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Short bio:

Zamira Hyseni Duraku is an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Prishtina “Hasan Prishtina.” Her research focuses on factors influencing education quality and well-being in Kosovo, from preschool to higher education. Prof. Hyseni Duraku has led the Department of Psychology for two years. She has contributed on establishing alumni networks and partnerships with NGOs for community engagement and has been awarded twice by the University of Prishtina for her scientific achievements. Recently, she was a visiting professor at the University of Iowa, focusing on university support services for students. Prof. Hyseni Duraku also leads the service learning project for psychology students, and is the initiator of and leads student support programs at the same department.

Paper

Title: Enhancing Well-being, Learning, Societal Engagement, and Research Skills through Student-led Interventions at a Major Public University in Kosovo

Abstract

This paper summarizes the outcomes of several student-led intervention studies co-authored by psychology students. These interventions, developed and conducted as part of the Department of Psychology's internship and student support programs, were designed to enhance well-being, learning outcomes, attitudes, and career confidence among students while contributing to the community and their peers. A mixed-methods design study evaluated service learning (SL), where psychology interns provided individualized academic and socio-emotional support for children with disabilities. The program, involving 107 interns, led to increased self-efficacy, positive attitudes toward disability, and greater willingness for community engagement. A related study, using semi-structured interviews with 20 parents, explored the outcomes of SL on children, revealing improvements in academic performance and emotional well-being. The outcomes of mutual support groups were explored through two approaches. Based on focus group discussions, the first highlighted improvements in well-being and coping skills among 30 university students who led and participated in the groups. The second, a retrospective pre-post design, assessed 20 higher education students, showing enhanced well-being, study skills, career confidence, and positive attitudes toward mental health support. A pretest-posttest control group design study evaluated a brief CBT-based "Anxiety Toolbox" workshop led by psychology interns for 100 high school students, showing improved emotional regulation, time management, and

reduced test anxiety. Lastly, a one-group pre-post-test design assessed mindfulness training on 197 lower secondary school students, showing reduced test anxiety and increased self-esteem. These findings underline the benefits of student-led interventions in enhancing well-being, research skills, and professional development while impacting the community.

Keywords: student-lead interventions, well-being, skills, knowledge, community support, research

Introduction

In recent years, student-led interventions in higher education have emerged as essential frameworks that engage students in initiatives to enhance academic achievement, well-being, and community involvement. These programs—ranging from peer support and tutoring to mental health workshops and service-learning projects—have demonstrated positive effects on skill acquisition, wellbeing, personal growth, and social engagement (Kuh, 2009).

Among these interventions, service-learning stands out for its ability to blend academic learning with community service, fostering civic responsibility, social awareness, and empathy (Chupp & Joseph, 2019; Cipolle, 2020). Studies, including a meta-analysis by Celio, Durlak, and Dymnicki (2011), reveal that students involved in service-learning gain academic and interpersonal skills while developing critical thinking. By applying academic concepts in real-world contexts, students build professional competencies and a deeper understanding of societal issues, which strengthens both civic awareness and social responsibility (Eyler, 2011; Gordon et al., 2020). Service-learning thus serves as a bridge between academic and community spheres, preparing students for complex societal roles.

In addition to service-learning, mutual support groups and peer-led mental health initiatives, including psychoeducational workshops, effectively promote well-being and community engagement. These approaches are increasingly recognized as effective tools for reducing stigma around seeking psychological help and preventing mental health decline, particularly in educational settings that lack integrated professional services. By creating supportive environments for students to address mental health concerns, these programs provide sustainable frameworks that foster resilience and social connectedness, while reducing stress and anxiety. As a result, they contribute to improved academic retention and performance (Durlak & Weissberg, 2020; Gable et al., 2020).

The impact of student-led initiatives is particularly profound in regions facing social and economic challenges. In developing areas like Kosovo, where educational and mental health support systems are still evolving, student-led initiatives address both academic and social needs (Astin et al., 2019) These programs align with global educational reform trends, empowering students to actively engage in community-based support systems and develop as active, responsible citizens—essential for sustainable societal progress (Hensley, 2024; Gray & Harper, 2024).

Inspired by the success of student-led initiatives worldwide, Kosovo has recently adopted similar practices within various academic departments and units. This paper examines the outcomes of voluntarily implemented pilot initiatives led by the Department of Psychology at the University of Prishtina, a major public university in Kosovo. The findings from these programs offer a potential model

for other educational institutions and countries facing similar challenges, demonstrating the broader impact of student-led interventions on educational development and community engagement.

