

Stories Under the Magnifying Glass METHODOLOGY HANDBOOK



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Stories Under the Magnifying Glass

METHODOLOGY HANDBOOK

This methodology handbook provides a comprehensive framework for using storytelling in non-formal education with the aim of developing empathy, openness, tolerance towards differences, strengthening critical thinking, and building resilience against stereotypes. The methodology integrates theoretical principles with practical tools for working with various types of stories and targeted activities for younger (13–15 years) and older (16+ years) youth.

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1. The Theoretical Foundation of Storytelling:

Stories as a Transformative Tool

Each of us remembers a story that changed something within us – it might be a fairy tale from childhood, a friend's confession, or a film that opened our eyes. Stories have the power to stop us in our tracks, to touch us, and to transport us into someone else's world. For young people, this is even more crucial. Sometimes, feelings or experiences cannot be expressed directly, but a story allows us to approach them safely and naturally. Stories help us name what is difficult, discuss sensitive topics, and find answers to questions we might not even know how to ask ourselves.

Stories have been with us since ancient times – from cave paintings to modern digital narratives – and they represent a universal language that requires no formal qualifications. It does not matter whether you are an experienced lecturer or just starting out; all you need is to be open and willing to listen. By doing so, you are already opening a door for young people to empathy, understanding, and change. Storytelling is more than just telling tales; it's a tool that connects people, breaks down prejudices, and creates a safe space for young people to find their own answers. It works on a multisensory level, fosters emotional engagement, and enables the facilitation of complex social issues such as health and social disadvantages, bullying, extremism, violence, ethnicity, and migration. Such stories sensitively portray the reality of vulnerable groups, encouraging empathy and helping to dismantle stereotypes and prejudices.

By combining the cognitive, affective, and social aspects of learning, storytelling builds empathy, develops critical thinking, and strengthens social responsibility. This is precisely why it is such a powerful tool for creating an open society.

1.1. The Neurobiology of Stories and Theory of Mind (ToM)

Stories function as a powerful tool because they activate specific areas of the brain. When a story is told, mirror neurons are activated, which allow us to feel the emotions and experiences of the characters as if we were living them ourselves. This mechanism is crucial for the development of empathy and the Theory of Mind (ToM), which is the ability to attribute mental states (desires, beliefs, intentions) to oneself and others and, on that basis, to predict their behaviour.

Additionally, telling and listening to stories stimulates the release of the hormone oxytocin, which supports the creation of trust, a sense of belonging, and social connection. This combination of neurobiological mechanisms makes stories an exceptionally effective tool for building deep and authentic interpersonal relationships.

1.2. Types of Stories that Can Be Used

- **Fairy tales and myths:** these portray universal values and moral dilemmas, providing space for the analysis of archetypes and reflection on the behaviour and attitudes of characters.
- **Legends, folk tales, and historical stories:** these open up questions of identity, justice, and social responsibility. They offer the opportunity to discuss and compare historical and contemporary problems (e.g., stereotypes in the past and today).
- **Video stories and digital stories:** presenting stories and addressing various topics through the real stories of real people brings about a more intense emotional impact.
- **Living books:** these are real stories of people from vulnerable groups from various backgrounds, which allow for direct interaction and the building of empathy.

1.3. Anti-bias Analysis

Anti-bias approach is based on the belief that stereotypes and prejudices are not fixed but are the result of social learning and can gradually change. Stories play a key role in this process because they provide a safe space in which prejudices can be recognised, named, and critically examined without direct accusation or confrontation.

When participants work with stories, they have the opportunity to notice what images, attitudes, or behaviours of characters reflect stereotypical thinking—for example, in the way certain groups are portrayed, in the language used, or in recurring behavioural patterns. They can then look for other, alternative ways the story could have developed if these prejudices had not appeared.

This kind of work with stories supports not only critical thinking but also empathy. Participants become aware of how stereotypes affect the lives of specific people, and they learn to see reality from the perspective of those who are often marginalised or experience discrimination. Creating inclusive versions of stories also develops creativity and shows that more just and respectful ways exist to portray the diversity of the world.

1.4. Connecting Storytelling with Critical Thinking

Stories as a tool for breaking down stereotypes and prejudices.

