JOINclusion: developing kids' soft skills through a collaborative app

How do you teach empathy to children? The new research consortium JOINclusion, which kicked off on May 1st, has received European funding to develop a collaborative mobile app. The AI-powered app offers games to help children understand each other's perspectives. JOINclusion particularly focuses on social inclusion in multicultural classrooms.

JOINclusion's app will promote dialogue and understanding of others' feelings and perspectives in children between 7 and 12 years old. The app – which is under development for the next 2 years – dishes up various situations that let children explore how they interact with others. In doing so, the app customizes its scenarios based on kids' previous choices and provides them with feedback.

Teachers can offer the app in their classrooms using devices provided by schools.

Fostering inclusion

By training empathy in this way, JOINclusion wants to foster social inclusion in primary and secondary schools across Europe. "I want to find new strategies to tackle emotional distress", said one of the schoolteachers involved in JOINclusion. "It's important to increase the sense of responsibility and belonging in my pupils."

JOINclusion specifically focuses on inclusion in multicultural environments, such as those in international schools and in classrooms with refugee children. The app will offer ready-made scenarios for these situations. In addition, researchers will design the app in such a way that language barriers play little to no role during the learning experience.

Interdisciplinary research consortium

The European JOINclusion consortium consists of schools, universities and non-profit partners. Psychologists, schoolteachers and experts in technology-enhanced learning will collaborate to develop and test the game scenarios included in the JOINclusion app.

Maastricht University coordinates the project and will contribute to the development of AI-based solutions. These will improve students' experiences, boost the app's usability and efficiency, and facilitate the teachers' experience by providing customized recommendations.

JOINclusion is coordinated by Dr. Enrique Hortal of the Department of Advanced Computing Sciences and funded through the European Union's Erasmus+ Programme. The project runs until January 2025. For more information, visit the JOINclusion website.