



TEACHERS' STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING CLASSROOM COMMUNITY IN SLOVAK PRIMARY EDUCATION

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Abstract

Building a classroom community is an important dimension of primary teachers' professional practice. It influences classroom climate, children's engagement, and their social development. However, less is known about the specific pedagogical strategies through which classroom community is built in everyday classroom practice. The aim of the study was to identify and interpret pedagogical strategies used by primary school teachers to build classroom community. The study was designed as a qualitative follow-up to a previous quantitative survey. The empirical material consisted of 137 written reflections produced by future teachers who observed teaching as part of their teaching internship in 137 primary school classrooms. Data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis combining deductive and inductive procedures across four analytical areas: acceptance and inclusion, classroom behavioral regulation, teamwork and communication, and children's self-assessment and responsibility for learning. The analysis revealed a wide range of pedagogical strategies used by teachers in everyday classroom practice. These strategies reflected two broader regulatory orientations of teaching practice: participatory-preventive approaches that support cooperation, reflection and children's autonomy, and directive-reactive approaches based primarily on external regulation and behavioral control. The findings suggest that classroom community-building is shaped not by isolated techniques, but by broader pedagogical strategies that reflect different regulatory orientations in classroom practice. These strategies regulate participation, relationships, behavior, and learning in everyday classroom practice.

Keywords: *classroom community, classroom regulation, primary education, qualitative content analysis, teacher strategies*

Introduction

Contemporary educational research has increasingly emphasized that effective learning environments depend not only on teaching methods but also on the quality of social relationships and classroom interactions. Classroom community represents an important relational dimension of schooling. It integrates cooperation, mutual respect and shared responsibility among children (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; OECD, 2021). Research on classroom climate has shown that children's engagement, motivation and emotional well-being are strongly influenced by everyday pedagogical practices. These practices have shaped how teachers organize interaction and regulate behavior in the classroom (Aldrup et al., 2020; Wang & Degol, 2020). Teachers therefore play a key role not only as facilitators of learning but also as architects of the classroom social environment. Can et al. (2025) and Vančíková et al. (2025) have also emphasized the importance of valuing every child, together with the ethical role of teachers, empathy, and justice in creating a positive educational environment.

From this perspective, building classroom community can be understood as a complex pedagogical process. It involves both relational and regulatory dimensions of teaching practice. Teachers create supportive relationships, organize opportunities for collaboration, and regulate

behavior through formal and informal norms. Immordino-Yang et al. (2019) and Panadero et al. (2023) have argued that these processes are closely linked to the development of children's social, emotional, and self-regulatory competences. In this sense, classroom community-building involves both relational support and the regulation of participation, cooperation, and behavior. Cumhur (2022) has suggested that effective teacher guidance should support understanding, strategic action, and evaluative thinking in learning processes.

A broader conceptual framework for understanding the development of children's life skills in schools is Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). SEL includes five key competences: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Durlak et al., 2011). A meta-analysis of 213 school-based universal SEL programs has shown that participants demonstrated significantly better social and emotional skills, attitudes, behavior, and academic performance than children in control groups (Durlak et al., 2011). Subsequent findings have further strengthened the empirical basis of SEL by showing that its benefits were broadly similar regardless of race, socioeconomic background, or school setting (Taylor et al., 2017). At the same time, evidence from whole-school interventions has suggested a more differentiated picture. Goldberg et al. (2019) have reported significant but rather small improvements in social and emotional adjustment, behavioral adjustment, and internalizing symptoms, while no significant effects on academic outcomes have been confirmed. These findings suggest that the development of social and emotional competences is educationally important, but that its effects depend not only on formal programs, but also on how these principles are translated into everyday school and classroom practice.

This perspective is directly relevant to classroom community-building. If social and emotional development is not reduced to isolated interventions, then classroom community becomes one of the key contexts in which these competences are enacted, supported, and regulated in everyday school life. Building classroom community therefore cannot be understood only as creating a positive atmosphere. It also includes the ways in which teachers respond to difference, organize cooperation, support reflection, and regulate behavior in relation to participation and learning.

