Psychol Stud
https://doi.org/10.1007/s12646-026-00901-5

RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

# Cognitive Strategies, Sensitivity, Prejudice, and Elements of Inclusion among Social Workers

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Received: 21 January 2026 / Accepted: 1 September 2026
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**Abstract** This study examines the interplay between cognitive and metacognitive strategies, environmental sensitivity, prejudice, bullying, and perceived self-efficacy in a small group of individuals working in the social sector. Using a mixed-method design, standardized questionnaires assessed cognitive strategies and sensory processing sensitivity, while semi-structured interviews explored experiences of prejudice and bullying. Results indicate that highly sensitive individuals often experience greater vulnerability to stress but also demonstrate enhanced emotional processing and empathy, which function as professional resources. Interviews revealed the complex dynamics of bullying, the pervasive impact of prejudice on social and professional relationships, and the pivotal role of self-efficacy in sustaining motivation and resilience. The findings highlight the importance of professional training and reflective practice in strengthening cognitive and relational competencies, challenging stereotypes, and fostering inclusive environments. By emphasizing the potential of educators and practitioners as agents of social change, this study contributes to understanding how individual and collective well-being can be enhanced through culturally and socially responsive pedagogical practices.

**Keywords** Professional training · Self-efficacy · Environmental sensitivity · Social operators

## Introduction

Over the past decades, social and professional transformations have drawn increasing attention to the individual and relational competences that foster the development of inclusive and resilient contexts. Literature has highlighted the role of cognitive and metacognitive strategies as key determinants in the ability to confront complex situations and to solve problems autonomously and reflectively (Woolfolk, 2020). At the same time, research has underlined environmental sensitivity, defined as heightened reactivity to social and emotional stimuli, as an individual characteristic that may constitute both a vulnerability, when associated with stressful contexts, and a resource, insofar as it promotes empathy and a deeper understanding of others' experiences (Lionetti et al., 2018; Pluess et al., 2023). Alongside these individual dimensions, phenomena such as bullying and prejudice continue to represent significant challenges in both educational and professional domains. Studies have shown that bullying is not confined to the bully–victim relationship but rather involves a broader network in which bystanders play a crucial role in perpetuating or counteracting violent dynamics (Minton, 2012; Olweus, 1993). Similarly, prejudice subtly yet pervasively influences interpersonal relationships, shaping self-perception, motivation, and opportunities for social participation (D'Urso & Petruccelli, 2022; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Such biases may become internalized experiences that undermine self-esteem and, consequently, perceived self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Major et al., 2003). These individual characteristics operate within a broader social and cultural context, which can either amplify or

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Published online: 08 October 2026

attenuate their effects. Consequently, understanding the dynamics that emerge in educational and professional settings requires a theoretical and methodological framework capable of integrating cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions.

### Cognitive and Metacognitive Strategies

Psychopedagogical research has demonstrated that cognitive and metacognitive strategies are fundamental for self-regulation and management of complex tasks (Woolfolk, 2020). Cognitive and metacognitive learning strategies involve active mental processes that people employ to acquire, comprehend, and retain knowledge while maintaining awareness of their own strengths and limitations (Ramírez et al., 2022). Cognitive strategies encompass techniques such as rehearsal, elaboration, organization, and critical thinking, which support the encoding, retention, and retrieval of information (Zimmerman, 1990). These strategies are central to cognitive control and regulation, forming the basis for effective information processing (Pintrich, 2004). Conversely, metacognitive strategies focus on the regulation of one's own thinking processes. They involve planning, monitoring, and evaluating one's cognitive activities, as well as developing awareness of personal abilities and limitations (Winne, 2011; Zimmerman, 1990). Metacognitive activities are essential components of cognitive control, facilitating self-regulation through deliberate planning, and ongoing monitoring of one's processes and performance (Pintrich, 2004; Schraw & Dennison, 1994).

### Environmental Sensitivity

Environmental sensitivity refers to the capacity to perceive, register, and process external stimuli (Pluess, 2015). This ability enables individuals to evaluate and respond to diverse environmental conditions, playing a crucial role in adaptation to both supportive and adverse developmental contexts. Empirical research has increasingly shown that individuals differ in their general sensitivity to environmental factors. While all humans, as context-dependent organisms, must register, process, and respond to their surroundings, the degree to which they are affected by contextual characteristics varies substantially.