1. A story → leads to an **emotion** (empathising).
2. An emotion → evokes a **question** ("Why did it happen this way?").
3. A question → leads to **analysis** (uncovering the causes of prejudice).
4. Analysis → leads to an **attitude** (creating one's own values based on respect and equality).

In youth work, storytelling becomes an effective tool for breaking down stereotypes and prejudices precisely when it is connected to critical thinking. A story first appeals to emotions and allows young people to empathise with the situation of the characters or real people. This emotional experience naturally raises questions—why things happened the way they did, what were the reasons behind the behaviour of individuals or groups. These questions then create space for analysis, in which deeper social mechanisms, prejudices, and stereotypes present in the story can be sought out and uncovered. Critical examination thus leads to the conscious formation of one's own attitudes, which are based on the values of respect, justice, and equality.

1.5. Developing Awareness and Sensitivity

Stories have a unique power to awaken sensitivity and awareness in young people by connecting an emotional experience with critical thinking. When young people first empathise with someone else's life situation, experiencing their joy, pain, or fears, it opens up a space for them to realise that behind every experience stands a specific person. This moment of empathy then becomes a springboard for questions and for seeking out the causes that shape behaviour, attitudes, or inequalities in society. Critical examination not only uncovers stereotypes and prejudices but also leads to a deeper understanding and respect. Thanks to this connection between emotion and reflection, stories become an effective tool for increasing awareness—they help young people become more sensitive to the needs of others and support their ability to build a more just and tolerant environment.

2. Practical Framework for Working with Stories

2.1. Choosing a Story

Artistic Stories

Artistic stories—fairy tales, myths, legends, folk tales, or historical stories—don’t have to be just well-known and repeatedly told tales of the past. They can take on a new, vibrant dimension. They are like mirrors reflecting our deepest desires, fears, emotions, and the questions we ask about the world and ourselves.

These stories carry archetypal motifs, symbols, and values that can resonate with young people across time and cultures. They can serve as a stimulus for opening up sensitive social topics such as justice, otherness, compassion, freedom, loss, and courage. They can raise awareness of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, foster empathy, and help dismantle stereotypes and prejudices.

In this way, artistic stories can function as a bridge between fantasy and reality, between the past and the present—they create a space for reflection, dialogue, and the search for new perspectives. If we can read and interpret them with openness, they become an exceptional tool for developing value-based thinking and supporting an inclusive and tolerant society.

Real-Life Stories

Real-life stories—whether conveyed through living books, video stories, or other forms of digital or written storytelling—bring a unique moment of authenticity and human closeness to the educational process. Thanks to them, otherness ceases to be an abstract concept and takes on a concrete form: a specific person, their voice, experiences, face, and emotions. These stories are exceptional because they capture

the real lives of people with all their complexity, pain, strength, and fragility. They allow participants to step into real-life situations and contexts that they might otherwise only have heard or read about. They directly address the viewer or listener and evoke a deep resonance because they are true, shared with courage, and often with the goal of changing perspectives and breaking down barriers.

Real-life stories open up a space for trust, empathy, and self-reflection. Through them, young people can realise that everyday decisions, prejudices, and silence have a concrete impact on the lives of others. At the same time, they can also be a source of inspiration and a message of hope, showing that even in difficult life circumstances, one can find strength, dignity, and meaning. Furthermore, digital forms of conveying these stories make them accessible and engaging for today's generation, which is accustomed to perceiving the world through image, sound, and interactivity. Real-life stories thus connect the heart and mind, serving as a powerful impulse for shaping the values, attitudes, and social awareness of young people.

2.2. Working with Stories and Ethical Aspects

It is crucial for youth workers to be prepared for the psychological intensity of some real-life stories. A safe environment must always be ensured, and it should be emphasised that no one is forced to share their personal experiences. Below, we provide recommendations and techniques for working with sensitive topics, managing and coping with potential strong emotional reactions from participants, and offering them support after an activity.

1. Preparation and Creating a Safe Environment (before the activity begins)

- **familiarise yourself with the topic and the story:** the facilitator must be aware of the potential triggers contained in the story. They should prepare a strategy in advance for how to moderate these sensitive passages.
- **create a safe space:** it is essential to explain the basic rules at the beginning. This includes an emphasis on trust, respect, and voluntary sharing. Participants should know that they have the right to refuse to answer or to withdraw from the discussion at any time.