Current international literature has supported this interpretation. Research has emphasized the importance of emotionally supportive classroom environments, teacher-student relationships, inclusive practices, cooperative learning, and formative feedback for children's engagement and well-being (Immordino-Yang et al., 2019; Gillies, 2016; Panadero, 2023). Recent discussion has also focused on how SEL should be integrated into teacher education. In this context, scholars have emphasized the need to prepare teachers to implement SEL in line with global good practice and have pointed to its transformative potential for creating inclusive educational environments (Parween & Raza, 2025). At the same time, much of the international research has remained program-oriented. It has focused mainly on the implementation of SEL programs, whole-school approaches, mental health promotion, prevention of risk behavior, and well-being support (Domitrovich et al., 2017; Greenberg & Kusché, 2006). Considerably less attention has been paid to the concrete pedagogical strategies through which classroom community is built in everyday classroom practice, especially in primary education.

This gap is even more visible in Central European research. Compared with the broader international literature, research on children's life skills and social-emotional development in this region has been characterized by terminological inconsistency, conceptual fragmentation, and a lower number of empirical studies and meta-analyses. Systematic evaluations of school-based programs have remained limited. In Slovakia, this field is still relatively unsystematic, conceptually dispersed, and only partly grounded in empirical evidence. At the same time, current discussions on curriculum reform indicate that these issues are highly relevant. Porubský (2024) has argued that primary education should move beyond a traditional transmission model of teaching and should more strongly support cooperation, social responsibility, and children's

active participation in learning. In a related line of study, Rochovská (2026) has shown that pedagogical orientations in the Slovak context differ in the degree to which they emphasize authority, flexibility, and respect for the child's individuality, while also pointing to the value of strengthening more personalized and flexible elements within formal education. From this perspective, classroom community becomes an important framework for the development of these competences in Slovak primary education.

Research Problem

Previous Slovak research has already shown that the type of school may influence teachers' professional activities aimed at developing children's life skills, whereas the length of teaching experience appears to be less significant (Čiliaková & Babiaková, 2025). However, those findings were based on quantitative indicators and could not adequately capture how such activities are enacted in classroom situations, how they are combined in practice, or what broader pedagogical logic underlies them.

This is the central problem addressed in the present study. Although previous scholarship has demonstrated the importance of classroom climate, teacher–student relationships, and life skills in primary education, less is known about the concrete pedagogical strategies through which teachers build classroom community in everyday classroom practice. This lack of knowledge is relevant not only nationally, but also internationally. It concerns a question that is often overshadowed by program evaluation: how teachers actually translate relational, inclusive, and regulatory principles into situated classroom action.

A deeper understanding of this issue is particularly important in primary education, where classroom community plays a central role in children's social participation, engagement in learning, and sense of belonging. Building classroom community is not limited to supportive relationships alone. It also includes the ways in which teachers organize cooperation, respond to differences among children, regulate behavior, and create opportunities for reflection and responsibility. These processes require qualitative inquiry capable of identifying specific pedagogical strategies and interpreting their broader regulatory meaning.

Research Focus

The present study shifts attention from general indicators of classroom climate to specific pedagogical strategies visible in classroom practice. It focuses on four analytical areas that are theoretically and practically relevant to classroom community-building: acceptance and inclusion, classroom behavioral regulation, teamwork and communication, and self-assessment and responsibility for learning.

Within these areas, the study moves beyond identifying whether professional activities occur. Instead, it examines how they are pedagogically enacted and what broader regulatory orientations they reflect. In this sense, the study is concerned not only with what teachers do, but also with the pedagogical logic through which participation, relationships, behavior, and learning are organized in everyday classroom life.

This focus also provides the rationale for the methodological design. The study draws on structured reflections produced by future teachers during their teaching internship in primary school classrooms. These reflections offer systematically collected descriptions of classroom situations that make it possible to reconstruct recurring pedagogical strategies across a relatively broad set of school contexts. This makes them suitable for a qualitative follow-up study aimed at deepening previous quantitative findings through interpretive analysis of classroom practice.

Research Aim and Research Questions

The aim of this study was to identify and interpret the range of pedagogical strategies used by primary school teachers to build classroom community. The study also sought to conceptualize these strategies within a framework of regulatory orientations and to examine how participatory-preventive and directive-reactive approaches were manifested in everyday educational practice.

To achieve this aim, the study addressed the following research questions:

RQ1: What specific pedagogical strategies do primary school teachers utilize to facilitate the formation of classroom community?

RQ2: How are these strategies manifested across the four predefined analytical dimensions: acceptance and inclusion, behavioral regulation, teamwork and communication, and children's responsibility for learning?

RQ3: What broader regulatory orientations characterize the identified pedagogical strategies in the observed classroom contexts?