Several theoretical models have been proposed to account for these differences, including Differential Susceptibility (Belsky & Pluess, 2009), Sensory Processing Sensitivity (Aron & Aron, 1997), and Biological Sensitivity to Context (Boyce & Ellis, 2005). The concept of environmental sensitivity was later introduced as a higher-order framework integrating these theories (Pluess, 2015). Although this capacity is fundamental for all individuals, some appear to exhibit markedly higher sensitivity, which can significantly influence their developmental trajectories (Aron et al., 2012; Belsky & Pluess, 2009; Ellis et al., 2011).

Leading frameworks suggest that heightened sensitivity is not solely a risk factor for adverse environmental exposures but also confers increased susceptibility to positive influences, such as supportive interventions (Aron & Aron, 1997; Belsky & Pluess, 2009; Boyce & Ellis, 2005). These theories propose that the general population is composed predominantly of individuals with lower sensitivity, while a minority exhibit higher sensitivity (Wolf et al., 2008). This distinction has been popularized through the orchid–dandelion metaphor (de Villiers et al., 2018), wherein "orchids" represent highly sensitive individuals who thrive under optimal conditions but are particularly vulnerable in adverse environments, and "dandelions" denote less sensitive, resilient individuals capable of adapting to a wide range of circumstances.

Recent research has begun to empirically investigate these sensitivity groups in children and adolescents, confirming the existence of distinct patterns of environmental responsiveness (Pluess, 2017).

### Bullying and Prejudice

Prejudice plays a central role in relational processes, functioning as a cognitive schema that shapes the perception and interpretation of reality (D'Urso & Petruccelli, 2022). Beyond generating discrimination and distortions in social interactions, prejudice can affect individuals' self-efficacy, the belief in one's ability to cope effectively with challenges (Bandura, 1997). International literature has shown that stereotypes and biases can undermine self-esteem, reduce learning opportunities, and diminish motivation (Major et al., 2003).

Bullying is a specific form of peer aggression distinguished from general aggressive behavior by three key characteristics: (1) repetition, in that the behavior occurs over time rather than as an isolated incident; (2) intentionality, with the aggressor deliberately inflicting harm; and (3) a power imbalance, which prevents the victim from effectively defending themselves (Waseem & Nickerson, 2023; UNESCO, 2023). Unlike general aggression, which may be reactive or situational, bullying is systematic and involves a persistent dynamic of dominance and victimization (Bork-Hüffer et al., 2021). While general aggression can arise from provocation or frustration, bullying often reflects strategic behaviors aimed at asserting social power over a weaker individual (Cosma et al., 2022). Bullying is, therefore, a complex relational phenomenon embedded within asymmetric power structures, where not only the bully–victim relationship but also the role of bystanders is critical (Minton, 2012). Research indicates that bullying is more frequent in classrooms where bystanders support the aggressor and

less frequent where bystanders defend the victim, with intervention often mitigating emotional and psychosocial harm (Salmivalli et al., 2011; Sjögren et al., 2021, 2024). However, not all bystanders choose to intervene, and few studies have systematically examined the factors that influence their behavior.

Bullying and prejudice are related but distinct phenomena. Bullying is typically characterized by repeated interpersonal aggression within a power imbalance (Olweus, 1993), while prejudice involves prejudged targets and an attitude with cognitive, affective, and behavioral components (Allport et al., 1954). Prejudice can manifest as (1) hostility toward the target, (2) overprotection of the target, reflecting rejection of hostility in a reversed form, or (3) apparent indifference (D'Urso et al., 2023a, 2023b, 2023c). The literature suggested how prejudice underlies bullying, with discrimination and stereotypes shaping aggressive behaviors (D'Urso & Pace, 2019; Antunes & Zuin, 2008). However, research shows that targets of bullying are not necessarily members of socially devalued groups, unlike targets of prejudice, who often belong to minority or marginalized populations (Souza, 2013).

