life was decided by others, Anna said that in some situations it was understandable, for example, in the case of the foreigners who come from abroad and do not know much about the situation of the new country. Of course, she added, once they become legal citizens, they should be allowed to vote and participate in public life.

Kristián expressed, that many of the decisions he needed to take during the simulation activity could have been taken in real life, for example:

*Voting or also that according to one's financial means, one chooses housing and school, which then influences them in the future. If one lives in a good neighbourhood for example, of course, even those people can be messed up and some poorer people can be smarter, but I think the environment where we live affects quite a lot our general well-being. And also, health affects a person a lot in his/her life. Or when a person can't go to work and so on.*

Anna and Naomi thought that the simulation activity depicted well the unpredictability of life. During the activity, it was impossible to know what would happen next and how one's decisions now would influence the character in the following rounds. They both felt that regretting not having done certain actions during the activity felt very much like regretting their decisions in life. Naomi also mentioned, that when her character was not able to apply for a good job, made her think of people of colour who get discriminated against at the workplace and who are eventually left with much fewer opportunities for their careers.

When students were asked if they could identify with and/or empathize with their character, for three of them it seemed quite challenging to identify with their characters. This, however, did not restrict them from empathizing with their characters. If students were able to identify with their character mostly depended on which character they were playing and how different his/her situation was to their life. Only Kristián answered that even if his character was different to himself, he could easily identify with him. It made him feel like he was making decisions about his own life:

*I was Roma, gay, without any bonuses, with very little money. Although I was completely different, I really identified with him, it felt like I was making decisions about my future.*

For Martina and Noemy, it was pretty easy to identify with their characters since their characters were similar to themselves and they could also relate to the feelings of their characters. Martina was a white woman with good financial resources, Noemy was also a white woman from Slovakia. Martina reflected on how difficult it might have been to identify with her character if she had been playing a different character.

*I was playing a Slovak average woman. It wasn't very difficult, maybe if I had a different character like some of my classmates, it would have been harder to identify with her. It suited me well enough. If I were to play a man, it wouldn't be so hard to identify with him either, but if I were to play a person with a different nationality, it would have definitely been harder. For example, Ukrainians, I would not have been able to identify as much. But yes, I would still empathize with them.*

For Eduard, whose character had a disability and was in a good financial situation, it was pretty hard to identify with his character. He took it as a game and was making decisions which he might not have made otherwise. Eduard added, that he was still able to empathize with his character, especially when his character was going through difficult times. Also, Barbora found that it was not easy to identify with her character who was in a quite different situation to hers.

*For me, it was very difficult. I was an immigrant who didn't know the language and did not have access to a good education, it was pretty bad for me. It was harder to identify with a character who was in a worse situation than me.*

Barbora problematized how close one could feel to the character and if what she felt for the character were real emotions. She could not say if what she felt for the character was empathy or not. When asked how she understood empathy, she said “understanding other people’s feelings”.

*For example, we tried what it's like not to have money or not to vote. I can't tell if those emotions were real.*

To conclude, the students demonstrated the ability to make connections between the simulated environment of the simulation activity and their everyday realities. As the most realistic elements of the simulation, they listed language difficulties and other barriers faced by foreigners, the unpredictability of life, the omnipresent risk of getting sick, and having

the right to decide about other people's faith in the elections. Although not all of them were able to identify with their character's actions, most of them could empathize with their characters.

### **5.2.2. Inequality, System of Oppression and Privilege**

In the simulation activity, privilege was symbolized in the form of bonuses, which the characters were allocated at the beginning of the game together with money and general well-being. In the understanding of some students, privilege was also linked to money and good health. Martina pointed out that thanks to the money and bonuses she was given at the beginning of the game, she was able to get a good living, a quality education and then also a good job. So, she was able to “*multiply her privilege*” quite quickly during the game. She concludes by saying:

*The ones with privilege became even more privileged and the disadvantaged ones even more disadvantaged during the game. It was mind-blowing to see it happening!*

As sources of oppression or marginalization of their characters, the students identified race and ethnic origin, disability, and sexual orientation. Race and ethnic origin often led to language barriers or the inability to vote. Barbora identified an intersection of several elements putting her character in a disadvantaged position:

*My character was disadvantaged by many factors. I was a lesbian, of black Tanzanian origin. I had not yet acquired Slovak citizenship, so I could not vote. Everybody else was making decisions for me. It was really difficult.*

Besides reflecting on origin, race and sexual orientation, Noemy reflected also on the level of abilities. She gave an example of a handicapped person and how such a person can get disadvantaged in everyday life:

*It brought us closer to the view of the world as it really is. It showed us that many people are disadvantaged, for example, handicapped people, and for them, it is much more difficult to find a job. They are also people and need something to live on. Maybe a person with a handicap can't do all the jobs, but surely there are at least some.*

Kristián linked the system of oppression to discrimination. People of different races or ethnic origins might get discriminated against under different forms, some more visible than others, for example:

*It can be manifested in different ways. Other people may bully them, ridicule them, not take them seriously, and not take them for who they are. Such people have lower self-esteem because the environment doesn't want to take them for who they are.*

Anna thought that people who were discriminated against might have been influenced by their education at home, which made them reproduce the learnt patterns, or also they could get bad influence from the media.