Research Methodology

Background

This study was designed as a qualitative follow-up to previous quantitative research by Čiliaková and Babiaková (2025). Its purpose was to deepen understanding of how classroom community-building is enacted in practice by analysing student-mediated reflections of observed classroom situations. The data collection process was completed in 2024. The qualitative analysis of the data was carried out in 2025–2026.

Sample

The empirical material consisted of 137 written reflections produced by future teachers enrolled in a primary teacher education program. The observations were conducted in 137 primary school classrooms across Slovak regions. The original sample was purposively constructed to include respondents relevant to the broader research focus on children's life skills development in primary education. In terms of school type, 115 classrooms (84%) were located in state schools and 22 classrooms (16%) in non-state schools. In the preceding quantitative phase of the research, the observed classroom teachers were also differentiated according to length of teaching experience: 21 teachers had 0–7 years of experience, 31 had 8–15 years, 39 had 16–23 years, 19 had 24–30 years, and 27 had 31 years or more (Čiliaková & Babiaková, 2025).

For the purposes of the present follow-up study, the unit of analysis was not the teacher or the classroom as such, but the written reflections produced by the observer. The study therefore analyses mediated descriptions and interpretations of teachers' classroom practices rather than direct recordings of classroom interaction.

Instrument and Procedures

The study employed a qualitative design as a follow-up to a previous quantitative survey (Čiliaková & Babiaková, 2025). It used qualitative content analysis combining deductive and inductive procedures to interpret pedagogical actions as reflected in authentic classroom settings. Data collection took place during a continuous 13-week internship, which allowed for a longitudinal perspective on recurring pedagogical patterns. The observers used a structured

observation sheet (see Table 1) developed in 2024 by experts at the Faculty of Education, Matej Bel University, to examine the development of children's life skills. They recorded teachers' professional activities in classroom practice and expressed their occurrence numerically using a frequency scale: 5 = certainly yes, 4 = yes, 3 = neither yes nor no, 2 = no, 1 = certainly no, 0 = do not know. In addition, they described situations in which the observed phenomenon occurred, with particular attention to the pedagogical strategies through which the teacher enacted these professional activities in specific classroom contexts. These written descriptions constituted the material for the qualitative analysis.

Table 1
Observation Sheet - Overview of Observed Professional Activities Within Four Life Skills

Life skills	Professional activities	5	4	3	2	1	0
Accepting behavior	The teacher supports acceptance and tolerant behavior of children through targeted activities.						
	Teacher notices and positively evaluates children's friendly behavior.						
	Classroom has a rule for children to maintain the order and well-being in the classroom.						
	Teacher applies an equal approach to education and upbringing in the classroom.						
Classroom behavioral regulation	Classroom has rules to manage children's behavior in learning						
	Teacher appreciates and verbally evaluates children's efforts.						
	Teacher appreciates and verbally evaluates children's perseverance.						
	Classroom has rules to tackle children's behavioral and learning problems.						
Work in a team	Teacher purposefully encourages children's regular cooperation.						
	Classroom has rules for work in groups.						
	Classroom has rules for open mutual communication.						
	Teacher purposefully encourages children's sense of humor.						
Self-assessment	The classroom has a regular method for children's self-assessment.						
	Teacher purposefully supports children's self-confidence by various activities.						
	Teacher purposefully builds children's responsibility for their own learning.						
	Teacher purposefully encourages children's flexibility and overall creativity.						

Note: Rating scale: 5 – certainly yes, 4 – yes, 3 – neither yes nor no, 2 – no, 1 – certainly no, 0 – do not know.

To ensure the trustworthiness and rigor of the qualitative findings, several strategies were implemented in accordance with international standards for educational research.

Prior to data collection, all observers (future teachers) underwent systematic methodological preparation. They were trained in the observation framework and practiced identifying analytical categories (e.g., behavioral regulation, inclusion) using video-recorded classroom situations to reduce inconsistencies in recording events.