Empirical studies suggest a complex interaction between prejudice and bullying. For example, Goodboy et al. (2016) found that bullying may sometimes overlap with prejudice, its targets are not necessarily members of socially marginalized groups (D'Urso et al., 2023a, 2023b, 2023c; Souza, 2013). Prejudiced attitudes, however, can underlie discriminatory bullying behaviors, particularly when motivated by sexism, racism, or other intolerant beliefs (Goodboy et al., 2016). In this sense, the aim of this study is to explore how social workers' attitudes may be shaped or influenced by prejudice and personality traits, with particular attention to sensitivity to the environment.

## The Current Study

Given these considerations, professional training represents a pivotal means to equip educators and social intervention practitioners with both theoretical knowledge and practical skills, supporting conflict management, bullying prevention, and the deconstruction of prejudice while fostering inclusive environments. Continuous professional development also reinforces self-efficacy, promoting motivation and resilience in the face of challenges (Bandura, 1997). Using a mixed-methods approach, this study aims to examine the interplay between cognitive and metacognitive strategies, environmental sensitivity, perceptions of bullying and prejudice, and self-efficacy among participants in social and professional contexts, with the objective of identifying key strengths, challenges, and avenues for targeted interventions.

## Methods

### Sample and Procedure

The participants were eight young adults and adults (seven of whom were women), aged between 25 and 54 years, all of whom worked in the social sector (i.e., educators, social workers, and psychologists). Participants took part in a structured socio-educational program during the 2024–2025 academic year, aimed at addressing educational poverty and strengthening the socio-pedagogical fabric. Participants completed a series of questionnaires and took part in individual interviews. Upon completion of the questionnaires, a brief plenary reflection session was conducted to facilitate discussion and consolidation of responses. All procedures involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee, the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its subsequent amendments, or comparable ethical standards, as well as with the ethical requirements of our institution. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

### Instruments

Cognitive and metacognitive strategies used to solve work-related and social problems were assessed using an adaptation of the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (cf. Woolfolk, 2020; e.g., "I construct my own thinking rather than passively accepting what others think"). Participants responded on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all like me) to 4 (very much like me). This self-report questionnaire consists of 25 items and demonstrates good reliability (Cronbach's alpha = .81). The scores fall within a specific range: 66–72: Very good strategies. 55–65: Moderately good strategies. <54: You would probably benefit from working on your thinking strategies. Participants reported a mean score of 55.50 (SD = 8.76).

Environmental sensitivity (Sensory Processing Sensitivity; Pluess et al., 2023) was evaluated using the Highly Sensitive Person Scale (HSP; Lionetti et al., 2024; e.g., "I am easily affected by both positive and negative feedback"). Participants responded on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). This self-report questionnaire consists of 12 items and demonstrates good reliability (Cronbach's alpha = .85). The HSP-12 assesses three dimensions of environmental sensitivity: Ease of Excitation, Low Sensory Threshold, and Aesthetic Sensitivity. Although these dimensions are assessed separately, the scores are considered together to obtain an overall index of sensitivity, which can be interpreted along a continuum ranging from low to moderate to high sensitivity. This continuum is represented metaphorically by three types of

flowers. Individuals with low sensitivity are described as dandelions, as they tend to be highly adaptable and resilient across different environments. Individuals with moderate sensitivity are represented by tulips, reflecting a good capacity to adapt to a range of environments without being particularly vulnerable to environmental conditions. Finally, individuals with high sensitivity are represented by orchids, as they tend to process environmental stimuli more intensely and may, therefore, be more responsive to, and dependent on, supportive and well-suited environments.

Additionally, a semi-structured interview was administered, developed specifically to explore prejudice and bullying. The interview aimed to investigate participants' perceptions of these phenomena in social and work contexts, as well as their self-efficacy (Bandura, 1999).

