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Pupils' and Parents' Opinions on Schools with Italian as the Language of Instruction

The model of education in the ethnically mixed area of Slovene Istria is designed to ensure schooling for members of the Italian national community and their children in their own language, i.e., Italian. Although also attended by pupils of other nationalities, primary schools with Italian as the language of instruction are key for the preservation of Italian culture and language. The authors present selected research findings that shed light on the opinions of pupils and their parents on whether schools with Italian as the language of instruction develop pupils' communicative competence in both Italian and Slovene, and whether the existing model of education creates conditions that promote the pupils' awareness of the linguistic and cultural diversity of their environment. The results of the research reveal that the majority of the respondents consider competence in several languages an added value and that the model of education is adequate and good.

Keywords: primary schools with Italian as the language of instruction, linguistic competence, Slovene Istria, pupils' and parents' opinions.

Mnenja učencev in njihovih staršev o šolah z italijanskim učnim jezikom

Izobraževalni model na narodnostno mešanem območju slovenske Istre je zasnovan tako, da pripadnikom italijanske narodne skupnosti omogoča šolanje v svojem jeziku, torej v italijanščini. Osnovne šole z italijanskim jezikom imajo ključno nalogo pri ohranjanju italijanske kulture in jezika, čeprav jih obiskujejo tudi učenci drugih narodnosti. V prispevku avtorice predstavljajo izbrane izsledke raziskave, ki osvetljujejo mnenja učencev in njihovih staršev o tem, ali šola z italijanskim učnim jezikom razvija sporazumevalne zmožnosti učencev tako v italijanskem kot v slovenskem jeziku in ali obstoječi model izobraževanja ustvarja pogoje, ki vplivajo na oblikovanje zavesti učencev o jezikovni in kulturni raznolikosti okolja. Rezultati kažejo, da večina udeležencev meni, da je znanje več jezikov dodana vrednost in da je model izobraževanja ustrezen in kakovosten.

Ključne besede: osnovne šole z italijanskim učnim jezikom, jezikovna kompetenca, slovenska Istra, mnenja učencev in staršev.

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1. Introduction

An individual's or a group's attitude towards a language is a complex psychological whole, involving knowledge, feelings, and behaviour. For some scholars (Giles et al. 1983), language attitudes are difficult to define and measure, as they are subjectively coloured and difficult to quantify. Gardner (1982), for example, considers language attitudes only in relation to attitudes towards second language learning, pointing out that language attitude is also determined by an individual's performance in language acquisition, especially second language (L2) acquisition. The level of linguistic competence is particularly relevant to language use at the institutional level, as an individual's proficiency or linguistic competence varies (Cummins 1984) from basic communicative competence suitable for communication at the interpersonal level to a higher cognitive or academic competence where language is used as an instrument of thought. An individual's linguistic behaviour is therefore influenced by various social, political, historical, and cultural factors that shape his or her perception of language acceptance and indirectly affect the motivation to learn and use a language.

The ethnically mixed area of Slovene Istria is a heterogeneous territory – a meeting point for different cultures and languages where individuals from different ethnic groups coexist. Slovene Istria has historically been home to the Italian national community which is one of the two constitutionally recognised autochthonous minorities in Slovenia.¹ The Constitution, various laws, and the national language policy provide the conditions for the use of the minority language – i.e., Italian – which in Slovene Istria is an official language, just like Slovene. This means that the national community is guaranteed equal status, which is particularly important for maintaining its vitality. Thus, also the model of education is designed to meet the specific needs of the environment, take into account the cultural and educational traditions of the ethnic group, and reflect the political status of the minority population (Novak Lukanovič et al. 2011, 350; cf. also Zorman 2021).

The ethnically mixed area is a “natural laboratory” (Novak Lukanovič 2011, 80) with numerous opportunities to observe the coexistence of different communities and cultures and build multicultural awareness and tolerance (Zudič Antonič 2012). In this context, schools with Italian as the language of instruction play a key role for both the Italian minority and the majority population, as they attach great importance to language learning and to the development of multilingualism and multiculturalism. Čok (2009, 21) sees minority schools as a true laboratory for the schools of the future, which are to be open to qualitative development of the educational process. As Zudič Antonič (2009, 79–80) points out, the Italian school has a broader role, which is expressed not only in the implementation of the learning process but also in the achievement of numerous educational objectives. The school creates conditions for the preserva-

tion of the cultural heritage of the ethnically mixed area, while strongly emphasising the development of intercultural communication and positive attitudes towards diversity.