The empirical material consisted of 137 written reflective notes based on direct observation of teaching, which allowed for broad coverage of different primary school classrooms. To minimize retrospective distortion, observation sheets were completed continuously during teaching, and reflections were prepared immediately after the end of the classroom observation, that is, after at least five consecutive school days of presence in the classroom as an observer. To increase reliability, the data analysis process included independent coding by two researchers (the observer trainers). After the initial coding phase, inter-coder agreement was assessed to identify discrepancies. These discrepancies were resolved through iterative consensus discussions until a consistent coding structure was achieved. Analytical integrity was further strengthened by the combined use of deductive categories derived from OECD and other international frameworks, together with subcategories that emerged from the empirical material. This ensured that the findings remained theoretically grounded while also being sensitive to new pedagogical patterns identified in classroom practice.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis combining deductive and inductive procedures. This approach was chosen because the study was based on four predefined analytical areas derived from the theoretical framework. At the same time, it identified pedagogical strategies and regulatory orientations of teachers that were not specified in advance. The use of this approach was also reflected in the design of the study as a qualitative follow-up to previously quantified empirical material (Čiliaková & Babiaková, 2025). The aim of the analysis was to deepen understanding through the qualitative interpretation of pedagogical strategies and broader regulatory orientations. Deductively, the analysis was guided by four predefined analytical areas derived from the theoretical framework and the structure of the observation sheet: acceptance and inclusion, classroom behavioral regulation, teamwork and communication, and self-assessment and responsibility for learning. Inductively, specific pedagogical strategies, subcategories, and patterns of classroom regulation were identified from the empirical material within these broader areas.

The analytical process proceeded in several stages. First, all reflections were read repeatedly to gain an overall understanding of the material. Second, meaning units relevant to the research questions were identified. Third, these units were openly coded with attention to recurring pedagogical actions, interactional patterns, and ways of regulating classroom life. Fourth, the codes were grouped into broader categories of pedagogical strategies within each of the four analytical areas. Finally, across these categories, broader interpretive patterns were identified and conceptualized as two regulatory orientations of classroom practice: participatory-preventive and directive-reactive.

The aim of the analysis was not to quantify the frequency of individual strategies, but to identify and interpret the range and character of pedagogical approaches through which teachers contributed to the formation of classroom community.

Research Results

The qualitative analysis identified a broad range of pedagogical strategies through which primary school teachers support classroom community. Across the predefined analytical dimensions, the findings reveal recurring patterns of pedagogical action and a dynamic interplay between participatory-preventive and directive-reactive orientations. As synthesized in Table 2, these observed pedagogical actions are distributed across the pedagogical areas of acceptance and inclusion, behavioral regulation, teamwork and communication, and children's responsibility for learning.

Table 2
Identified Pedagogical Strategies Across the Four Analytical Areas (N = 137)

Analytical area	Strategy category	Brief characteristic of observed practices
Acceptance and inclusion	Morning circles and rituals	Circle conversations, classroom meetings, sharing feelings and experiences
	Teacher as a model of respectful communication	Use of respectful language, humor, explanation of consequences, guidance toward tolerance
	Inclusive pedagogical practices	Task differentiation, individual support, sensitive work with diversity
	Immediate conflict resolution	Mediation, discussion without blaming, restorative responses
	Prosocial and developmental activities	Project-based, experiential, and community-oriented activities
	Formal emphasis on respect	Explicit reminders about politeness, respect, and classroom norms
	Verbal directive correction	Raised voice, brief reprimands, authoritative correction of behavior
Classroom behavioral regulation	Participatory rule-setting	Co-construction of rules, classroom agreements, children's participation
	Visualization of rules	Rules displayed visibly, use of symbols or posters
	Delegation of responsibility	Classroom duties, distribution of roles, shared responsibility
	Non-verbal regulatory signals	Raised hand, bell, agreed gestures, visual cues
	Positive motivational systems	Praise, symbolic rewards, points, encouragement
	Natural authority	Calm, consistent, and respectful regulation of behavior
	Unilaterally formulated rules	Rules imposed by the teacher without children's participation
	Sanction mechanisms	Notes, black marks, withdrawal of privileges, repetitive rewriting
	Public reprimands	Correction of misbehavior in front of the class
	Inconsistent rule enforcement	Formal existence of rules without systematic application
Teamwork and communication	Cooperative learning	Group work with shared tasks and role distribution
	Peer learning	Mutual help, explanation between classmates
	Classroom self-governance	Children's roles and responsibilities in organizing classroom life
	Spatial organization of the classroom	Semi-circle, clusters, carpet area, relaxation zones
	Project-based and shared activities	Longer-term collaborative tasks and common projects
	Active structuring of groups	Teacher intervention in group composition to support cooperation
	Predominantly frontal organization	Mainly teacher-led or individual work with limited cooperation
	Interruption of group work	Shift to individual work when cooperation fails or conflicts emerge

Self-assessment and responsibility for learning	Self-assessment activities	Pictograms, scales, self-evaluation techniques
	Reflective closing activities	Reflection on the lesson, day, or week
	Process-oriented feedback	Reflection on mistakes, feedback focused on progress
	Formative assessment	Portfolio work, individualized assessment, monitoring progress
	Suggesting one's own grade	Children's proposal of their own grade or evaluation
	Public evaluation of performance	Pointing out mistakes in front of the class
	Correction without alternatives	Insistence on one correct procedure without exploring alternatives
	Absence of reflection	Lack of space for feedback or self-reflection