The **service-learning initiative "In Your Shoes"**, launched by a group of youth and supported by the Department of Psychology, was piloted in Kosovo during the COVID-19 pandemic. This two-month program aimed to enhance the professional skills of undergraduate psychology students while offering one-on-one academic and socio-emotional support to children with disabilities (ages 5–14). Led by third-year students, with support from first- and second-year students, the sessions were conducted both online and in-person. Comprehensive training prepared the students in socio-emotional support and inclusive practices, while the program's implementation was supervised by psychology professors and experienced alumni (see studies 1 and 2 in the table below for further details).

The **"Students for Students" mutual support groups** were introduced at the University of Prishtina, as part of the Department of Psychology's support services. This five-week program included voluntary, one-hour sessions facilitated by students. These facilitators, trained by academic mentors and professional supervisors, followed a structured manual outlining group objectives and discussion guidelines. Initially limited to psychology students , the program was expanded in the 2023/2024 academic year to include participants from various academic units. Group discussions were guided by participant interests, encouraging collaborative topic selection and active engagement (see studies 3 and 4 in the table below).

The **Anxiety Toolbox workshop**, developed by Dr. Elizabeth Poloskov, was integrated into the department's support services for first-year students with authorization from the author. It was later included as an intervention activity in the Advanced Psychology course, implemented by students in School Psychology and Counseling program as part of their professional practicum with high school students. Graduate students facilitated the sessions after receiving training on the workshop content and facilitation techniques. The workshop is grounded in CBT principles, specifically targeting cognitive distortions and maladaptive behavioral patterns linked to anxiety. Through awareness raising about anxiety, cognitive restructuring, and skills training, the workshop aims to help students challenge negative thought patterns and behaviors, promoting coping and resilience. The workshop consists of four progressive sessions, each building on the previous one and providing practical strategies for managing anxiety (see study 5 in the table below).

Methodology

This paper summarizes the findings of five studies, detailed in Table 1.

Characteristic	**Description Study 1**	**Description Study 2**	**Description Study 3**	**Description Study 4**	**Description Study 5**
Study title	The Influence of a Service-learning Program on Psychology Students' Attitudes Toward Disabilities, Community	Benefits of Academic Tutoring and Socio-Emotional Support for Children With Disabilities: Lessons	The Outcomes of Mutual Support Groups on Students' Well-being and Learning: Insights	The Outcomes of Mutual Support Groups on Higher Education Students' Well-Being, Study Skills,	Effects of a Brief CBT-Based Anxiety Toolbox Workshop on Study Skills and Emotional Regulation

	Engagement, Self-Efficacy, and Volunteerism[1]	Learned During the COVID-19 Pandemic[2]	from the COVID-19 Pandemic[3]	Career Confidence, and Attitudes Toward Psychological Support[4]	among High School Students in Kosovo: A Pilot Study[5]
Research Focus	Investigates how service-learning experiences, conducted through one-on-one tutoring and socio-emotional support for children with disabilities, influence psychology students' attitudes toward disabilities, self-efficacy, community engagement, and motivation for volunteerism.	Explores the outcomes of service-learning initiatives, specifically tutoring and socio-emotional support, on academic achievement, emotional well-being, attitudes toward learning, and social interactions among children with disabilities.	Investigate the outcomes of mutual support groups on managing mental health challenges (stress, anxiety) and their influence on socialization, academic performance, and personal growth among psychology students during the COVID-19 pandemic.	Explores changes in students from different fields of study regarding well-being, study skills, attitudes toward psychological support, and career confidence after participating in mutual support groups.	Examines the effectiveness of the Anxiety Toolbox (CBT interventions) in reducing anxiety, while also enhancing study skills and emotional regulation.
Design/Methodology	The study employed a mixed-methods sequential design. In the quantitative phase, 107 students completed validated questionnaire	Qualitative study with semi-structured interviews conducted with 20 parents of children with disabilities.	Static-group comparison design with data collected via focus group discussions involving 30	Retrospective pre-post design, with data collected from 20 students aged 18–25 years, using semi-structured interviews	A pretest-posttest control group design was employed with 100 high school students from four schools, randomly