The empirical data presented in this article are derived from the 2019 study titled *Importance of Schools with Italian as the Language of Instruction on the Slovene Coast for Maintaining the Vitality of the Italian National Community*. The selected results present the opinions of pupils and their parents on the importance of language knowledge (Italian and Slovene) and schools with Italian as the language of instruction. The results also serve as a good starting point for reflection on whether schools with Italian as the language of instruction sufficiently develop pupils' communicative competence in both Italian and Slovene, and whether the existing model of education creates conditions that influence the formation of pupils' awareness of the linguistic and cultural diversity of their environment.

To better understand the obtained data that shed light on the respondents' opinions, we present in brief the legal framework and the organisation of education in schools with Italian as the language of instruction in Slovene Istria.

2. Legal Protection and Model of Education for Members of the Italian National Community in Slovene Istria

The education of members of the Italian national community is an integral part of education in Slovenia, as defined by both the Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia² and several sector-specific laws: the *Kindergartens Act* (2005), the *Basic School Act* (2006), the *Gimnazija Act* (2007), the *Vocational and Technical Education Act* (2006), and the *Organisation and Financing of Education Act* (2007). The law which regulates in more detail the rights of the Italian (and Hungarian) national community in education is the *Act Regulating Special Rights of Members of the Italian and Hungarian Ethnic Communities in the Field of Education* (2001). The latter defines the special objectives of education for members of the Italian (and Hungarian) national community, the organisation of the educational process, the adaptation of programmes and curricula, the public kindergarten and school network, special conditions for kindergarten and school professionals, the language of operation, and financing. The state, together with the national community and its institutions, is therefore obliged to provide for the existence and development of preschool and school education in the language of the national community.

There are three primary schools with Italian as the language of instruction in the ethnically mixed area of Slovene Istria: *Pier Paolo Vergerio il Vecchio* in Koper, *Dante Alighieri* in Izola and *Vincenzo e Diego de Castro* in Piran. In these

schools, Italian is taught as mother tongue or first language.³ Its specific task in this context is to preserve and promote the importance of the historical presence of the language, culture, and identity of the Italian national community. The curriculum and syllabus⁴ of schools with Italian as the language of instruction contain, in addition to the objectives laid down by the educational regulations, also specific socialisation objectives aimed at the familiarisation with the culture and history of the ethnic community present in the local environment, as well as at transmitting different values and shaping pupils' attitudes towards the linguistic and cultural diversity in their environment (Nečak Lük 2009b, 115).

Schools are attended by children of the Italian national community but are also open to other pupils, regardless of their ethnicity and nationality, who perceive contact with Italian culture and language as a positive value (Novak Lukanovič et al. 2011, 351). For this second group, in particular, the motivation to learn Italian in the school context and use it also outside school or in everyday communication is very important.

3. Research Method and Sample Structure

The empirical data and selected results presented in the article are derived from a study conducted in 2019.

The study aimed to identify and present a broader pupils' and parents' view on the importance of language knowledge and the educational model in schools with Italian as the language of instruction. Language attitude influences the motivation to learn and use a language. Studying language attitude is relevant primarily in terms of the achievement of the socialisation goals of minority education (Nečak Lük 2009a, 30), such as familiarisation with the other language and with the history and culture of one's own and the other nation.

The study comprised the following research questions:

- Do schools with Italian as the language of instruction sufficiently develop pupils' communicative competence in both Italian and Slovene?
- Does the existing model of education in schools with Italian as the language of instruction create conditions that influence the formation of pupils' awareness of the linguistic and cultural diversity of their environment?

The study involved pupils of the 7th, 8th and 9th grades of the three primary schools with Italian as the language of instruction (*Pier Paolo Vergerio il Vecchio* in Koper, *Dante Alighieri* in Izola and *Vincenzo e Diego de Castro* in Piran) and their parents. Before starting the survey in schools, parents were asked for their written consent to include their pupils in the survey. As shown in Table 1, the planned sample was 152 pupils, but since many pupils did not return or obtain their parents' consent,⁵ the final sample included 83 pupils, which represents a sample realisation rate of 54.6 %.⁶

Table 1: Number of pupils by grade and number of pupils participating in the survey in the school year 2018/19

Primary school	Pupils	
	No. of pupils in 7 th , 8 th and 9 th grades	Number of returned pupils' surveys
Pier Paolo Vergerio il Vecchio, Koper	69	32
Dante Alighieri, Izola	47	31
Vincenzo e Diego de Castro, Piran	36	20
Total	152	83

Source: Data obtained from the survey.