The findings indicated that the selection and application of these strategies may reflect broader regulatory orientations of classroom practice, resulting in diverse patterns of classroom organization. Rather than representing fixed teacher types, these strategies function as interpretive orientations. Depending on their professional orientation, teachers may prioritize participatory-preventive methods that support children's autonomy, rely on directive-reactive interventions to maintain order, or situationally combine various approaches in response to the practical demands of the classroom. This highlights that building classroom community is a dynamic process shaped by the underlying tension between different regulatory orientations.

Strategies Supporting Acceptance and Inclusion

In the area of acceptance and inclusion, the material showed that teachers most often supported classroom community through relational and community-building practices. A particularly visible role was played by morning circles and similar shared rituals, which created space for children to speak about their experiences, listen to one another, and enter the lesson in a calm and socially connected atmosphere. The following description illustrates how such a routine functioned not only as an organizational opening, but also as a means of strengthening trust and mutual acceptance: "I conducted the observation on Monday. When I entered the classroom, I saw that the children were quietly waiting for the teacher and sitting at their desks. The class teacher then asked the children to sit on the carpet and began the lesson with a shared morning circle, during which the children greeted one another and shared their weekend experiences. In this way, a friendly atmosphere was created and mutual trust was strengthened. The children listened actively and accepted one another. She then asked the children to return quietly to their desks and asked the weekly classroom helpers to tell her who was absent. A pleasant silence continued in the classroom without any sign of tension. The teacher then informed the children about the course of the lesson and asked them to divide into groups."

Acceptance and inclusion were also supported through the teacher's own communicative style and through explicit modelling of respectful behavior. In several situations, teachers explained why respectful communication mattered, addressed inappropriate behavior through discussion rather than immediate sanction, and encouraged children to respond to one another with greater sensitivity. Inclusive support was especially visible when teachers worked with differences in learning needs, pace, or background. In these cases, participation was strengthened through adapted tasks, peer support, and deliberate efforts to ensure that no child was left outside the activity. The material also contained situations in which conflict was addressed immediately through dialogue. Rather than postponing tensions or reducing them to punishment, some teachers interrupted the activity, spoke with those involved, and guided the situation toward understanding and repair. Another important cluster of strategies consisted of prosocial and developmental activities extending beyond a single lesson. In some classrooms, the support

of acceptance and inclusion was embedded in broader class life through community meetings, experiential activities, projects, excursions, and social-emotional learning. One description summarized this broader pedagogical orientation as follows: "In addition to the activities I observed during the lesson, the teacher builds classroom community through a range of other activities. For example, she takes the children to a School in Nature every year, including when they were in the first grade. The class also participates in the Second Step program. She became involved in a grant project and obtained funding for the project Supporting Entrepreneurship and Soft Skills of Children, within which the children took part in experiential workshops focused on entrepreneurship and soft skills. She regularly organizes class meetings, various excursions and trips, as well as visits to the eco-centre, where children attend educational talks. In her teaching, she also uses experiential and inquiry-based methods."

The material also showed that respect was sometimes reinforced more explicitly through reminders about politeness and appropriate conduct during classroom interaction. At the same time, not all responses to social situations were relational in nature. Some descriptions pointed to more direct and authoritative correction, including raised voice or immediate reprimand. In this sense, acceptance and inclusion were supported mainly through strategies aimed at belonging, mutual respect, and supportive peer relations, but these practices were not entirely free of directive intervention. The coexistence of both tendencies pointed to a broader tension between inclusive intentions and authoritative regulation.

Strategies Supporting Classroom Behavioral Regulation

The material in the area of classroom behavioral regulation showed that regulation was often embedded in routines, shared expectations, and visible organizational structures. One of the clearest patterns concerned participatory rule-setting and the public presence of agreed classroom rules. In classrooms where regulation was more preventive in character, rules were not presented only as orders from the teacher, but as part of a collectively maintained framework for classroom life. This was reinforced when rules were written down, displayed, and symbolically endorsed by children: "In this classroom, there are established classroom rules, group-work rules, rules for break time, rules for playing football, and duties assigned to the weekly classroom helpers. All of these rules were created jointly by the children and the teacher, and the children actively participated in deciding which rules they wanted and were able to follow. The rules are written down and displayed in the classroom. The children signed them, thereby giving these rules additional importance."