2. Responding to Strong Emotions during an Activity

Tears, anger, anxiety, or expressions of deep sadness may appear during a discussion. In such situations, the facilitator should use the following technique:

- **active listening and validating emotions:** do not underestimate or trivialise a participant's experience. Use phrases such as, "I can see that has really affected you," or "Thank you for sharing that, it's very brave." This helps the person feel heard and accepted.
- **provide space and choices:** if a participant is crying or visibly upset, you can discreetly approach them and offer them the option of leaving the room for a moment if they need to. Tell them they can return when they feel better.
- **grounding techniques:** these techniques help bring a person back to the present when they are overwhelmed by emotions (e.g., continuous breathing or other breathing exercises, the 5-4-3-2-1 technique: the participant names 5 things they can see, 4 things they can feel, 3 things they can hear, 2 things they can smell, and 1 thing they can taste).

3. Support after the Activity (Debriefing)

Reflection should not only be a discussion but also a form of concluding care:

- **final “check-out”:** at the end of the session, ask each participant how they feel. You can use a scale (e.g., from 1 to 10) or a verbal rating. This helps the facilitator to verify that no one is leaving with an unprocessed feeling.
- **provide contacts and sources of help:** it is important to have contacts for specialists available (psychologists, helplines, organisations working with young people) who can provide further support. This information should be available to participants, whether on a leaflet, a poster, or in printed form.

Recommendation for facilitators: after a difficult discussion, facilitators should be offered supervision or the opportunity to share experiences with colleagues.

2.2. Preparation

In order for work with any story to be as pleasant an experience as possible, preparation is essential. To begin, it is necessary to define the topic we want to address and open up through the story. Knowing the target group (age, maturity, interests, individual specifics) of the young people we are working with provides the opportunity to adapt subsequent activities to their individual needs, abilities, and personalities (it is also important to consider young people with special needs).

Creating a pleasant environment can contribute to a good feeling and an enjoyable experience. It is very important to create a safe, supportive environment where young people can feel comfortable and secure to share their thoughts, observations, attitudes, opinions, as well as their feelings, experiences, and emotions. To support the cultivation of expression, respect, tolerance, and empathy, it is advisable to set rules for communication, argumentation, and discussion in advance.

Before working with a story, it is important to familiarise oneself with it and to analyse it. Identify the story's strongest moments or messages and prepare prompts for reflection, discussion, and a goal you would like to achieve. It can be helpful to look at the story through the eyes of young people and prepare for possible emotional impacts, reactions, or questions.

Using Emotional Cards

When working with stories, it is appropriate to use illustrated emotional cards. These help to use images to name feelings or experiences that may be difficult for young people to name, formulate, or express in words. The images can be helpful in understanding and becoming aware of feelings (both their own and those of others), as well as in expressing them. Children can describe what is in the picture, what it symbolises for them, and why they (or a character from the story) feel that way.

2.3. Artistic Mediation of Stories

The live artistic portrayal of stories provides a space for a deeper experience and understanding of their message. It allows not only for the content to be conveyed but also for emotions, empathy, and a personal connection to be awakened in participants with the characters, the story, and the topic itself. This form of presentation gives stories depth, supports imagination and audience engagement, and at the same time, opens the way for reflection, discussion, and the search for connections with the listeners' life experiences.

The delivery of the story's text itself is an important artistic device. The text of a fairy tale or story should be delivered in an experiential way, using prosodic features—accent, emphasis, rhythmic pauses, intonation, changes in tempo, and voice

modulation. This style of delivery emphasises the semantic layers of the text, creates tension or, conversely, a sense of release, and conveys the emotional atmosphere of the work. It can draw the listener into the action, awaken their emotional experience, and strengthen their sensitivity to language, the phonetic beauty of speech, and the ability to focus on detail. It also develops the rhetorical skills and conscious use of the voice of the person delivering the story.

Stories can also be mediated by various other artistic means, such as visual representation. Using illustrations, symbolic objects, or masks, musical accompaniment, or the rhythmisation of the text, which stimulate the imagination, strengthen sensory perception, and enhance the feeling of authenticity. Such elements develop creativity, aesthetic sense, and the ability to perceive symbols in listeners, which can transfer value-based messages into everyday life.