Students did not mention gender as a source of oppression. After Martina claimed that there was absolutely nothing putting her character at disadvantage, she was asked about gender, since her character was a woman. She affirmed that neither gender nor anything else disadvantaged her.

During the interviews, the students repeated several words in connection with poverty and inequality. Mostly, these expressions were used to illustrate an example or to give a more detailed explanation of what they meant. As seen in Table 2, the students associated inequality with different groups of people, namely with the Romas and Ukrainians and then with people of other nationalities.

**Table 2**

*Word frequency*

<b>Expression</b>	<b>Association/ context</b>		
	<b>Poverty</b>	<b>Inequality</b>	<b>Simulation</b>
Alcohol, alcoholic	6 times	0	0
Homelessness, homeless person	5 times	0	0
Ukraine, Ukrainian	0	3 times	1 time
Roma person/people	1 time	4 times	1 time
Foreigner, foreign country	0	3 times	0
Drugs	2 times	0	0

Although students could easily identify the sources of privilege in their characters' lives, when asked if they felt privileged, it was much harder for them to reflect on their own situation. Eduard and Barbora said that they felt neither privileged nor marginalized, rather average. Kristián said that it was hard to say, as it was very much depending on whom he was comparing himself to. Surely, if compared to a war refugee, he was very privileged. But if compared to a Slovak president, he would not call himself privileged.

Martina said she never thought of her family as very privileged, but seeing how many factors could put people at a disadvantage, she probably was privileged, since her parents gave her a good education, she enjoyed holiday abroad every year and never felt like missing something. Noemy was the only one who confidently said that she felt privileged and as sources of her privilege she mentioned her race, citizenship status, and good social and financial status.

In conclusion, the students were able to identify the sources of privilege and oppression leading to inequalities witnessed by their characters. They associated privilege with race and ethnic origin, disability, and sexual orientation. They did not consider gender as a source of privilege or oppression. Inequality tended to be associated with specific ethnic groups, namely the Romas and Ukrainians. While they could see the intersectional relationship between different sources of privilege, they encountered difficulties identifying the sources of privilege in their own lives.

### **5.2.3. Concept of Poverty**

As we can see in Table 2, the students associated poverty with homelessness, alcohol, and, sometimes also with drugs. Only once poverty was associated with a specific ethnic group, in this case, the Roma people.

*Everyone may perceive it [poverty] differently, poor people may be homeless, they can be blamed themselves, because they were alcoholics, or lost all money in gambling.*

Sometimes, when talking about poverty and poor people, the students referred to the poor as homeless people. In the example below, Eduard was asked what could be done to get poor people out of poverty. He answered by referring to homeless people.

*I remember two years ago we gave money to homeless people, but then the next day we found them drinking alcohol.*

Four out of six students defined poverty as something relative, unstable, and changeable. In the understanding of these students, the term relative poverty refers to an economic disadvantage as compared to wealthier members of society. Therefore, a person can be considered poor if compared to a richer person; likewise, if compared to a person with even fewer economic means, the same person can be viewed as rich. Kristián a Barbora explained this concept by saying that if compared to publicly known rich people – Elon Musk and Kim Kardashian, they might also be seen as poor.

*It depends on whom we compare ourselves to, for example, if I compare myself to Kim Kardashian, I can also call myself quite poor. I only have one car, and*

*I live in an apartment and not in a house. It's relative, it depends on whom I'm comparing myself to.*

*A poor person is poor from what perspective? Compared to a millionaire, I'm poor too, but compared to a homeless person, I'm rich. Or I'm poor compared to Elon Musk, for example.*

Anna thought that poverty was a concept that could be understood differently by different people. To explain more concretely, she gave an example of comparing an average person to a rich person. When asked to define whom she considered rich, average, and poor, the student answered that all these concepts were relative and did not give any more details.

*It can mean something else to everybody. For example, rich people can say that even an average person is poor.*

However, when the students were asked if they knew any poor person, all of them answered that they did not know anybody, which means that in this case, they did not relativize poverty, as they did not apply the same relative definition of poverty, and instead, might have used an absolute definition of poverty to answer.

Martina and Noemy depicted poverty as a lack of basic necessities. As basic necessities, they mentioned housing and being forced to live in bad conditions. Noemy described the dilemma of poor people when they couldn't afford to buy all the basic necessities and in consequence, needed to prioritize by deciding on the most urgent ones.

*People who live in [segregated] settlements, who don't have very good housing, and don't live in very good conditions. They live with limited financial resources and do not have their basic needs provided for.*

*It depends on the point of view, people who don't have the right conditions to live have to limit themselves and choose between something and something - like basic needs, because they don't have enough to pay for both.*

As supposed before the research, the students neither had a direct experience with poverty nor knew anybody in person whom they would identify as being poor. They answered that they either saw poor people on the TV news or other mass media, or they saw homeless people while walking on the street. Barbora was told the life story of one poor woman by her mother.