Another prominent feature of the material was the use of non-verbal regulatory signals. Instead of interrupting the lesson through repeated verbal commands, some teachers relied on agreed gestures and visual cues that allowed order to be restored with minimal tension. A typical example was described in the following way: "The classroom became noisy. The teacher stopped speaking and raised her hand above her head, which the children noticed immediately, and those who were not talking raised their hands as well, following the teacher's example. Gradually, the whole classroom became quiet, and everyone had their hand raised. The teacher thanked the children. There was no need to silence the children verbally. They stopped talking on their own, and the teacher then had the space to explain the task."

Regulation was also supported through positive motivation, praise, and symbolic rewards, as well as through calm, respectful communication that relied on natural authority rather than overt pressure. In such situations, expectations were explained clearly, and children adjusted their behavior without visible escalation. Responsibility for maintaining classroom order was sometimes further distributed through classroom roles and duties, which connected behavioral regulation with accountability for shared classroom life.

At the same time, the material also documented more directive and reactive forms of regulation. In these situations, rules were presented as fixed requirements without children's participation, disruptions were addressed through direct verbal correction, and, in a smaller number of cases, teachers relied on sanctions such as notes or reprimands. What emerged from this contrast was not a simple opposition between "good" and "bad" practice, but a broader picture of classroom behavioral regulation as a field in which preventive and reactive logics coexisted. In some classrooms, participation, shared responsibility, and predictability dominated; in others, external control and immediate correction were more visible.

Strategies Supporting Teamwork and Communication

In the area of teamwork and communication, the material showed that cooperation was not limited to task completion, but functioned as an important social mechanism through which classroom participation and peer relations were shaped. Group work and cooperative learning created opportunities for shared problem-solving, discussion, and mutual help. These situations encouraged children not only to work together, but also to explain, negotiate, and respond to one another in ways that supported both learning and social connection. This kind of cooperation appeared in the material in descriptions such as the following: "Children worked in groups and discussed different ways of solving the task. A child explained the task to a classmate who did not understand it."

Teamwork was further supported through the use of classroom roles and responsibilities. When children were assigned roles within groups or within the wider organization of classroom life, this strengthened both accountability and participation in the class community. The organization of classroom space also mattered. In some classrooms, seating arrangements and layout were deliberately adjusted to make communication and cooperation easier, while in others the teacher actively intervened in group composition in order to balance interaction and prevent exclusion. These elements were sometimes described together as part of a broader collaborative orientation: "The teacher organizes group activities and projects that encourage children to help one another and share ideas. This approach not only supported teamwork, but also strengthened the children's ability to communicate and cooperate effectively, identify their strengths and weaknesses, and develop critical thinking. The teacher paid close attention to the development of individual strengths and supported all children. This approach led to greater motivation and self-confidence among the children. The desks were arranged so that children could easily work together in groups. The teacher changed the groups so that everyone had a chance to work with different classmates."

The analyzed material also included situations in which cooperation remained limited or fragile. In those cases, children worked mainly individually or within a more frontal teaching format, with little room for interaction. This suggests that teamwork in the observed classrooms functioned not only as a teaching method, but also as a social form whose maintenance required active pedagogical support. Where such support was weaker, collaborative interaction could easily give way to more controlled and teacher-directed formats.

Strategies Supporting Self-assessment and Responsibility for Learning

In the area of self-assessment and responsibility for learning, the material revealed strategies through which teachers created opportunities for reflection, feedback, and more active participation in evaluation. These strategies included reflective dialogue, visual self-assessment tools, formative feedback, and work with mistakes as part of the learning process. One recurring form of support was the deliberate creation of space for children to reflect on how they had worked, how they had felt during the lesson, and what they had learned. In

some classrooms, this reflection was embedded in a regular closing routine: “At the end of the lesson, the children remained on the carpet and the evaluation followed. The teacher evaluated the children’s work and then asked them to assess how much they had enjoyed the lesson and how they had felt during it by giving a thumbs-up. It was again evident that the children were accustomed to engaging in self-assessment.”

The use of mistakes as a resource for learning also appeared as an important strategy. Rather than treating error only as failure, some teachers encouraged children to identify mistakes themselves, understand them, and work with them constructively. This orientation is visible in the following description: “The teacher also analyzed mistakes together with the children who had made them. She taught them that a mistake is not something negative, but an opportunity to improve. She gave them the chance to identify the mistake themselves and supported them in learning how to work with it, correct it, and avoid it in the future.”