[1] **Manuscript under review:** Authors: Zamira Hyseni Duraku and Mirjeta Nagavici (former student of the Psychology Department, University of Prishtina).
[2] **Hyseni Duraku, Z., & Nagavci, M.** (2023). Benefits of academic tutoring and socio-emotional support for children with disabilities: Lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic. *International Journal of Educational Reform*. https://doi.org/10.1177/10567879231202486
[3] **Manuscript under review:** Authors: Zamira Hyseni Duraku, Jon Konjufca (academic staff, Department of Psychology, University of Prishtina), Tiba Bajmaku (former student), and Era Hamiti (former student).
[4] **Manuscript under review:** Authors: Zamira Hyseni Duraku, Liridona Jemini Gashi (academic staff, Department of Psychology), Jon Konjufca, Artë Blakaj (former student), and the following contributors, who were undergraduate students at the time of this engagement: Viola Greiçevci, Vali Ibrahimi, Fisnik Eger, Donarta Uka, Rrezarta Vllasaliu, Adea Dobra, and Rajma Bernolli.
[5] **Manuscript under review:** Authors: Zamira Hyseni Duraku, Dardana Fetahu (former student), Jon Konjufca (academic staff, Department of Psychology), Fatime Rrahmani (former student), and Shkurtë Bajgora (former student).

	s assessing discomfort in social interactions, self-efficacy, motivation for community engagement, and volunteerism. This was followed by a qualitative phase involving focus group discussions with 8 students to gain deeper insights into their experiences.		participants (facilitators, participants, and non-participants of mutual support groups).	after a five-week mutual support program.	assigned to either control or intervention groups. Data were collected using validated instruments to measure emotional regulation, test anxiety, and study skills.
Analysis approach	Analysis of quantitative data for correlations and predictors, with qualitative insights aligned to quantitative findings through thematic analysis.	Thematic analysis of qualitative data to explore changes in children's academic and social development.	Deductive thematic content analysis with pre-determined themes guiding the analysis.	Deductive thematic content analysis with pre-determined themes guiding the analysis.	Comparison of pre- and post-intervention scores between control and intervention groups.

Results and Discussion

Dual Impact of Service-Learning: Benefits for Psychology Students and Children with Disabilities

Studies 1 and 2 investigated the impact of the service-learning program, which involved psychology students providing one to one academic tutoring and socio-emotional support to children with disabilities. While **Study 1** focused on how this experience influenced the psychology students' attitudes toward disabilities, self-efficacy, community engagement, and motivation for volunteerism, **Study 2** examined the benefits of the same intervention on the children's academic performance, emotional well-being, and social interactions, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Study 1 findings indicate that direct involvement in the service-learning program significantly enhanced students' comfort levels in social interactions with children with disabilities, improved their self-efficacy, and fostered positive attitudes toward community engagement and volunteerism. Students initially reported discomfort and uncertainty in engaging with children with disabilities, but as they gained

experience, they developed a more empathetic understanding and reported increased confidence in their abilities. These insights align with theories of intergroup contact, suggesting that direct engagement reduces prejudice and enhances empathy (Allport, 1954; Armstrong et al., 2017). The positive correlation between service-learning hours and self-efficacy underscores Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory, which posits that hands-on experience strengthens beliefs in one's competence. Furthermore, students reported a heightened motivation for future community service, driven by personal satisfaction and a sense of purpose, aligning with Astin's (2000) findings on the benefits of community-oriented projects. These findings were observed in the quantitative analysis and were further supported by the qualitative insights, highlighting the comprehensive impact of the service-learning experience. **Study 2** explored the outcomes of the same intervention, on children with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic, from the parents' perspectives. Parents reported notable improvements in their children's academic skills, including enhanced pronunciation, vocabulary, sentence formation, and reading abilities, particularly in literacy, language skills, math, and art. These findings align with previous research indicating that individualized support can effectively address specific academic challenges, fostering both psychological and educational development (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Boekaerts & Corno, 2005). In addition to academic benefits, the socio-emotional gains observed in **Study 2** were notable. Many parents noted improvements in their children's mood, interest in learning, and self-confidence. Enhanced social interactions, both online and in person, were also reported, reflecting an increased comfort level in engaging with peers. The tailored, child-centered approach of the sessions was highlighted by parents as "versatile to the child's needs," indicating the effectiveness of individualized support in fostering emotional resilience.

Both studies underscore the value of the service learning program as a dual-benefit intervention that supports both the service providers (psychology students) and the recipients (children with disabilities). For psychology students, the program bridged theoretical knowledge with practical application, enhancing empathy, self-efficacy, and commitment to community service. For children, the tailored academic tutoring and socio-emotional support helped mitigate the negative effects of pandemic-related disruptions, leading to improvements in academic performance and well-being. The positive outcomes for both groups highlight the potential for sustained one-on-one interventions beyond the context of pandemic recovery, advocating for the broader adoption of such inclusive educational practices (Durlak et al., 2010).