## Results

All participants reported employing effective cognitive strategies, with some demonstrating particularly sophisticated approaches. Regarding environmental sensitivity, nearly all participants were classified as "orchids," indicating a high level of sensitivity. During the plenary discussion, many participants recognized themselves in this characterization, which, consistent with the literature (Sperati et al., 2024), is often experienced as a state that can generate psychological discomfort. In particular, when coupled with stressful situations, high sensitivity appeared to contribute to general malaise. Nevertheless, participants seemed capable of deeply processing the emotional experiences of the people they work with. This ability may help explain why targeted interventions on cognitive strategies could be particularly beneficial: Despite their heightened sensitivity, participants do not appear to be hindered in their reflective thinking. The interview transcripts were examined line by line using thematic analysis, following a Grounded Theory approach (Chun Tie et al., 2019) and without adopting a predetermined theoretical framework (Bird, 2005). This process represented the initial stage of meaning-making from participants' narratives (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999). Beginning with the participants' accounts, preliminary themes concerning teachers' perceptions of and responses to bullying were identified through thematic analysis (cf. Poland, 1995). First, the transcripts were read in their entirety to facilitate familiarization with the data and to develop an objective understanding of the content expressed by the social workers. Subsequently, relevant segments of text were identified and assigned provisional codes—temporary labels summarizing the content of specific units of meaning—with the assistance of ATLAS.ti. The main themes and their corresponding subthemes are presented below (Cf. Table 1):

### Bullying

*Actors in Bullying.* Participants consistently identified three central actors within bullying dynamics. Responses emphasized the active role of the bully, the vulnerability of the victim, and the significant influence of bystanders, who may either reinforce or mitigate aggressive behaviors. As one participant noted, *"The main actors in bullying are three: the bully, the victim, and the bystanders."* Another similarly highlighted, *"The bully, the victim, and those who participate in the bully's actions."*

*Dynamics of Bullying.* Bullying was described by participants as emerging from complex and multifaceted social dynamics, often reinforced by competitive group environments, scarce resources, unclear goals, and insufficient emotional awareness. Several respondents emphasized that such dynamics are not only widespread but at times socially legitimized. As one participant observed, *"The dynamics that fuel bullying are very common in groups. In some circumstances, they are socially accepted and even encouraged"*. Beyond structural factors such as *"Competition, lack of resources, poor organizational attention to group activities, unclear group objectives, and low sensitivity to emotions and values,"* participants also pointed to deeper relational and cultural issues, including *"lack of empathy, identity-related dynamics, insufficient adult supervision, and the normalization of violence in educational and family contexts"*. A recurring theme was the pivotal role of bystanders. Their responses underscored that passive or approving attitudes can reinforce the bully's behavior: *"Thanks to bystanders who do nothing, the bully feels supported and admired for their actions, thus perpetuating them."* Conversely, active intervention was recognized as a critical protective factor: *"Bystanders can support, ignore, or counteract bullying; they play a key role in its spread or containment."*

*Psychosocial Factors Linked to Bullying.* Participants identified multiple contributors to the development of bullying behaviors, spanning the family, peer, educational, and broader socioeconomic contexts. Parental influence, sibling relationships, playmates, teachers, and the school environment were frequently described as primary agents shaping an individual's trajectory. As one participant noted, *"The main agents contributing to an individual's development are: parents, siblings, playmates, teachers, and the school. If they feel accepted and reassured by these agents, they will progress naturally and healthily in social relationships."* Several respondents emphasized the destabilizing role of emotional and relational difficulties. Maladaptations linked to *"affective issues, separations, divorces, marital crises, and economic hardship"* were described as increasing vulnerability. Emotional disturbances were also cited as risk factors, with participants pointing to individuals who may become *"rebellious, behaviorally unstable, excessively shy,*