Anna referred to generational poverty by saying that the situation of the parents would most probably be repeated with their children. If parents did not have a good education, their children most probably would not be motivated to study.

*Also, if children don't see that parents are interested in education, children don't have as many options either and are likely to turn out the same way.*

In summary, the students did not have direct contact with poverty, their understanding was mostly mediated by the media. Most of the students demonstrated a tendency to relativize the concept of poverty, in their understanding a person can be poor or rich in comparison with other people. Two students defined poverty as a lack of basic necessities. The students associated poverty with negative phenomena like homelessness, alcohol, and sometimes drugs.

#### **5.2.4. Attributions of Poverty**

When students were asked if their characters were able to succeed in the simulation activity, four students answered that their characters might have been able to succeed if the game either lasted longer or if the students tried harder. Barbora's character was disadvantaged by several factors, but she believed that if she had put more effort, her character's life would have turned better.

*It was harder for my character, and I needed to think twice about how to use my money. Invest in education, or get more bonuses? No matter the choice, I would always have a disadvantage in something. But I think that over time, if I had tried even harder, and made use of my education, I would have gotten to a higher level.*

Similar to Barbora's character, also Kristián's character had to face quite a few obstacles on the way, however, he also believed that if he had tried harder and the game had lasted longer, he would have been able to succeed.

Nevertheless, Anna's experience was quite different. Her character encountered several obstacles, which were blocking her "from a better life". She added:

*No matter how hard I tried, there were always some external factors that blocked me.*

Also Martina felt that the simulation was unfair because it was too much built on a certain causality, which she explained like this:

*You buy one and you lose four, you do A and it automatically leads to B, or you do this and it will lead to an even worse situation.*



No matter how she tried, it always resulted in an even worse situation. Noemy agreed with Anna that individual effort would not have changed their characters' fate, as the external factors standing in their way were not easy to overcome. In her opinion, country representatives should step in and should be held responsible for the situation of people in need.

*It would certainly not have been enough to try harder myself, because you need support from people around you, especially the ones leading this country, who would support disadvantaged people. In this case, if the person is handicapped, it won't be enough for him to make an effort to come for an interview. The boss might see him as a burden and turn him down. Such people are often discriminated against.*

Later in the interview, Noemy developed further her ideas about how some groups of people get discriminated. They are often judged based on some external factors, such as their looks, but people rarely try to understand deeper their personal stories. She concluded by saying that poor people should not be blamed for becoming poor.

*In the case of an immigrant, or a black woman, people don't want to talk to them, but we don't know what those people have been through, what path they've taken to get here. Most people judge them because of how they look or their status. And in the case of poor people, they say it's their fault, but it doesn't have to be their fault at all. It gave me a glimpse of those who can't afford more because they were left out.*

Similarly, Barbora said that the activity allowed her to look beyond what we usually see, for example, that poor people are often blamed for getting into poverty, but in reality, it might not necessarily be their fault.

*And in the case of poor people, they say it's their fault, but it doesn't have to be their fault at all. It gave me a glimpse of those who can't afford more because they were left out.*

When asked what should be done to get people out of poverty, Martina and Eduard highlighted the role of the government, which should assist the poor in finding alternatives. While they both highlighted the role of government, they both said that the individual will was also important. Martina said, that if poor people were helped by the government to obtain employment, such measures would only be efficient if poor people did not spend this money on alcohol. As we can see, Martina associated the poor with alcoholism. Eduard referred in his answer to homeless people instead of poor and said that if they really tried to

change their life, it would have been possible. It might not have been easy, but surely possible.

Kristián warned that while the government should do something, the poor could easily get “*addicted*” to social benefits which might end up in reluctance to change. He also added that if poor people wanted to get out of poverty, it would be possible and they would be capable of overcoming all obstacles.

Anna said that while the government should offer some help, the individual needs to have a strong will to change his/her life. So, it should be a combination of a state support system and individual effort. To explain why the government should help, Anna shared a personal experience when her family of Roma origin was looking for renting a flat and because of their origin, they were declined. Here, she probably reacted to a common assumption that Roma people in Slovakia were associated with poverty.

*It would be much more difficult for such a person [poor], for example, to look for housing. From my own experience, when my parents were looking for housing, they were asked if they were Roma and when they said they were, they were refused to rent. Some people are like that, they listen, for example, on TV, how they portray Roma as dirty, and indecent, they put it in their heads and then people think that everyone is like that.*

Talking about discrimination, Barbora also shared her own experience of when her family traveled to the east of Slovakia and was crossing through Roma settlements. She distinguished between two groups of poor Roma people – the “bad ones” who became poor because of alcohol and drugs and the “good ones” who became poor as a result of discrimination from the rest of society.