The questionnaire used to collect the data was prepared for the pupils in Italian only. It consisted of 14 closed and open ended questions. In addition to mother tongue and ethnic affiliation, we inquired which language pupils speak at home, for example with their parents and siblings, and which language they use outside the home. We also asked them to self-assess their language skills, i.e., the level at which they understand, speak, read, and write in Italian and Slovene. This was followed by statements about the importance of knowing Italian and statements about the school they attend, which had to be rated on a five-point scale (from 5 – strongly agree to 1 – strongly disagree).

Only the parents of the pupils who took part in the survey were sent the questionnaires, yet not all of them returned them. The questionnaire for the parents consisted of 20 closed and open ended questions. Some of the questions concerning the importance of language learning and some of the statements about the importance of language knowledge and the school attended by their children were the same as in the questionnaire for the pupils, while other questions referred to Italian as an official language in the ethnically mixed area of Slovene Istria and to the Italian national community. Forty-three questionnaires were completed and returned, which equals a sample realisation rate of 28.2 %. This figure surprised us as we had expected a higher response rate from parents. Although the sample is small and no generalisation is possible, the data collected is informative and relevant for understanding the topic in general, considering that children's attitudes are also influenced by their family values.

The majority of pupils (90.3 %) and parents (90.6 %) surveyed have their permanent residence in the ethnically mixed area. Only eight (9.6 %) pupils reported having permanent residence outside the ethnically mixed area of Slovene Istria and lived in Italy (Trieste, Muggia). Four (9.4 %) parents also have permanent residence in Italy. 66.7 % of the pupils have lived in their current place of residence since birth, while 33.3 % of the pupils migrated from other places. Of these, only two pupils (2.4 %) moved from Ljubljana, while 13.2% immigrated from abroad (four from Italy, two from Russia and one each from the Czech Re-

public, Serbia, and North Macedonia). Of the 21 (48.8 %) parents who have not lived in their current place of residence since birth, 47.6 % moved there from another place within the ethnically mixed area, 14.2 % moved from other parts of Slovenia (Ljubljana, Dolenjska), and 42.8 % immigrated from abroad (Italy, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia).

As indicated in Table 2, the structure of pupils and parents by mother tongue or first language is as follows: 28.9 % of pupils have two mother tongues or first languages, i.e., Slovene and Italian; 27.7 % report Slovene to be their mother tongue, and 20.5 % report Italian to be their first language. For 22.9 % of pupils, the mother tongue is another language (Macedonian, Albanian, Serbian, Bosnian, Croatian, Russian). Compared to pupils, a larger proportion (37.2 %) of parents report their mother tongue to be Slovene, 25.6 % chose Italian, while 20.9 % indicated they have two mother tongues, both Slovene and Italian. For 16.3 % of the parents, the mother tongue is another language (Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian, Istro-Venetian dialect).

Table 2: Pupils' and parents' mother tongue

Pupils		Parents	
Mother tongue			
Italian	20.5 %	Italian	25.6 %
Slovene	27.7 %	Slovene	37.2 %
Italian and Slovene	28.9 %	Italian and Slovene	20.9 %
Other	22.9 %	Other	16.3 %
Total	100 %	Total	100 %

Source: Data obtained from the survey.

Table 3 shows the replies to the question on ethnic affiliation. Based thereon, 25.3 % of the pupils identify themselves as Slovenes, while 20.5 % state their ethnic affiliation is Italian–Slovene or Slovene–Italian. 16.9 % of pupils identify themselves as Italians and 22.9 % chose the reply other ethnic affiliation (Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian, Macedonian, Albanian, Russian, or mixed affiliation: Slovene–Albanian, Slovene–Croatian, Slovene–Macedonian, Slovene–Serbian). 8.4 % of the pupils refused to answer this question, and 3.6 % report to be ethnically undefined. The majority of the parents, i.e., 37.2 %, identify themselves as Slovenes, 18.6 % state their ethnic affiliation is Italian–Slovene or Slovene–Italian, and only 9.3 % identify themselves as Italian. A relatively high share of parents, 16.3 % to be precise, did not wish to answer the question, 7 % chose other ethnic affiliation (Croatian, Istrian, Serbian–Slovenian), and 4.7 % report to be ethnically undefined.