**Table 1** Summary of interview findings

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Bullying | *Actors in Bullying* | Three main actors: bully, victim, bystanders<br>Bystanders may reinforce or counteract bullying |
| | *Dynamics of Bullying* | Complex social dynamics, sometimes socially legitimized.<br>Contributing factors: competitiveness, scarce resources, unclear goals, low emotional awareness.<br>Relational and cultural aspects: lack of empathy, normalization of violence, insufficient adult supervision.<br>Bystanders play a pivotal role (passivity reinforces bullying, active intervention protects victims). |
| | *Psychosocial Factors* | Parents, siblings, peers, teachers, school, family crises, separations, economic hardship, emotional difficulties, parenting styles (overly permissive or authoritarian). |
| | *Actions* | Primary prevention<br>Training on communication/conflict management<br>School–family collaboration,<br>Training for teachers/parents,<br>Peer education. |
| Anti-Bullying Practices | *Lack of Knowledge* | Some lacked familiarity with structured programs |
| | *Specific Knowledge* | KiVa (Finland),<br>Olweus (Norway),<br>NoTrap! (Italy),<br>Second Step (USA),<br>P.I.P.P.I. (Italy).<br>Key elements: prevention, empathy, early intervention, whole-school involvement, victim support + re-education of bullies, continuous monitoring. |
| Prejudices | *Impact in Relational Contexts* | Prejudices influence communication, relationship quality, and project outcomes. |
| | *Workplace Prejudices* | Discrimination in hiring, promotion, task allocation, recognition of merit.<br>Consequences: toxic environments, reduced motivation, decreased productivity, undermined diversity. |
| | *Socio-Educational Contexts* | Prejudices affect teacher expectations, peer relationships, student self-esteem, performance, and inclusion. Curricula may reinforce distorted views.<br>Consequences: inequities, stress, inadequate classroom climate. |
| General Consequences | *Individual & Collective Development* | Limitation of opportunities, hinder both personal and collective growth. |
| | *Educational Relationships* | Selective listening, unequal treatment, mistrust, hinder open communication. |
| | *Self-Esteem & Development* | Prejudices harm self-esteem, aspirations, motivation, learning opportunities, and inclusion.<br>Reinforce inequities linked to gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status. |
| Perceived Self-Efficacy | *Positive Perceptions* | Participants felt effective when creating supportive environments, promoting emotional growth, and witnessing improvements (e.g., disengaged student becoming successful). |
| | *Negative Perceptions* | Reported limits due to student resistance, lack of collaboration, situational constraints. Some felt only partially effective. |
| Enhance Self-Efficacy | | Methodological planning,<br>Continuous training,<br>Supervision,<br>Peer exchange,<br>Simulations,<br>Active learning,<br>Group work,<br>Problem-solving,<br>Gamification,<br>Positive relationships,<br>Clear rules, time-management (Pomodoro),<br>Importance of feedback and self-reflection. |

**Table 1** (continued)

| | |
|---|---|
| Coping with Discomfort | Mindfulness,<br>Reflective practice,<br>Emotion regulation,<br>Social support,<br>Professional help. |
| Agent of Change | Interactive reading,<br>Improved collaboration via emotional education,<br>Teacher sharing own bullying experience led students to disclose hidden bullying cases. |

*or frustrated."* Particular attention was drawn to the impact of parenting styles. Both overly permissive and excessively authoritarian approaches were regarded as detrimental, as they hinder the formation of secure and meaningful affective bonds. One participant explained this risk in terms of *"individuals who experienced either overly permissive or overly authoritarian parenting styles during their development, which did not allow the formation of significant affective bonds."*

*Actions to Counter and Prevent Bullying.* Participants emphasized a broad set of strategies to effectively prevent and address bullying, ranging from primary prevention programs to targeted interventions at both group and individual levels. They highlighted the importance of training activities focused on effective communication, conflict management, and collaborative problem-solving. As one respondent explained, *"Primary prevention and informational actions for students, parents, and teachers: group and individual meetings, training in effective communication, conflict management, and group problem-solving."* A strong emphasis was also placed on fostering empathy, encouraging prompt adult intervention, and engaging bystanders as active agents in countering bullying. Collaborative efforts between schools and families, along with clear behavioral rules, were viewed as essential for creating safe and inclusive environments. One participant described this approach as *"education fostering empathy, prompt adult intervention, engagement of bystanders, school-family collaboration, and clear rules to promote a safe and inclusive environment."* Awareness-raising initiatives were seen as valuable tools for prevention. These included *"thematic days: events dedicated to raising awareness about bullying and its consequences"* as well as training sessions for teachers and parents aimed at providing practical tools to identify and respond promptly to problematic situations. In addition, several participants drew attention to technological supports such as *"anonymous reporting apps: platforms like 'YouPol' allow safe reporting of incidents"* and monitoring systems designed to detect cyberbullying on social media and school platforms. Finally, participants underlined the importance of timely interventions by schools, including both sanctions and mediation, and the value of structured peer-education projects. As one respondent noted, these initiatives enable *"older students educating younger ones on mutual respect"* reinforcing a culture of responsibility and care within the student community.