Outcomes of Mutual Support Groups on Student Well-being, Academic Engagement, and Career Confidence (study 3 and 4)

Study 3 focused on the outcomes of mutual support groups specifically among psychology students during the COVID-19 pandemic. It aimed to investigate how these groups helped students manage mental health challenges such as stress and anxiety, while also examining their influence on socialization, academic performance, and personal growth. **Study 4** expanded the scope to include students from various fields of study in the post-pandemic period. This study explored changes in well-being, study skills, attitudes toward seeking psychological support, and career confidence after participating in mutual support groups. By involving a more diverse student population, **Study 4** aimed

to evaluate the broader applicability and benefits of peer-led interventions across different academic disciplines.

Both studies consistently highlight the mental health benefits of mutual support groups, emphasizing their role in managing stress and anxiety. Results from **Study 3** showed notable reductions in stress levels among participants, and the value of having a shared, supportive space for discussing personal and academic challenges. One participant noted, “Having a group to share my stress with helped me realize I am not alone, which reduced my anxiety.” This aligns with social exchange theory, which posits that reciprocal support within groups can alleviate feelings of isolation and build resilience (Roloff, 2015). In **Study 4,** similar findings were observed, with students reporting improved well-being and a greater willingness to engage in open discussions about their mental health, particularly in contexts where formal mental health resources are limited, as is the case of Kosovo.

Beyond mental health improvements, both studies highlighted the positive influence of mutual support groups on academic engagement. In **Study 3,** students who participated in these groups reported increased classroom participation and a greater willingness to contribute to discussions. Non-participants observed that peers involved in the support groups were more confident and actively engaged, indicating that the supportive environment fostered motivation and enthusiasm. One non-participant remarked, “They talk freely and also give more answers when professors ask questions,” reflecting the boost in academic involvement. **Study 4** extended this analysis by examining specific gains in study skills, such as time management and exam preparation strategies. Participants noted that sharing tips and techniques within the group improved their academic performance, supporting the Constructivist perspective that emphasizes the role of social interaction in learning and skill development (Schcolnik et al., 2006).

Developing essential professional skills was a key outcome for facilitators of the mutual support groups in **Study 3**. They reported gaining valuable experience in counseling and group management, which significantly contributed to their professional growth. The hands-on practice of managing group dynamics and offering peer feedback enabled them to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world settings. In **Study 4**, the focus shifted to career certainty, with findings revealing that career discussions within the peer-led groups offered diverse perspectives, enhancing students’ self-efficacy and confidence in their career decisions. One participant shared, “Discussing career goals with peers gave me new perspectives and made me feel more confident about my decisions.” This aligns with previous research, suggesting that peer-led initiatives are effective preparatory resources for career exploration (Pointon et al., 2024).

Both studies observed a notable shift in students’ attitudes toward seeking psychological help. In **Study 4,** participants reported that the peer-led group environment normalized conversations about mental health, reducing the stigma associated with seeking professional support. One participant stated, “I thought only people with serious problems needed psychological help, but the support group changed my view.” This finding is particularly important in culturally conservative contexts like Kosovo, where mental health discussions are often stigmatized (Duraku et al., 2023).

The combined findings highlight the multiple benefits of mutual support groups in higher education: they provide immediate mental health support, enhance coping skills, and foster long-term academic and

career development. The results suggest that peer-led interventions can effectively supplement formal support services, particularly in resource-limited settings, by boosting students' resilience, reducing stigma toward seeking help, and enhancing study strategies and career readiness. However, while mutual support groups are valuable additions to student support frameworks, they should not replace professional mental health services, which remain essential in addressing more complex needs in higher education (Hefner & Eisenberg, 2009; Duraku et al., 2023; Frisby, 2024; Pointon et al., 2024).

Outcomes of the Anxiety Toolbox Workshop on Study Skills and Emotional Regulation

Study 5 evaluated the effects of a brief, CBT-based Anxiety Toolbox workshop on high school students' study skills, test anxiety, and emotional regulation using a pretest-posttest control group design. The results indicated significant improvements in the intervention group across key areas, including time management, concentration, study aids, test strategies, and cognitive reappraisal. These findings suggest that the structured approach of the Anxiety Toolbox workshop effectively enhanced essential skills for managing test anxiety and improving academic success.

Participants in the intervention group reported noticeable improvements in time management and concentration, which are critical for academic performance. The CBT-based techniques, such as cognitive restructuring and practical anxiety management strategies, helped students transition from procrastination to proactive study habits. This aligns with existing research demonstrating the positive impact of CBT on study-related behaviors (Seegol et al., 2014; Nikpour et al., 2021).

The workshop also significantly reduced test anxiety and improved test-taking strategies. Students reported feeling more prepared and less anxious during exams, likely due to the cognitive reappraisal techniques practiced in the sessions. By reframing anxiety-inducing thoughts, students were able to minimize the cognitive interference of negative self-talk, leading to enhanced focus and test performance. This outcome supports previous findings that CBT interventions are effective in alleviating test anxiety (Gray et al., 2024). However, while the reduction in test anxiety is promising, sustained practice or additional support may be necessary to maintain these gains over time.