Table 3: Ethnic affiliation of pupils and parents

Pupils		Parents	
Ethnic affiliation			
Italian	16.9 %	Italian	9.3 %
Slovene	25.3 %	Slovene	37.2 %
Italian–Slovene or Slovene–Italian	20.5 %	Italian–Slovene or Slovene–Italian	18.6 %
Other ethnic affiliation	22.9 %	Other ethnic affiliation	7 %
Ethnically undefined	3.6 %	Ethnically undefined	4.7 %
Do not wish to reply	8.4 %	Do not wish to reply	16.3 %
No reply	2.4 %	No reply	7 %
Total	100 %	Total	100 %

Source: Data obtained from the survey.

4. Research Outcomes: Pupils’ and Parents’ Opinions on the Importance of Language Knowledge and the Educational Model in Schools with Italian as the Language of Instruction

4.1 Pupils’ Opinion

4.1.1 Self-Assessment of Language Skills

Pupils were asked to assess their knowledge of Italian and Slovene.⁷ We were interested in their linguistic competence in all four language skills: understanding, speaking, reading, writing (1 – very poor, 2 – poor, 3 – neither good nor poor, 4 – good, 5 – very good).

When asked how they assess their language skills in Italian, only 76 pupils provided a full reply. The highest ratings were reported in understanding: 62.5 % have a very good, 27.5 % a good, and 10 % a neither good nor poor understanding of Italian. No pupil chose the reply poor or very poor. In speaking, 41 % of the pupils chose the reply very good, and 42.3 % good. The ratings were relatively low in writing, which also presents the highest coefficient of variability. 28.2 % of pupils assess their writing in Italian as very good, 34.6 % as good, 30.8 % as neither good nor poor, and 6.4 % as poor. The most incomplete data were obtained for reading. Six pupils did not answer the question, 44.2 % of them assessed their reading in Italian as very good, 28.6 % as good, 24.7 % as neither good nor poor, and 2.6 % as poor.

The above results are presented in Table 4, where the arithmetic mean and standard deviation are shown for ease of understanding. The answers indicate that pupils assess their linguistic competence the highest in understanding ($\bar{x} = 4.52$) and the lowest in writing ($\bar{x} = 3.85$).

Table 4: "How do you rate your knowledge of Italian?"

	N	Min	Max	Arithmetic mean	SD
Understanding	80	3	5	4.52	.675
Speaking	78	2	5	4.21	.812
Reading	77	2	5	4.14	.884
Writing	78	2	5	3.85	.913
Number of pupils who provided a full reply	76				

Source: Data obtained from the survey.

When asked to assess their knowledge of Slovene, pupils rated such rather low in all four skills. Understanding scored the highest: 51.8 % said their understanding of Slovene was very good, 25.3 % rated it as good, 18.1 % as neither good nor poor, and 4.8 % as poor. As regards speaking, 33.3 % of pupils assessed their knowledge as very good, 27.2 % as good, 27.2 % as neither good nor poor, 11.1 % as poor, and 1.2 % as very poor. A relatively high proportion of pupils (37 %) rated their reading skills as very good, 29.6 % as good, 16 % as neither good nor poor, 11.1 % as poor, and 6.2 % as very poor. The lowest scores were reported in writing: only 23.5 % of pupils rated their writing skills in Slovene as very good and 33.3 % as good. 22.2 % of pupils assessed their writing as neither good nor poor, 19.8 % as poor, and 1.2 % as very poor.

The results presented above are shown in Table 5 including the arithmetic mean and standard deviation for better clarity and understanding. Pupils gave the highest score for understanding ($\bar{x} = 4.24$), and the lowest score for writing ($\bar{x} = 3.58$). The highest standard deviation is observed in speaking (SD = 1.229), where responses vary considerably.

Table 5: "How do you rate your knowledge of Slovene?"

	N	Min	Max	Arithmetic mean	SD
Understanding	83	2	5	4.24	.919
Speaking	81	1	5	3.80	1.229
Reading	81	1	5	3.80	1.066
Writing	81	1	5	3.58	1.094
Number of pupils who provided a full reply	81				

Source: Data obtained from the survey.

A comparison of the results presented in Tables 4 and 5 reveals that pupils rate their knowledge of Slovene rather low in all four skills, while the rates for Italian are higher. In the context of schools with Italian as the language of instruction, the explanation for and the cause of such results are most likely to be found in the educational system itself. Pupils are exposed to the Italian language for many hours of the day as the whole educational process takes place in Italian and they speak Italian with their classmates. This is confirmed by the results of our survey since, as they themselves said, communication with their classmates at school is only or mainly in Italian (54.9 %). Another reason for the differing rates lies in how critical they are of their language knowledge. In fact, a subjective assessment of language skills does not always reflect actual knowledge, as pupils – when self-assessing – most likely had the school programme in mind rather than merely their language skills.