### Knowledge of Specific Anti-Bullying Practices

*Lack of Specific Knowledge.* Some participants reported limited familiarity with structured anti-bullying programs, emphasizing instead the importance of context-specific and theoretically grounded approaches. One participant remarked, "*There are certainly several programs, although I do not know any specific ones. In my view, important features include: a correct analysis of the problem, clear objective definition, a systemic vision of the issue, and theoretically sound methodologies*". Others highlighted the need for integrated programs tailored to local contexts, noting that initiatives should involve students, teachers, and families, and focus on empathy, conflict management, timely interventions, and continuous awareness. As one respondent described, "*I believe there should be specific anti-bullying programs for each context, with an integrated approach involving students, teachers, and families, educating in empathy and conflict management, ensuring timely interventions and continuous awareness. In this project, a workshop targeting bullying prevention was carried out to promote respect and inclusion.*" Several participants also stressed that programs should be personalized rather than generic, adapting interventions to the sociocultural environment: "*I am not familiar with anti-bullying programs, but I believe they should exist, primarily focusing on personalization rather than generic courses, adapted to the sociocultural context.*"

*Specific Knowledge.* Some participants demonstrated familiarity with well-established anti-bullying programs implemented in schools and communities. They identified initiatives such as KiVa (Finland), which focuses on prevention, bystander engagement, and victim support; the OLWEUS Bullying Prevention Program (Norway), aimed at fostering cultural change within schools through teacher training and targeted interventions; NoTrap! (Italy), a peer-education program developed by the University of Florence; Second Step (USA), which promotes empathy and emotion

regulation to prevent aggressive behaviors; and P.I.P.P.I. (Italy), a broader program supporting vulnerable children and incorporating anti-bullying strategies. As one participant summarized, "*Yes, several anti-bullying programs with specific approaches exist, implemented in schools and communities to prevent and counteract bullying*". Participants also emphasized the key components that contribute to program effectiveness. These included prevention through awareness-raising about empathy, respect, and diversity; early intervention to recognize and address initial signs of bullying; active involvement of the entire school community, including teachers, students, and families; support for victims combined with re-education strategies for bullies; and continuous monitoring and evaluation to ensure the programs remain effective. As one respondent explained, "*An effective program should include: Prevention—raising awareness about empathy, respect, and diversity through interactive lessons; Early intervention—strategies to recognize and address early signs of bullying; Involvement of the entire school community—active participation of teachers, students, and families; Support for victims and re-education of bullies—creating safe environments and targeted interventions; Monitoring and evaluation—continuous progress checks and strategy updates.*"

## Role of Prejudices

*Impact in Relational Contexts.* Participants described prejudice as a significant factor shaping interpersonal dynamics, with direct implications for communication, relationship quality, and even project effectiveness. As one respondent noted, *"Prejudices influence behavior, particularly in the way operators and users relate to each other."* Others emphasized that such biases can lead to *"ineffective modes of interaction"* and in more severe cases, *"compromise the outcomes of entire projects"* Prejudices were perceived to influence interpersonal behavior, affecting communication, relationship quality, and project outcomes.

*Workplace Prejudices*. Participants emphasized that prejudices within professional settings can translate into concrete forms of discrimination, particularly in hiring, promotions, task allocation, and recognition of merit. As one respondent observed, *"They may lead to discrimination in hiring and career advancement opportunities"* while others noted that biases can *"cause overestimation or underestimation of an individual's skills"* and *"affect task distribution and recognition of merit."* Several participants stressed the broader consequences of such practices: *"When employers evaluate based on stereotypes, they undermine group quality and diversity."* The lack of fair treatment was described as demotivating, reducing productivity, and fostering inequitable or toxic environments. In the words of one participant, *"Prejudices create inequalities and limit people"* while another highlighted their impact on cooperation and decision-making, particularly in processes such as *"hiring [and] promotions."* Participants noted that prejudices could lead to discrimination in hiring, promotion, task allocation, and recognition of merit. Biases were seen as undermining collaboration, motivation, and workplace diversity, creating inequitable and potentially toxic environments.