*For example, when we go to my grandfather's house in the east [of Slovakia], we pass through Roma settlements. There are certainly those who only buy alcohol and drugs, but there are also those who want to study and want to achieve something, but society rejects them because of the way they look or the way they talk. They must put much more effort to compensate for all disadvantages.*

To conclude, although the students recognized the sources of oppression in the life of their characters, four students still believed that individual effort could compensate for any structural inequality. Two students claimed that individual effort would not amount to any significant improvement in their characters’ lives. As for who should take the initiative in the eradication of poverty, the students’ answers differed, some believed that the

government should take a leading role, some believed in the individual effort, and some in a combination of both.

### 5.3. Observations during and after the Intervention

During the debriefing part, students were actively involved in the class discussion, they were keen on sharing which character they represented and how difficult or easy it was to go through the game. While gender, race or ethnic origin did not make the students uncomfortable, sexual orientation did feel like a taboo for the students. They either talked with hesitation or they made giggles or remarks like “Oh no, I am gay!”

I had the impression that students got pretty engaged in the simulation. During the break between the first and second classes, they kept discussing their characters. I overheard two students discussing why/what kind of decisions they made. One student commented on the simulation activity the following:

*You see, those living in good conditions got even better and those living in bad conditions got into even worse situations.*

While students did not mention gender as a source of oppression of their characters in the interviews, during the debriefing session, they engaged in quite a heated discussion about gender equality/inequality.

*T: Do you think women and men have an equal chance to succeed?*

*S1: I do.*

*S2: No, there are hardly any women in politics except for our president [Zuzana Čaputová]. Even in the last election in the Czech Republic, no woman won [Danuše Nerudová].*

*S1: In my opinion, politics is not quite the right example. I don't mean that women do not belong in politics, but history proves, that most men have been good leaders, unlike women.*

*S3: Excuse me, I wonder why men were leaders when women had no rights in the past? How could they ever become leaders? Hundred years ago, women just gave birth and took care of children. They could not vote, and their husbands made decisions for them. What was normal for men was taken as a privilege for women.*

After the simulation activity, I was approached by two more teachers who were curious about the content and form of the simulation activity. As I understood from the first teacher, the students who participated in the simulation were discussing the activity with the students from other classes, who then asked their class teacher if there was a possibility to participate in the same simulation. Then, I was inquired by an elementary school teacher if the simulation was appropriate for younger-age students, and if not, if I was willing to participate in a study group together with her colleagues to adapt this simulation for younger ages. Both of these inquiries made me very happy because it meant that poverty was regarded as an important topic at school and that the students found the simulation quite engaging since they proactively recommended it to the students from other classes.

## 6. Discussion

### 6.1. Interpretation of Results

The main aim of this study was to find out the effect of a poverty simulation activity on 9th-grade students' understanding of poverty. Below, I would like to discuss more in detail the study's results alongside my theoretical framework. I will conclude this section by summarizing the answers to both research questions.

As Kolb & Lewis say, experiential learning can happen in a real-world setting as well as a simulated environment (1986, p. 104). Results from the analysis suggest that experience gained in a simulated environment enabled the students to make connections to real-life situations and trigger their reflection on the topics of poverty and inequality. With the help of a simulation tool, the educator created an environment where students could acquire experiences based on which they constructed their learning. According to Dewey, the main challenge for an educator of experiential education is to choose the kind of present experiences that “live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences” (1963, p. 26). In this specific case, the educator can use a simulation to help to create specific experiences. Moreover, based on students' reactions, the simulated experience aroused interest in the students, which is also consistent with Dewey's belief that experience sparks curiosity and can also motivate students to take more initiative in their learning process (1963, p. 38).

As previous research shows, learning through simulations is often linked to Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle, which is composed of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Kolb, 2015, p. 44). Kolb defines Experiential learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 2015, p. 49), suggesting that transformation of experience is an important building block of learning by experience. Firstly, experience occurs through a concrete activity in which a learner is actively involved, in this case, a simulation. After the simulation, students get a chance to reflect on the simulation activity in the debriefing. Then, through abstract conceptualization, the students are encouraged to incorporate this new knowledge into some of the existing schemas. The circle is usually closed by active experimentation when the students are encouraged to apply new knowledge. However, since many poverty simulations are one-time activities, it is difficult to evaluate if the last step took place or not. The possible presence of active experimentation

will be possible to evaluate through the following AR cycles, which are, unfortunately, out of the scope of this thesis.

The study shows that the simulation activity gave students a chance to step into other people's shoes. In accordance with the previous literature review, most of the students were able to develop empathy toward the poor and marginalized. They were also able to acknowledge the difficulties faced by people living in poverty or being marginalized.

The results of the qualitative analysis demonstrated that the students' attitudes toward poverty changed in all three domains. There was an increase in Personal Deficiency and Stigma domains, which means that fewer students believed that individuals can be blamed for being poor because of a lack of effort, or ability or because of their negative personal characteristics such as laziness. However, the statistical analysis revealed that these results were not statistically significant. The only statistically significant change was in the Structural Perspective, which means that after the simulation, more students had a greater endorsement of the structural viewpoint on poverty. The research shows that the negative characteristics of the poor are related to the belief that individual factors as opposed to structural ones are the main reason why people become poor (Cozzarelli et al., 2001).