4.1.2 Opinions on the Importance of Knowing Italian

The study also explored attitudes towards individual languages, more precisely Italian, which is the subject of our research. Language attitude is important because it represents a complex psychological whole, involving both knowledge and feelings, as well as an individual's behaviour. Table 6 shows the pupils' responses about the importance of knowing Italian on a five-point scale ranging from 1 – strongly disagree to 5 – strongly agree.

Table 6: Pupils' opinions on the importance of knowing Italian

Statement	N	Arithmetic mean	SD
The knowledge of Italian I get at school enables me to continue my education in Italy.	83	4.40	.883
Knowing Italian opens up more job opportunities.	83	4.33	.734
I use Italian in various situations, including outside school.	82	4.12	1.169
Knowing Italian allows me to make friends.	83	3.99	1.006
Knowing Italian allows me to understand and accept the culture of my environment.	83	3.39	1.135
Knowing Italian gives me a chance for success in my environment.	83	3.30	1.079
Knowing Italian is necessary to feel Italian.	83	2.61	1.333

Source: Data obtained from the survey.

As seen from Table 6, the arithmetic mean is the highest for the statement that the knowledge of Italian pupils get at school enables them to continue their education in Italy ($\bar{x} = 4.40$), which means that this statement was agreed with by the highest number of pupils. Although the pupils participating in the survey attend primary school and we do not have data on how many of them actually go on to secondary school in Italy, we can conclude that they rate the knowledge

of Italian they acquire at school as important. Strong agreement with this statement also offers us a first insight into the effectiveness of the educational model in schools with Italian as the language of instruction, i.e., that the model enables the development of communicative competence and the transfer of knowledge useful for their further education. This is followed by the statement that knowing Italian opens up more job opportunities ($\bar{x} = 4.33$), which is consistent with the economic factors of the language. Knowledge of Italian is therefore important from a practical point of view, as shown by previous research (Novak Lukanovič 2006) presenting some indicators of the specific role of Italian: economic cooperation with Italy, the presence of the Italian language in an ethnically mixed area, and the usefulness and spread of the language in the world.

Our data also confirm the statement that pupils use Italian in various situations, including outside school ($\bar{x} = 4.12$). As can be seen from the data on communication within the family, namely with parents, the answers show that 25 % of the pupils speak only or mainly Italian with their mother, while 23.8 % use both languages equally; 30.8 % of the pupils speak only or mainly Italian with their father and 16.8 % use both languages equally. In other communicative situations, Italian seems to be spoken to a limited extent, for example when talking to neighbours (15.7 % speak only or mostly Italian), at the doctor's (13.6 % speak only or mostly Italian), in the shop (12.5 % speak only or mostly Italian) and at the post office (11.4 % speak only or mostly Italian).

Pupils agreed least with the statement that knowing Italian is necessary to feel Italian ($\bar{x} = 2.61$). This statement also presents the highest standard deviation ($SD = 1.333$), which means that pupils answered with high variability. The theory points out that language and identity are closely linked, and that language is considered the most important symbol of an individual (Joseph 2004, cited in Novak Lukanovič 2019) and is passed on from generation to generation along with culture. However, the data from our study show that the link between language and identity is not so important for pupils and that their perception of identity is subjective, as affiliation with an (ethnic) group is mainly marked by subjective feelings.

4.1.3 Opinions on the Educational Model

We also presented the pupils with a series of statements relating to the model of education in which they are involved and which they know well, or to the organisation of classes in schools with Italian as the language of instruction. The pupils' answers are shown on a five-point scale (from 1 – strongly disagree to 5 – strongly agree) in Table 7.

The highest share of pupils agreed with the statements that teachers have a good command of Italian ($\bar{x} = 4.47$), that the school gives pupils enough knowledge to continue their education anywhere in Slovenia ($\bar{x} = 3.94$), and

that teachers have a good command of Slovene ($\bar{x} = 3.64$). The positive attitude towards the statement that teachers have a good command of both Italian and Slovene suggests that language plays an important role in schools with Italian as the language of instruction and that this is perceived by pupils as quality preparation of teachers.