Dramatic techniques are a powerful tool, including staged reading, role-playing, improvisation, physical theatre, or group mirroring. Thanks to them, participants can put themselves in the characters' shoes, better understand their motivations, conflicts, and emotions, which opens the way to empathy and critical thinking about the story's message. A short dramatic sketch or an improvised scene on the topic of discrimination or friendship also stimulates a discussion about social and ethical contexts. Through dramatization, social learning, the ability to cooperate, the expression of feelings, and the courage to perform in front of others are developed.

Overall, such an artistic and dramatic portrayal of stories strengthens their educational value—it supports the understanding of content, awakens imagination and empathy, develops critical and aesthetic thinking, and opens up a space for deep reflection on personal and social topics.

2.4. Ideas for Activities

2.4.1. Introductory Evocative Activities

Before working with a story, it is a good idea to include an activity or activities to introduce the topic you want to open up through the story and to spark interest in it.

- Working with images through emotional cards: what images do they associate with the given topic?
- Topic-related imagination: ‘imagine that...’
- Brainstorming: spontaneous associations with the topic.
- Mind map: a visual representation of what they already know about the topic (can be a result of the brainstorming).
- Introductory discussion: introducing the topic, where it is possible to discuss it in general terms (discussion, expressing opinions, mutual respect).

2.4.2. Activities for Working with a Story

The natural process of working with a story can be divided into three main phases, each dedicated to different aspects and contexts:

- Immersion in the story and emotional resonance: activities focused on initial perception, experience, and building empathy.
- Analysis and deconstruction: activities for critical thinking, uncovering stereotypes, and finding hidden meanings.
- Transfer to reality and transformation: activities that connect insights from the story with real life and inspire action.

Phase 1: Emotional Resonance and Empathy

The goal of the activities in this phase is to help participants empathise with the characters, experience their emotions, and be open to their perspectives. In this phase, we work with vulnerability and emotions, among other things.

Activity ideas for possible use in this phase of working with a story:

- **the story in one word (and why):** After reading the story, ask participants to summarise it in a single word that best captures its essence for them. Then ask them, “Why did you choose this particular word? What does it say about your perception of the story?”.
- **emotional map of a character:** Participants choose one character and visually or verbally represent their emotional journey. They can use colours, symbols (e.g., a thorn for pain, a sun for joy), or words. The goal is to explore the concept of the “character's vulnerability”: Where did the character feel weakest? When did they show the courage to share their feelings, even though it was difficult? The discussion will focus on how their perception of the character's vulnerability changes and whether they can identify with that feeling.
- **"Who am I in the story?":** This method focuses on self-reflection and identification. Participants are given slips of paper with the names of all the characters. Without telling anyone, they choose the character they identify with the most and the character they feel most distant from. Then, they share their feelings within the group and justify their choices. This opens up a space for a conversation about personal values, fears, and desires.

Phase 2: Analysis and Deconstruction

The main goal of story analysis and deconstruction is to support critical thinking, recognise stereotypes and prejudices, and analyse the behaviour of characters.

Activity ideas for possible use in this phase of working with a story:

- **anti-bias analysis:** This activity focuses on identifying and deconstructing the stereotypes and prejudices that may be hidden in the story. It's not just about passive reading. Participants will actively look for examples of how stereotypes are manifested in language (e.g., "the wicked witch"), in character behaviour (e.g., a hero's aggressive behaviour is seen as strength, not weakness), or in thought patterns.
- **Role-play (the story from a different perspective):** Participants are tasked with rewriting key passages of the story from the point of view of another character, ideally one who has minimal presence in the original story. For example, they could rewrite the story of Goldilocks from the perspective of the King and his motivations, or from the perspective of the ugly duckling. The goal is to understand that everyone has their own point of view and that "truth" can have many faces. This activity leads to an understanding of the concept of "from suffering to empathy." How does our view change when we see that the King's anger stemmed from his own trauma and low self-esteem.
- **Alternative story:** This activity involves dividing the group into smaller units, where they suggest how the story might have unfolded if a key character had behaved differently. For example, if Goldilocks had run away sooner, or if the King had asked for help instead of acting domineering.