While students gained a deeper understanding of the structural barriers faced by poor people, the results from the semi-structured interviews showed a tendency to overestimate the individual effort of the poor in trying to get out of poverty. These findings were consistent with Hunt's (1996) research results suggesting that many Americans simultaneously endorse both individualistic and structuralist explanations for poverty. While the students acknowledged the difficulty caused by structural barriers when overcoming poverty, at the same time they believed that these barriers could be conquered by personal effort (Cozzarelli, 2002).

Moreover, the analysis of students' conversations showed that poverty was understood as a relative term, in relation to the situation of other people. This definition of poverty does not correspond to a commonly used definition of relative poverty, which suggests that people are considered poor when they "lack a certain amount of income derived from the mean or median income in a given society" (Wagle, 2019, p. 185). Also, the findings showed that poverty was often associated with negative social phenomena such as alcoholism and homelessness. The negative associations with poverty aligned with the qualitative results. In the questionnaires, four out of five items with negative values were associated with the welfare system, suggesting that the poor abuse the system to get more money or other benefits. Therefore, instead of helping the students to abandon the stereotypical views of the poor as those taking advantage of the social systems, the results suggest that the simulation even deepened such beliefs.

Results from the semi-structured interviews suggested that the students noticed a widening gap between the marginalized and privileged characters. While the situation of the privileged individuals was improving, the situation of the marginalized characters was worsening over time. As Byrne (2007) argues, the social exclusion of disadvantaged individuals or communities is a multifaceted phenomenon having economic, political, and cultural dimensions which intersect with each other. Individuals excluded from social, economic, or political life tend to experience worsening of their circumstances over time, as significant changes in their circumstances are usually non-linear (often sudden and discontinuous). For example, losing a job leads to a sudden non-linear change, while a salary rise leads to a linear change (often gradual and incremental).

The findings of this study also showed that the intersectional approach used in the simulation activity contributed to enhancing students' understanding of the complex topics of inequality, privilege, and oppression. These findings support Breunig's (2019) theory suggesting that the intersectional approach had the potential to disrupt the concept of oppression and privilege. The critical lenses of intersectionality enhanced students' understanding of inequality, their understanding of poverty and its causes, as discussed above, however, only to some extent. While the students could see the intersectional relationship between different sources of privilege, and acknowledged the structural causes of poverty, they encountered difficulties identifying the sources of privilege in their own lives and associated poverty with negative concepts.

Regarding the use of intersectionality, while Bramesfeld (2016) suggested that the intersectional approach might help students to avoid "othering", the study results did not prove this hypothesis. In the debriefing discussion and semi-structured interviews, the students expressed verbally a distinction between the poor and the rich, between "us" and "them", and between "good" and "bad". In line with Krumer-Nevo et al.'s (2009) findings, increasing students' understanding of structural explanations of poverty over individual explanations of poverty did not result in creating a partnership with the poor, but, quite on the opposite, leading to "othering" the poor, as the students might have had difficulties "translating" the theoretical concepts about structural and individual explanations of poverty into the practice.

Nevertheless, "C'est la vie" simulation triggered students' critical thinking about justice and inequality. Indeed, the research results showed that the students were able to identify the sources of privilege and oppression resulting in unequal power dynamics. However, after the simulation, the students demonstrated biased views about people living in poverty, such as their association with alcoholism and fraud, and also "othering". We can see that the intersectional approach employed in this simulation activity has only been effective to some

extent, hence, other critical approaches toward Experiential Learning should be further examined to avoid that teaching about poverty becomes an uncritical extension of national educational agendas or common beliefs.

To conclude, I would like to summarize the main findings regarding both research questions.

Research Question 1: *What were the attitudes toward poverty of the 9th-grade students before and after the simulation activity?*

The main differences between pre- and post-stimulation activity in students' attitudes toward poverty can now also be stated. The research results showed a difference in all three domains, more specifically a 3% increase (increase means improvement) in the mean of Personal Deficiency domain, an 8% increase (increase means improvement) in the mean of Stigma domain and an 24 % decrease (decrease means improvement) in the Structural Perspective domain. However, only the Structural Perspective domain had statistically significant results.

Research Question 2: *How do the 9th-grade students assess the effects of the simulation activity on their understanding of poverty?*

Students' understanding of poverty after a stimulation activity showed the following characteristics: while the students endorsed more structural explanations of poverty, the results of semi-structured interviews showed that they overestimated individual effort in getting out of poverty. Most of the students had a tendency to relativize poverty. While the students were able to identify the source of privilege and oppression in the lives of their characters, they associated poverty with negative phenomena such as alcoholism, homelessness, and the abuse of the welfare system. Also, the research results showed a dichotomy between "us" (not poor) and the "others" (poor), the good and the bad.

## 6.2. Suggestions for the next AR cycle

After having analyzed the results from the first cycle of this AR study, I discussed how these results could inform the future cycles and improvements that could be implemented.