Table 7: Pupils' opinions on the educational model

Statement	N	Arithmetic mean	SD
Teachers have a good command of Italian.	81	4.47	.808
The school gives me enough knowledge to continue my education anywhere in Slovenia.	83	3.94	1.028
Teachers have a good command of Slovene.	83	3.64	.945
Children like learning Italian at school.	83	3.60	.732
Children like learning Slovene at school.	83	3.28	.874
Learning a foreign language (e.g., English, German, etc.) is more important than learning Italian.	83	3.05	.961
There should be more Slovene language lessons at school.	83	2.52	1.263
I have problems learning several languages at school.	82	2.35	1.211
There should be more Italian language lessons at school.	83	2.31	1.287

Source: Data obtained from the survey.

Pupils are slightly less likely to agree with the statements that children like learning Italian at school ($\bar{x} = 3.60$) and that they like learning Slovene at school ($\bar{x} = 3.28$) but show low agreement with the statements that there should be more Italian language lessons ($\bar{x} = 2.31$) – which is the one with which they agree least of all the statements – and that there should be more Slovene language lessons ($\bar{x} = 2.52$).

Pupils do not wish to have more Italian and Slovene language lessons, as can be seen from the answers to the statement that learning a foreign language (e.g., English, German, etc.) is more important than learning Italian ($\bar{x} = 3.05$), which is ranked medium. Over the last decade, English has risen in status compared to Italian and Slovene because it is more attractive to learners as the language of globalisation, which often leads to neglect or a decline in motivation to learn other languages.

4.2 Parents' opinion

4.2.1 Opinions on the Importance of Knowing Italian

Several statements were also used to evaluate the parents' opinions on the importance of knowing Italian, especially in the ethnically mixed area of Slovene Istria.

Table 8 shows the parents' replies on a five-point scale ranging from 1 – strongly disagree to 5 – strongly agree.

Table 8: Parents' replies on the importance of knowing Italian in the ethnically mixed area

Statement	N	Arithmetic mean	SD
In the ethnically mixed area, there should be schools with both Italian and Slovene as languages of instruction.	43	4.72	.908
The knowledge of Italian children get at school enables them to continue their education in Italy.	43	4.59	.706
Knowing Italian opens up more job opportunities.	43	4.33	.944
In the ethnically mixed area, bilingualism is consistently practised in public institutions.	43	4.21	1.186
Knowing Italian enables me to understand and pursue the culture of my environment.	43	4.19	1.118
Knowing Italian enables me to make friends with Italians.	43	4.14	1.060
Knowing Italian is necessary to feel Italian.	43	3.33	1.492
It is not necessary for Slovenes to learn Italian.	43	2.35	1.211

Source: Data obtained from the survey.

Table 8 shows that parents agree the most with the statement that in the ethnically mixed area, there should be schools with both Italian and Slovene as languages of instruction, which is the reply with the highest arithmetic mean ($\bar{x} = 4.72$). This result is important for us as it suggests that the respondents are aware of the importance of a multilingual and multicultural environment in which they live and in which Italian has the same status as Slovene. The statements about knowledge of Italian enabling pupils to continue their education in Italy ($\bar{x} = 4.59$) and opening up more job opportunities ($\bar{x} = 4.33$) follow in order of mean values. It is worth pointing out that the two statements referring to the ethnically mixed area also achieved relatively high agreement. The statements that in the ethnically mixed area, bilingualism is consistently practised in public institutions ($\bar{x} = 4.21$) and that knowing Italian enables them to understand and pursue the culture of their environment ($\bar{x} = 4.14$) are important because they show that people are aware of the presence of the Italian language and the Italian national community. Parents were the least likely to agree with the statement that it is not necessary for Slovenes to learn Italian ($\bar{x} = 2.35$), which is confirmed by the above statement with the highest arithmetic mean. Parents are therefore aware that the implementation of bilingualism requires that both members of the majority population and members of the minority population master both languages – Italian and Slovene. The highest standard deviation is observed for the statement that knowing Italian is necessary to feel Italian ($SD = 1.492$) where responses vary considerably.

Based on the above, we find that the majority of respondents have a positive attitude towards bilingualism or a multilingual environment in which majority and minority languages coexist. It can also be confirmed that the majority of parents support the equal status of the Italian language in the ethnically mixed area of Slovene Istria and hence the legislation underpinning the educational model of schools attended by their children.

4.2.2 Opinions on the Educational Model

We were also interested in the parents' opinions on schools with Italian as the language of instruction. Table 9 shows the parents' replies on a five-point scale (from 1 – strongly disagree to 5 – strongly agree).