Phase 3: Transfer to Reality and Transformation

The activities carried out in the final phase will help participants connect what they have learned with their personal lives and inspire them to actively solve problems in their surroundings. This phase also includes the so-called transformative power of love, empathy, and self-reflection.

Activity ideas for possible use in this phase of working with a story:

- **Story and reality (group discussion):** Return to reflection and ask: “Where in your life do you see parallels with the story? Do you know anyone who behaves like the King? Where have you encountered bullying, like the Ugly Duckling?” Encourage a discussion about how fiction manifests in their daily lives.
- **"Living and dead water" for reality (inspired by the fairy tale of Goldilocks):** Participants reflect on two areas in their lives, school, or community. One area they would like to “heal” or change (dead water—e.g., bullying, disrespect for the elderly, xenophobia), and another they would like to “strengthen” (living water—e.g., friendship, inclusion, creativity). Discuss how they could actively contribute to these changes.
- **Call to action:** It is important to put the acquired knowledge into practice. Based on the story analysis, participants will propose concrete steps they can take in their own environment to support tolerance, inclusion, and fight against prejudice. This could involve creating a poster with information on a given topic, drawing a poster of emotional symbols, proposing a play script or a short dramatisation, creating a short video or social media post, or organising a class discussion. This connects theory with practice and at the same time shows that stories can be a catalyst for positive change in society.

Linking theoretical principles to activities

Phase of Work with the Story	Theoretical Principles	Concrete Activities and Methods	Expected Outcome
Phase 1: Emotional Resonance and Empathy	- Neurobiology of stories, mirror neurons, Theory of Mind (ToM) - Working with character vulnerability and emotional experience	Story in one word (Simplifying the story to a key feeling). Emotional Character Map (Visual representation of the character's emotional journey). "Who am I in the story?" (Identification with the character and reflection on personal values.)	Empathy and self-reflection development, emotional engagement, and identification with characters..
Phase 2: Analysis and Deconstruction	- Anti-bias approach, critical thinking, revealing stereotypes. - Connecting suffering to empathy	Anti-bias analysis (Deconstruction of the story and searching for hidden stereotypes). Role-play (Rewriting the story from a different perspective to understand motivations). Alternative Story (Creating new prejudice-free versions of the story).	Development of critical thinking, ability to identify and dismantle stereotypes, understanding different perspectives on "truth."
Phase 3: Transfer to Reality and Transformation	- Social responsibility, call to action, transformative power of self-reflection. - Cognitive, affective, and social learning.	"Water of Life and Death" for Reality (Identifying areas for change and areas for reinforcement in the real world). "Circle of Real Experiences" (Finding parallels between the story and the participants' personal lives). Media Outputs (Creation of posters, videos, social media posts as a tool for active citizenship).	Connecting fiction and reality, inspiration for positive change, strengthening personal responsibility and proactive behaviour.

Table 1: Linking theoretical principles to activities

2.4.3. Reflection Activities

Reflection is a significant part of the entire process of working with a story. It is not just about sharing feelings, but primarily about actively processing the experience and connecting it to real life. Without high-quality reflection, there is a risk that the story will become just an entertaining narrative without a deeper impact. Therefore, it is essential to guide participants through thoughtful questions and activities.

Reflection can be individual, group-based, and also connected to reality. Each form of reflection works with a different method. For inspiration, we provide two methods for each form of reflection.

Individual reflection

- **Silent writing:** Participants write down their initial feelings, thoughts, and questions evoked by the story on paper. This allows them to organise their thoughts before sharing in the group.
- **Sentence with a gap:** An incomplete sentence is written on a whiteboard/flipchart (or using sticky notes), e.g., “The character of the King evokes a feeling of... in me, because...” Each person completes it on their own behalf.

Group reflection (facilitated discussion)

- **Open-ended questions:** instead of questions like, “How do you feel?” ask: “What in the story affected you the most and why?” or “What would you have done in the character's place and why?”.

- **Working with a metaphor:** „Imagine the story is a house. What does the roof represent to you? What about the foundations?“ This helps participants explore deeper, hidden meanings.