Since the students were quite motivated about the simulation activity and other classes showed interest in participating in such an activity, the AR team suggested actively involving the students as facilitators of the simulation. Students who show an interest in becoming co-facilitators will have one-to-one sessions with the class teacher to practice and get more confidence. Also, based on the students' feedback in the interviews, a few small modifications will be introduced in the simulation, such as maximum negative points for well-being after which the character gets into the hospital, resulting in a suspension from the



game for a few rounds and a threshold when the character dies. Then, more time will be reserved for the simulation in order to be able to add a few more rounds and some more modifications in the character profiles will be done so the students could make more easily the parallels with the situation in Slovakia, such as adding even more characters with the ethnic origin of neighboring countries as opposed to the African and American origin.

As could be seen above, the research results showed that students developed empathy and gained a deeper understanding of the structural barriers faced by poor people. However, as this study only evaluated post-intervention data, it is not clear how long effect would the intervention have on the students. As Menzel et al. claim, it is not realistic to expect a one-time simulation “to change radically student attitudes toward poor people” (2014, p. 44). I believe that the simulation represents an engaging way of introducing the topic of inequality and poverty, but to gain a long-term effect on the students, it should be complemented with other activities throughout a longer period.

As Blaire & Santos (2015) suggest, “strongly academic” and “strongly experiential” approaches to teaching about poverty could complement each other to strengthen the final effect on the students. If experiential approach is represented by the simulation, strongly academic approach could be composed of case studies, analysis of the policy changes, comparing data within countries and regions. These assignments should be spread over at least one academic year.

### 6.3. Reflexivity

Reflexivity plays an important role in qualitative research, including AR. While reflection is often referred to as a process of making sense of experience, “reflexivity is an attitude, a state of mind” (McGee, 2002, p. 20). Through a constant examination and explanation of my influence on the research project, as a researcher, I tried to become aware of the biases brought to the research, or how some perspectives could have been suppressed or avoided in my result interpretations (Given, 2008).

In this research study, I employed “self-critical epistemological awareness” (Chambers , 1997, p. 32, as cited in McGee, 2002), which prompted me to engage in a self-critical monitoring of my research methods. Epistemological implications of such practice have a crucial impact on the quality and trustworthiness of my research. Therefore, I paid special attention to critical self-awareness, self-evaluation, and recognition of my own limits as well as willingness to embrace error (Blackburn & Holland, 1998, as cited in McGee, 2002). In practical terms of reflexivity, I kept a research diary, where I noted my ideas, impressions, reflections, and main outputs of the conversations with my AR team. The research diary was especially useful during the intervention and the interviews, where I felt a need to record not

only my observations, but also random thoughts about the atmosphere, students' reactions, and general feeling during the interviews.

Another practical aspect of reflexivity in my research process can be seen through the engagement of a critical friend, a practice common in AR (Herr and Anderson, 2005). Since I had a double role of a facilitator of the simulation activity and a researcher, it was very important to discuss the simulation activity with a person familiar with the teaching setting and a research context, not to get overwhelmed with the challenges of such a double role and to diminish the risk of biased interpretations. Moreover, apart from insights about the teaching practice, discussions with my critical friend created opportunities for reflexivity over power and positionality. More precisely, we discussed our positionalities of being white privileged women getting engaged with sensitive topics of poverty and oppression. Our personal experiences with poverty have been somewhat limited, which might have influenced our interpretation of the research results.

Furthermore, I reflected with my critical friend on the teacher – student power dynamics and how it could inform my research results. While I tried to act as a neutral facilitator leading the students through the simulation activity and helping them to construct their own meaning, as opposed to indoctrinating them with preconceived ideas, it was quite challenging to keep rather a neutral stance. Since the simulation took place in a formal educational setting, most of the students considered me rather as a teacher with a certain level of authority commonly seen in Slovak school systems, and much less as a partner. Although I shared similar identity with the students in terms of nationality and ethnic background and language, we had a difference in age, which I also tried to take into consideration when interpreting the research results.

#### 6.4. Limitations

The nature of this study does not allow any generalizability, as the study was conducted on a very small sample. However, the motivation behind this intervention with elements of AR was not to acquire generalizable results but to test a simulation tool on a small sample of students (one class) and allow the AR team to make informed decisions about their teaching practice about poverty.

Apart from weak external validity, AR might represent a possible threat to the internal validity of the research results. Generally, AR studies risk demonstrating “data collector bias” since the data collector might unconsciously overlook responses that do not align with the intent of the study or the main hypothesis (Fraenkel, 2019, p. 235). Nevertheless, throughout the process of data collection and analysis, special attention was taken not to ask

leading questions in the interviews, and to observe the reactions of all the students without any preference.

Moreover, internal validity might have been threatened by subject attitude threat, especially by the Hawthorne effect. The Hawthorne effect refers to increased attention and recognition of subjects which might result in a better performance of the research subjects. The students who participated in the intervention might have performed better because they knew that they were receiving special treatment or because of the novelty of the treatment (Fraenkel, 2019).