Table 9: Parents' opinions on schools with Italian as the language of instruction

Statement	N	Arithmetic mean	SD
Children like to learn Slovene at school.	43	3.93	.884
Children like to learn Italian at school.	43	3.81	1.220
Teachers have a good command of Slovene.	43	3.81	.880
The school gives children enough knowledge to continue their education in Slovenia.	43	3.81	1.052
Teachers have a good command of Italian.	43	3.79	1.081
Pupils attending schools with Italian as the language of instruction are overburdened.	43	2.84	1.379
It would be better if children had more lessons of foreign languages (e.g. English, German, etc.) instead of Italian.	43	2.72	1.202

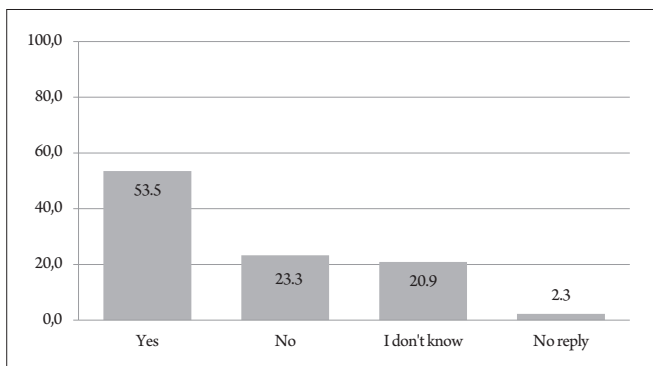
Source: Data obtained from the survey.

As can be seen, the highest arithmetic mean is observed for the statement that children like to learn Slovene at school ($\bar{x} = 3.93$), which means that most parents agreed with this statement. This is followed by a set of statements with the same mean value, as for example that children like to learn Italian at school ($\bar{x} = 3.81$), that teachers have a good command of Slovene ($\bar{x} = 3.81$), and that the school gives children enough knowledge to continue their education in Slovenia ($\bar{x} = 3.81$). Parents were slightly less likely to agree that teachers have a good command of Italian ($\bar{x} = 3.79$) and that children attending schools with Italian as the language of instruction are overburdened ($\bar{x} = 2.84$). This statement also presents the highest variability in responses, as shown by the standard deviation ($SD = 1.379$). Parents were least likely to agree with the statement that it would be better if children had more lessons of foreign languages (e.g. English, German, etc.) instead of Italian ($\bar{x} = 2.72$), which confirms the importance of knowing both the majority and minority languages, i.e. the two languages present in the

environment. It should also be pointed out that a relatively large standard deviation is observed for most of the answers.

As the school system in the ethnically mixed area is adapted and suited to the specific needs of the environment, we also explored whether parents consider the current form of schooling in Slovene Istria to be suitable and of good quality. Figure 1 shows that the majority (53.5 %) of respondents think that the current model is suitable and of good quality, while almost a quarter (23.3 %) think that the current model is not suitable. A relatively high proportion (20.9 %) said they did not know.

Figure 1: Parents' replies to the question whether the current form of schooling in the ethnically mixed area is suitable and of good quality



Source: Data obtained from the survey.

Parents were also asked to justify why they think the current model of education is of good quality and suitable, or why they think it is not. Parents who thought that the form of schooling in the ethnically mixed area of Slovene Istria was suitable and of good quality justified their answer by arguing that the level of Slovene and Italian knowledge was suitable and enabled the children of the minority to be educated in their mother tongue. Parents who felt that the current form of schooling was not suitable made other arguments, such as that pupils do not have enough knowledge at the end of school, that teachers are not sufficiently prepared, and that the school with Italian as the language of instruction is not ambitious enough and does not know how to take advantage of the opportunities offered in the educational process. The data also show that parents are not sufficiently familiar with the educational system in the ethnically mixed area of Slovene Istria. The situation should be improved by providing parents with additional information as they have an important influence on the pupils' views, their perception of the educational model, and their general attitude towards a language.

5. Conclusion

The article presents selected research results that reflect the specific features of the educational model in schools with Italian as the language of instruction in Slovene Istria in an attempt to answer the research questions set at the beginning.

As regards the first research question (Do schools with Italian as the language of instruction sufficiently develop pupils' communicative competence in both Italian and Slovene?), the data confirm that, according to a majority opinion of pupils and parents, schools with Italian as the language of instruction sufficiently develop pupils' communicative competence in both Italian and Slovene for all four language skills (understanding, speaking, reading, writing).