The analyzed material further showed that some teachers invited children to participate more directly in evaluating their own performance, for example, by proposing their own grade or explaining how they understood their progress. In other classrooms, responsibility for learning was supported through formative assessment and portfolio work, which made it possible to monitor development over time and discuss it in a more process-oriented way.

At the same time, not all classrooms created such opportunities. Some descriptions pointed to situations in which reflection and self-assessment were largely absent, and evaluation remained predominantly teacher-centred. Overall, the findings indicate that strategies related to self-assessment and responsibility for learning played an important role in supporting autonomy, but their implementation varied considerably across classrooms. In some settings, reflective and formative approaches were clearly present; in others, evaluation remained more summative and externally controlled.

Regulatory Orientations of Classroom Practice

Across the four analytical areas, the identified strategies revealed broader recurring patterns in the regulation of classroom life. Although individual strategies differed in form and function, they tended to cluster around two broader regulatory orientations. The first orientation was participatory-preventive, characterized by children’s involvement, relationship-building, shared responsibility, reflection, and support for internal regulation of behavior. The second orientation was directive-reactive, characterized by unilateral decision-making, external behavioral control, sanctions, and corrective responses to disruptions or insufficient performance.

These orientations did not represent fixed types of teachers; rather, they functioned as interpretive patterns through which it was possible to understand the observed classroom practices. In many reflections, both orientations appeared in combination, which suggests that teachers moved situationally on a spectrum between participatory and directive forms of regulation.

Table 3 summarizes the characteristic features of both orientations and illustrates their relationship to the identified pedagogical strategies.

Table 3*Regulatory Orientations Identified Across Classroom Community Building Practices*

Regulatory orientation	Characteristic features	Illustrative pedagogical strategies
Participatory-preventive orientation	Classroom management based on children's participation, relationship building, support for internal regulation of behavior, reflection and the development of responsibility.	Morning circles and rituals; teacher as a model of respectful communication; inclusive pedagogical practices; immediate conflict resolution; prosocial activities; participatory rule-setting; delegation of responsibility; non-verbal regulatory signals; positive motivational systems; natural authority; cooperative learning; peer learning; classroom self-governance; self-assessment activities; reflective closing activities; process-oriented feedback; formative assessment.
Directive-reactive orientation	Classroom management based on external behavioral control, unilateral rule-setting, sanction mechanisms and performance-oriented evaluation.	Verbal directive correction; unilateral rule formulation; sanction mechanisms; public reprimands; inconsistent rule enforcement; predominantly frontal situations; interruption of group work; public evaluation of performance; correcting answers without offering alternatives; absence of reflection.

Discussion

The findings addressed the three research questions. First, with regard to RQ1, the analysis showed that primary school teachers were described as using a broad repertoire of pedagogical strategies to build classroom community in everyday classroom practice. These strategies ranged from relational, inclusive, and autonomy-supportive practices to more directive and corrective forms of behavioral regulation. Second, in response to RQ2, these strategies were manifested across four interrelated analytical areas: acceptance and inclusion, classroom behavioral regulation, teamwork and communication, and self-assessment and responsibility for learning. Third, with regard to RQ3, the analysis indicated that, across these four areas, the identified strategies clustered around two broader regulatory orientations of classroom practice, conceptualized here as participatory-preventive and directive-reactive. Taken together, these findings suggest that classroom community-building is shaped not by isolated techniques alone, but by pedagogical strategies rooted in teachers' individual conceptions of teaching, through which participation, relationships, behavior, and learning are regulated in everyday classroom practice. These results provide the basis for the following interpretation.

In the area of acceptance and inclusion, the findings indicate that teachers often supported classroom community through relational practices such as morning circles, respectful communication, conflict mediation, and inclusive support for diverse children's needs. These strategies are consistent with research emphasizing the importance of teacher – child relationships and emotionally supportive classroom environments for children's engagement and behavior (Aldrup et al., 2020; Wang & Degol, 2020). At the same time, the reflections also pointed to directive forms of behavioral correction, suggesting that inclusive intentions may coexist with authoritative responses to classroom tensions. Rather than interpreting these approaches as mutually exclusive, the findings suggest that teachers combine them situationally in response to the practical demands of classroom life.