Another important point worth paying special attention to is the implementation of the simulation activity, which might pose an implementation threat (Fraenkel, 2019). While the facilitation of the simulation followed closely the author's instructions and recommendations, because of time concerns, it needed to be shortened. Moreover, an integral part of any simulation activity is the debriefing which follows right after the simulation and should facilitate the transfer of learning from one situation to another (Reid & Evanson, 2016). Inadequate debriefing can result in the activity being seen only as a game without any clear links to the real world (Davidson et al., 2009). The outcome of debriefing is largely dependent on the skills of the facilitator and the engagement of the participants. Therefore, evaluating the effectiveness of the same simulation tools facilitated by two different people might lead to different results.

## 7. Conclusions and Recommendations

### 7.2. Conclusions

The motivation behind this study was to research further how poverty simulations contribute to teaching about poverty. Although poverty is a widespread phenomenon and fighting it is prerequisite for attaining a more just and sustainable society, it is an often-overlooked topic in the primary and secondary school curriculum and an under-researched area of education.

Firstly, students were able to link experience gained in a simulated environment with real-life situations. The simulation activity incited students' reflection on poverty and inequality. As previous research has shown, the students had more empathic attitudes toward poor people, and they also recognized the difficulties faced by them.

Secondly, the quantitative results showed that after the poverty simulation, the students endorsed more structural explanations of poverty as compared to individual explanations of poverty. While students gained a deeper understanding of structural obstacles faced by poor people, the semi-structured interviews revealed that the students tended to overestimate the individual effort of the poor people in their attempts to get out of poverty. These findings are in line with the previous research by Cozzarelli (2002) that structural barriers should be overcome by individual effort.

Thirdly, the results suggest that the intersectional approach of the simulation helped students to identify the sources of oppression and privilege. However, unlike the previous research has shown, the intersectional approach did not help the students to avoid "othering", quite on opposite, the students drew a line between the poor people and the "others". Regarding poverty, the research results showed that most of the students tended to relativize poverty. A person might be poor if compared to a richer person and rich if compared to a poorer person. Poverty and poor people were associated with negative social phenomena such as alcoholism, homelessness, and abuse of the welfare system.

In the last place, although the research results do not possess any generalizability, I hope that this research study could contribute not only to improving the current teaching practice at Komenského School but also to the broader research of teaching critically about poverty.

## 7.2. Recommendations for Future Research

This research study evaluated the post-intervention attitudes toward poverty and understanding of poverty. It would be very interesting if the same post-intervention questionnaire and interviews were implemented 3-months after the intervention to evaluate if the changes in attitudes toward poverty and understanding of poverty persisted over time.

Since the external validity of this research study is very low due to its small sample, it is recommended to replicate it in similar educational settings to test further its transferability. It is also advisable to extend the research to other age groups, including primary school classes since it is beneficial for the students to generate a critical understanding of social justice-related topics.

As suggested in the previous section, the following AR cycle will test a combination of “strongly academic” and “strongly experiential” approaches to teaching about poverty. It is advisable to use the same evaluation methods to assess any improvements in students’ understanding of poverty and their attitudes toward poverty and compare them to the results of this research study.

It is recommended for further ESD research to keep exploring how to teach critically about social-justice-related topics, including poverty. As demonstrated in this research study, conventional teaching methods, including some poverty simulations, might generate sympathy instead of empathy or might even replicate the unequal power structures instead of challenging them. The critical understanding of social justice is critical in seeking a more just and sustainable future for all human beings.

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# Appendix 1 Parental Consent Letter

Dear Parent or Guardian:

My name is Lenka Čavojská, and I am currently studying a Master's degree in Education for Sustainable Development at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden. As part of the Master's program thesis, I would like to request permission for your child's participation in the following research study.

## Research Purpose and Methods:

The study seeks to explore the potential of Experiential Education in enhancing social justice and social inclusion. More specifically, it aims at evaluating the impact of the Poverty Simulation tool "C'est la vie" on students' understanding of poverty. This Poverty Simulation is a role-playing activity that allows students the opportunity to experience aspects of privilege and oppression in a safe classroom environment. The activity will be followed by a class discussion in which students share their impressions about the activity, and reflect on their experiences with poverty and privilege. The study is designed as an educational intervention with the elements of Action Research, consisting of a class intervention, pre-intervention and post-intervention surveys, and individual interviews. Through the interviews, I hope to get students' feedback about the simulation activity, as well as to get deeper insights into their perceptions of poverty and social justice.

## Benefits:

Poverty is a major global issue, directly influencing the lives of millions of people. However, as the research shows, it might be hard for more privileged students who do not have direct contact with poverty to sympathize with the poor. Therefore, Poverty Simulations can compensate for a lack of individual experience. Students will have a chance to understand poverty from different points of view and will be challenged to adopt critical perspectives.

## Participation:

This study will be conducted as part of the school curricular lessons, however, students' participation in this research project is completely voluntary. Also, you may choose to withdraw your child from the study at any point in the research. Before the simulation



activity, the students will be explained the purpose of the study and will be informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time they decide.