Connection to reality

- **„Circle of real experiences“:** Participants reflect on where they see parallels with the story in their own lives (e.g., in the behaviour of the King, Jirka, Goldilocks). They can share anonymously or voluntarily. The emphasis is on a safe environment.
- **Transformative questions:** „What can you learn about yourself thanks to this story?“ “How can you use the acquired knowledge in practice to prevent negative behaviour?“

To conclude the reflection, you can use the emotional cards again. The task could be:

- Choose the card that best captures how you feel right now.
- Choose the card that best captures what the concept of... means to you now (the key word from the topic you were working on, e.g., bullying).



3. Practical Examples of Opening Up Difficult Social Topics Through Stories

In the Appendix to the Methodology Handbook, you will find a comprehensive analysis of several stories. This serves as a practical example of how to use storytelling as a tool for initiating discussions on sensitive and challenging social topics.

The topic of bullying is elaborated in detail.

The Appendix also includes worksheets and suggestions for further activities (or: further work) with the stories.

Ve sborníku **INSPIRATIVNÍ AKTIVITY** naleznete soubor inovativních a zážitkových technik, které využívají příběhy pro rozvoj empatie, kritického myšlení a budování zdravého, respektujícího prostředí v různorodém kolektivu.

4. Conclusion: Stories as a Key to Understanding and Change

Stories are more than just a form of entertainment—they are a powerful tool for changing how we see the world. In non-formal education, they have the potential to open doors to empathy, critical thinking, and a deeper understanding of diverse human experiences. They help young people realise that every person has a unique story that deserves respect and an attempt to be understood.

Storytelling allows participants to safely look beyond the boundaries of their own world and confront otherness in a way that is not confrontational but inviting dialogue. It works on both an emotional and a rational level, enabling it to have a profound impact and prompt people to re-evaluate their own attitudes and beliefs. Empathising with the stories of others leads to a recognition of their desires, fears, challenges, and motivations—and it is this experience that is the key to transforming our view of society as a whole.

Shared stories—whether through personal narratives, artistic portrayals, or digital formats—have a unique ability to bridge the divides between individuals and groups. They build bridges of understanding where prejudice, ignorance, or indifference may have existed before. In combination with interactive and creative methods, storytelling provides young people with a safe space to explore complex social topics and supports their ability to respond actively and responsibly to the challenges of today's world.

Thanks to stories, we not only become more sensitive and compassionate but also better prepared to contribute to the creation of more open, supportive, and tolerant communities. Stories teach us that change is possible—and it begins with understanding.

5. Recommended literature and resources

Storytelling and its Principles

Psychology of Stories:

Gottschall, Jonathan. *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*. The book explains how stories have shaped the human mind and culture, and why we are biologically programmed for them. It explores the connection between stories and human psychology, which is relevant to understanding their transformative power.

Zaltman, Gerald. *How Customers Think: Essential Insights into the Mind of the Market*. Although this book focuses on marketing, it offers valuable insights into how the brain processes stories and the impact stories have on memory and emotions.

Practical Application of Storytelling

Monroe, Kristen R. *The Heart of Altruism: Perceptions of a Common Humanity*. This book examines the motivation of people who help others and demonstrates how altruism develops through stories and empathy.

Empathy and Critical Thinking

Psychology of Empathy

Rifkin, Jeremy. *The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis*. The author argues that empathy is crucial for the evolution of humanity and that technology and stories can strengthen our empathic abilities, which aligns with the methodology's goals.

Goleman, Daniel. *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*. The book explores emotional intelligence, which is fundamental for developing empathy, self-

reflection, and social skills. It is a key resource for understanding how to work with emotions in an educational context.

Critical Thinking and Working with Stereotypes

Tavris, Carol and Elliot Aronson. *Mistakes Were Made (But Not by Me): Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions, and Hurtful Acts*. The book examines the mechanisms that lead to self-deception and how people justify their actions and beliefs. It is useful for understanding why it is so difficult to dismantle prejudices and stereotypes.

Youth Work and Non-Formal Education

Folkerts, Annet, et al. *Storytelling for Inclusion: A Manual for Youth Workers*. A practical handbook that offers concrete activities and tips for youth workers on how to use stories to promote inclusion and diversity.

Council of Europe. *T-Kit 4: Intercultural Learning*. The handbook provides methodologies for working with intercultural learning and diversity, which is crucial for the section of the methodology dedicated to inclusion.



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