Comparing the responses of pupils and parents also gives us an insight into the respondents' attitudes towards language knowledge and education. There are no major differences between pupils' and parents' views, or rather, pupils appear to have slightly more positive views on the educational model than parents. In any case, both groups are aware of the importance of language knowledge, as it not only enables more effective communication but also opens up more opportunities in the labour market. The attitudes towards language knowledge, which include a strong agreement with the statements that schools with Italian as the language of instruction provide sufficient knowledge to continue education in Italy as well as in Slovenia, and that the teachers have a good command of both Italian and Slovene, indicate that language has special importance and value in minority schools. The data confirm beyond doubt that the importance of language knowledge is a multidimensional category, which is also linked to the model of education in ethnically mixed areas.

The results also confirm the second research question (Does the existing model of education in schools with Italian as the language of instruction create conditions that influence the formation of pupils' awareness of the linguistic and cultural diversity of their environment?). In minority schools, language has a special status and represents an asset for the Italian minority as well as for the community as a whole, including the majority population. It can be confirmed that the existing model of education in schools with Italian as the language of instruction creates conditions that influence the formation of pupils' awareness of the linguistic and cultural diversity of their environment. Both pupils and their parents are aware of the linguistic and cultural diversity of the environment in which they live and attend school. It is notable, however, that a large proportion of parents are unfamiliar with or undecided about the suitability and quality of the existing educational model, a fact that surprised us precisely because of the important influence that family values have on children's opinions.

We can conclude that the curricula in schools with Italian as the language of instruction require continuous monitoring, not only in the narrow circle of stakeholders involved in education but also in the wider environment in which

the school operates. The benefits of this type of education, or the knowledge of several languages, are sometimes not as obvious as one might think, and this is why we should strive to raise parents' awareness and, consequently, to achieve a high quality of professional staff in schools. Intercultural education, which is important for the coexistence and understanding of other cultures, needs to be developed and upgraded, but it is also important that the educational system provides appropriate content and methods for language teaching. A positive attitude towards languages and bilingualism in an ethnically mixed area promotes the possibility of using the Italian (minority) language in all domains, including outside the school environment, thus contributing to the vitality of the Italian national community.

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Notes

- ¹ Although several ethnic groups are present in Slovenia, the ones considered historical ethnic minorities are the Italian, Hungarian, and Roma communities. The Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia (1991) defines Italian and Hungarian national communities as autochthonous (Article 5) but does not provide any specific interpretation of this adjective. The two communities enjoy the highest level of protection of their special rights (Articles 11, 64 and 80). A limited scope of provisions is also provided for the Roma community – the position and special rights of the Roma community in Slovenia are set out in Article 65 of the Constitution (cf. Komac 2002; 2020).
- ² Article 64 of the Constitution provides that the Italian and Hungarian national communities have the right to education and schooling in their own languages and defines the geographical areas in which such form of schooling is compulsory.
- ³ By mother tongue, we mean first language, i.e., the language learned in early childhood.
- ⁴ The syllabus is adapted for the following subjects: Italian as mother tongue or first language, Slovene as second language (language of the environment), social studies, history, geography, and music. In addition, there are certain adaptations in teaching standards, teaching materials in Italian, and staff, as it is foreseen to have a qualified staff of Italian native speakers, mostly members of the Italian community (Zudič Antonič 2009).
- ⁵ At the Koper school, we did not obtain consent for as many as 35 pupils (50.7 %): two consents were negative, i.e., the parents did not allow their pupils to take part in the survey, while the remaining 33 consents were missing. On the days when the survey was carried out, two pupils were absent and could not take part in the survey. At the Izola school, we did not obtain consent for 16 pupils (34 %): four pupils were not allowed to participate in the survey and 12 consents

were missing. At the Piran school, we did not obtain consent for a total of 15 pupils (41.6%): two pupils were not allowed to take part, while 13 consents were missing. One pupil was absent on the day of the survey.

- 6 In the 2018/19 school year, the total number of pupils was 594, of which 282 in Koper, 174 in Izola, and 138 in Piran.
- 7 While aware that self-assessment is not the most reliable method, we assumed that the results could still be useful as the use of a language – Italian or Slovene – in different speaking situations enables us to assess the actual/real level of proficiency in a particular language. The results of the self-assessment, which are subjectively coloured, also help us to identify the value that an individual attaches to a language.

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