Confidentiality:

The data collected will only be read by me as a researcher and will not be stored online. It will not be distributed, published, or used in any other way than being incorporated into this thesis. I will not use your child's name or any other personal information that might identify him/her.

Please indicate whether or not you wish to allow your child to participate in this project by checking one of the statements below and signing your name.

- I do grant permission for my child to participate in this research study.
- I do not grant permission for my child to participate in this research study.

Child's name: \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Guardian name: \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Guardian signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

If you have further questions, please contact me at [guscavole@student.gu.se](mailto:guscavole@student.gu.se) or [lenka.cavojska@gmail.com](mailto:lenka.cavojska@gmail.com).

## Appendix 2 ATP Questionnaire

1. Poor people are different from the rest of society.
2. Poor people are dishonest.
3. Most poor people are dirty.
4. Poor people act differently.
5. Children raised on welfare will never amount to anything.
6. I believe poor people have a different set of values than do other people.
7. Poor people generally have lower intelligence than nonpoor people.
8. There is a lot of fraud among welfare recipients.
9. Some "poor" people live better than I do, considering all their benefits.
10. Poor people think they deserve to be supported.
11. Welfare mothers have babies to get more money.
12. An able-bodied person collecting welfare is ripping off the system.
13. Unemployed poor people could find jobs if they tried harder.
14. Welfare makes people lazy.
15. Benefits for poor people consume a major part of the federal budget.
16. People are poor due to circumstances beyond their control.
17. I would support a program that resulted in higher taxes to support social programs for poor people.
18. If I were poor, I would accept welfare benefits.
19. People who are poor should not be blamed for their misfortune.
20. Society has the responsibility to help poor people.
21. Poor people are discriminated against.

Notes:

Questions 1 – 7 = Personal Deficiency

Questions 8 – 15 = Stigma

Questions 9 – 21 = Structural Perspective

Retrieved from: Yun & Weaver (2010)

## Appendix 3 List of Questions for Semi-structured Interviews

### PART 1: Poverty Simulation

1. What did you like/dislike about the poverty simulation?
2. Was it easy/difficult to identify with your character? In what ways?
3. Was it easy/difficult to empathize with your character? In what ways?
4. Could you find any links between the simulation and real life? If yes, which ones?
5. In what ways was your character privileged/ marginalized?
6. How did your character's sources of privilege and/or marginalization affect your character's ability to succeed?
7. What role did race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and ability play in your character's life?
8. What were the most important lessons you learned during the simulation?
9. If you had a chance to play again, what would you change about the simulation?

### PART 2: Poverty, privilege, and oppression

1. How do you understand poverty?
2. Do you know any people who are living in poverty? If yes, what is their life like?
3. How do you think people get into the situation of poverty? / What causes poverty?
4. What do you think can be done to eradicate poverty?
5. In what ways do people in poverty have control or agency over their life decisions?
6. How do you understand privilege?
7. In what ways are people privileged/ marginalized?
8. Do you feel privileged/ marginalized? If yes, how?
9. How do race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and ability affect people's lives?  
And yours?

# Appendix 4 Simulation “C`est la vie” Playing Sheet

<b>Total:</b>
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**C`est La Vie: A Game of Social Life!** Your game ID: 42

**YOUR CHARACTER PROFILE:** Your character identifies as a heterosexual female. She is White (of European descent) and a citizen by birth. Your character has a chronic health condition that must be managed. Your character has a strong social support system. Your character begins the game with 20 money boxes and 1 bonus. Your character is able to vote.

<b>VOTE:</b> yes	<b>Social Group(s):</b> N S	<b>BONUSES</b> (○): Your character begins the game with 1 bonus. Each ○ is worth 1 bonus. Once you use a bonus, you will cross it out (⊗). If you gain more bonuses you can draw additional circles (○).  ○
<b>Neighborhood:</b>	<b>School:</b>	
<p><b>MONEY</b> (□): Your character begins the game with 20 money boxes. As you spend this money, you will cross out the relevant number of blocks (⊗). If you gain more money you can draw additional boxes in the space provided below (□).</p> <p>□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ □□□□</p>		<p><b>EXPERIENCE</b> (*): As you gain experience credits, draw a “*” to represent your gain. Experience credits are reusable as long as you maintain them. Some circumstances can result in experience credits being permanently lost. In this case cross out the credit ⊗ so that it can no longer be used.</p>
<p><b>DEBT</b> (-□-): Indicate debt and interest here. Debt must be paid off before there can be monetary gains. You cannot be more than 20 \$□ in debt at any time.</p>		<p><b>WELLNESS</b> (△): As you gain wellness credits, draw a “△” to represent your gain. Wellness credits are reusable as long as you maintain them. Some circumstances can result in wellness credits being permanently lost. In this case cross out the credit ⊗ so that it can no longer be used.</p>
		<p><b>ILLNESS</b> (▽): Negative wellness indicates illness. One must overcome illness before benefitting from wellness.</p> <p>▽▽▽</p>



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