A similar tension emerged in the area of classroom behavioral regulation. Participatory rule-setting, delegation of responsibility, and the use of non-verbal signals can be understood as strategies that support the gradual internalization of norms and the development of children's self-regulation. This interpretation corresponds with research on self-regulated learning and the

pedagogical importance of transferring regulatory responsibility to learners (Panadero et al., 2019; Panadero, 2023). By contrast, sanction mechanisms, public reprimands, and unilateral rule enforcement reflect a more behaviorally oriented model of classroom behavioral regulation in learning based on external control. The coexistence of these approaches suggests that classroom behavioral regulation in primary education is not best understood as a stable teaching style, but rather as a dynamic regulatory field in which preventive and reactive strategies are combined.

In the area of teamwork and communication, the findings highlight the importance of cooperative learning, peer support, and the organization of classroom roles and space. These strategies suggest that teamwork functions not only as a means of improving learning outcomes, but also as a mechanism for shaping social participation and classroom belonging. This is in line with studies that view social interaction as a core component of both learning and classroom climate (Gillies, 2016; Vančíková et al., 2025). At the same time, the empirical material also showed that collaborative formats could be interrupted or replaced by frontal forms of teaching when difficulties arose. This may indicate that while teachers recognize the value of teamwork, sustaining collaborative interaction in everyday practice remains demanding.

The findings were particularly notable in the area of self-assessment and responsibility for learning. Reflective closing activities, self-assessment techniques, portfolio work, and process-oriented feedback indicate that some teachers created space for children to reflect on their progress, interpret mistakes, and assume greater responsibility for learning. These practices are consistent with current views of formative assessment and feedback as tools that support reflection, autonomy, and deeper learning (Panadero et al., 2023; Cumhur, 2022; Metcalfe, 2017; Görtzen et al., 2025). At the same time, some reflections described assessment as predominantly teacher-controlled and summative. This contrast again supports the interpretation that classroom community-building is connected to broader regulatory principles that shape whether children are positioned as active participants in learning or mainly as recipients of teacher-led evaluation.

From the perspective of teacher education, the findings suggest that building classroom community requires more than the use of isolated methods or techniques. It also depends on how teachers understand regulation, authority, participation, and children's agency in everyday classroom practice. In this sense, the identified regulatory orientations may offer a useful framework for reflecting on teaching practice. They make visible not only supportive and inclusive strategies, but also those patterns of interaction that may limit children's participation, reflection, and autonomy.

Taken together, the findings suggest that building classroom community in primary education is not a one-dimensional pedagogical task, but a dynamic process shaped by how teachers balance behavioral regulation, participation, cooperation, and reflection. The concept of regulatory orientations may therefore provide a useful analytical lens for further research on classroom practice and for the professional preparation of teachers.

Conclusions and Implications

This study showed that classroom community in primary education is built through a differentiated repertoire of pedagogical strategies. Its main contribution lies in demonstrating that these strategies can be interpreted through two distinct regulatory orientations of classroom practice: participatory-preventive and directive-reactive. The observer reflections revealed clear differences between these orientations and suggested that they shape the ways in which pupils' life skills are supported and regulated in everyday classroom practice. The findings also indicate that building classroom community is not limited to relational support alone, but is closely connected to teachers' everyday decisions regarding acceptance and inclusion, classroom behavioral regulation, teamwork and communication, and self-assessment and responsibility for learning.

The study also has several limitations. The empirical material consisted of written reflections produced by trained future teachers. Therefore, the findings are based on mediated interpretations of classroom practice rather than direct recordings of pedagogical interaction. Although the observers were methodologically prepared, their reflections may have been shaped by selective attention, prior beliefs, and varying levels of interpretive sensitivity. The research was conducted in the context of Slovak primary education, which limits the direct transferability of the findings to other educational settings. Future research could build on these findings by combining qualitative content analysis with direct classroom observation, video-based analysis, or interviews with teachers. It would also be useful to explore more closely how different regulatory orientations relate to classroom climate, children's engagement, and the development of inclusive learning environments. The study also did not systematically examine differences across grade levels, and detailed contextual characteristics such as urban–rural location. Nevertheless, the concept of regulatory orientations may serve as a useful interpretive framework for further international research on classroom practice, as well as for the professional preparation and continuing professional development of primary teachers in other Central European countries.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors declare no competing interest.

Data availability statement

The research data supporting this study are available from the first author, Ružena Čiliaková, upon reasonable request.

Ethics statement

All data were processed anonymously and in accordance with ethical principles of educational research. The written reflections did not contain identifying information about individual children or teachers. Participation in the course assignment from which the material was drawn followed standard educational procedures, and all excerpts presented in the study are fully anonymized.

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