An important outcome of the workshop was the enhancement of emotional regulation, particularly through cognitive reappraisal techniques. Students in the intervention group demonstrated a greater ability to manage emotional responses, especially in high-pressure situations like exams. By reinterpreting anxiety-provoking thoughts, they were able to diminish the intensity of negative emotional reactions. This finding aligns with research on cognitive reappraisal, which has been shown to improve focus and motivation in academic contexts (Gross & John, 2003; McCann et al., 2020). Enhanced emotional regulation also contributes to overall well-being, with potential benefits extending beyond the academic environment.

Overall, the results of the Anxiety Toolbox workshop indicate that it can serve as a scalable and accessible intervention model for various educational settings, especially in contexts with limited mental health resources, such as Kosovo. The brief, structured format of the workshop enabled students to quickly develop crucial skills for managing anxiety and improving study habits. However, for long-term retention of emotional regulation and study skills, additional reinforcement through ongoing practice and supplementary support mechanisms may be necessary.

Recommendations for Effective Integration of Student-Led Interventions

To maximize the impact of student-led interventions in higher education, coordinated efforts are needed from policy makers, institutional leaders, academic staff, and accreditation agencies. These measures are critical to ensure that such initiatives are effectively integrated into the academic framework, enhancing both educational and well-being outcomes.

Policy makers should prioritize the integration of experiential learning, well-being support, and student-led initiatives as core elements of national higher education strategies. Relying solely on voluntary participation may jeopardize the sustainability of these initiatives in the long term. Thus, policies should mandate the incorporation of student-led interventions into educational frameworks and standard curricula across diverse academic disciplines, extending beyond the social sciences. This approach would ensure consistent implementation, broaden engagement, and amplify the impact on student learning and development. Moreover, policy frameworks should promote collaborations between universities, community organizations, and industry stakeholders to enhance the scope, relevance, and reach of these initiatives.

Institutional leaders should establish dedicated units within student support services to manage, oversee, and standardize student-led initiatives. These units would provide the necessary resources, mentorship, and structural support, ensuring consistent quality across all academic fields. Given the current reliance on voluntary efforts (e.g., as seen in contexts like Kosovo), integrating these activities into formal academic programs is crucial for long-term sustainability. Institutions should implement clear policies that include service-learning projects, peer-led initiatives, and research activities as part of degree requirements, offering academic credit or formal recognition for participation. Additionally, institutional leaders should invest in advancing pedagogical approaches and enhancing the professional development of academic staff to better involve students in volunteer activities, mutual support programs, and research projects. This would create a more collaborative and engaging learning environment.

Academic staff play a key role in embedding student-led interventions into their course curriculum. Instructors should actively mentor students through the research process, guiding them in data collection, analysis, and interpretation, while encouraging them to contribute as co-authors in academic publications. This approach not only improves the quality of interventions but also equips students with critical research skills and analytical thinking.

Accreditation agencies should strengthen their criteria to emphasize the formal integration of student-led interventions within academic programs. Institutions should be required to provide evidence of structured, sustainable student-led initiatives during the accreditation process, thereby promoting consistency, quality, and innovation across disciplines. Agencies should advocate for a holistic approach to education that integrates experiential learning with socio-emotional and well-being support, ensuring that student-led activities address both academic and personal growth needs.

Conclusion

By aligning the efforts of policy makers, institutional leaders, academic staff, and accreditation agencies, higher education institutions can create a supportive environment for student-led initiatives. This collaborative approach will not only enhance student learning and holistic well-being but also

foster a culture of innovation, inclusivity, and continuous improvement. Actively involving students in the design, research, and evaluation of these programs will further ensure that student-led interventions are effective, sustainable, and beneficial across all fields of study. Ultimately, this will prepare graduates with the skills, experiences, and competencies necessary for success in both academic and professional contexts.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

While the study demonstrates positive outcomes from student-led interventions, certain limitations remain. The short-term nature of several interventions raises questions about their lasting impact, highlighting a need for longitudinal studies to assess sustainability. Additionally, future research should explore how these programs can be adapted and scaled across diverse cultural and institutional settings, particularly in regions with limited resources similar to Kosovo. Comprehensive evaluation models should be developed to measure broader outcomes, including socio-emotional development, resilience, and adaptability to changing educational demands. Further research in these areas will provide valuable insights, helping refine and enhance the role of student-led interventions in cultivating a well-rounded and socially responsible student body.

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