*Socio-Educational Contexts*. Participants highlighted the pervasive impact of prejudices within educational settings, noting their influence on teacher expectations, peer relationships, student performance, self-esteem, and social inclusion. As one respondent observed, *"They can shape teachers' expectations and student relationships"* while others stressed that such biases *"affect performance, self-esteem, and social inclusion"* and can *"limit access to educational resources"*. Several participants pointed to the role of teachers, whose expectations may inadvertently disadvantage students: *"Teachers may treat students differently, expecting lower outcomes,"* thereby generating disparities in treatment. Beyond interpersonal dynamics, curricular content was also cited as a potential source of bias, with one participant remarking that *"prejudices in school curricula reinforce distorted worldviews."* Such dynamics were seen as harmful not only for students but also for teachers, creating *"distress and inadequacy"* within the classroom environment.

## General Consequences of Prejudices

Participants consistently described prejudices as constraining both individual and collective development, limiting opportunities, and underscoring the need for targeted interventions to promote fairness and equity. One respondent stated, *"They limit opportunities for both individual and collective growth"* while another emphasized that biases *"undermine individual potential and hinder environments from evolving."* Several participants highlighted the broader societal implications, noting that *"challenging prejudice is essential to building a fairer, more equitable society."*

*Impact on Educational Relationships*. Participants reported that biases can negatively affect the quality of interactions between educators and students, fostering selective listening, unequal treatment, and environments of mistrust that impede open communication and developmental support. One participant noted, *"They can produce 'selective listening' that prevents a full grasp of relational nuances"* while another emphasized that biases *"amplify and prioritize information that confirms pre-existing biases."* Several respondents highlighted disparities in adult–child interactions, explaining that *"they create disparities in adult–child interactions (e.g., when teachers unconsciously treat children differently based on gender, culture, or ability)."* Biases were also seen as fostering distrust and discrimination,

thereby *"hindering open communication and developmental support"* and *"damaging trust and opportunities for growth."* A minority, however, reported perceiving no effect, noting that *"they never have an effect."*

*Effects on Self-Esteem and Individual Development*. Participants highlighted the negative impact of stereotypes and prejudices on self-esteem, personal aspirations, learning opportunities, and social inclusion. Several respondents noted that biases could *"affect students' self-esteem and aspirations"* and *"cause low self-esteem, reducing recognition of latent potential."* Others emphasized the broader consequences for motivation and educational engagement, observing that prejudices *"can limit self-esteem, learning opportunities, and motivation"* and *"may also lead to social exclusion."* Participants further pointed out that stereotypes related to gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status could lower teachers' expectations, thereby reinforcing inequities and limiting individual development.

## Perceived Self-Efficacy

*Positive Perceptions*. Participants reported experiencing a sense of effectiveness when fostering supportive environments, facilitating emotional growth, and observing tangible improvements in student engagement and development. One participant reflected, *"I believe I am fairly effective in my role; I feel that I have implemented training and clinical interventions, both individual and group, that may have influenced the developmental trajectories of the users I work with"*. Others highlighted the importance of creating spaces for listening and support, noting that such environments enable individuals to express themselves freely and grow: *"I feel effective when I create an environment of listening and support that allows people to express themselves freely and grow. I perceive myself as making a difference when, through careful listening and needs analysis, I achieve improvements in emotional well-being and life management"*. Concrete examples of impact were also reported, such as a teacher who observed a student initially disinterested and struggling gradually become engaged and achieve academic success, describing this transformation as evidence of having *"made a difference*".

*Occasional Negative Perceptions*. Some participants acknowledged experiencing limitations in their perceived efficacy, often attributable to student resistance, lack of collaboration, or situational constraints. As one respondent noted, *"Being effective is not always possible. In some situations, I felt that certain personal and training skills made a difference"*. Others reported feeling less confident in their role, citing challenges such as uncooperative students who responded provocatively or struggled to fully express their ideas: *"At present, I do not feel 100% effective in my role, as I often encounter little collaboration from students who respond provocatively and fail to fully express their ideas"*.

## Tools to Enhance Work-Related Self-Efficacy

Participants identified a range of strategies critical for fostering teaching effectiveness, emphasizing the importance of thorough problem analysis, methodological planning, ongoing professional development, peer observation and exchange, feedback collection, and reflective practice. One participant stressed, *"I consider the analysis of needs essential: the choice of methods and objectives must follow from this crucial step in planning"* while another highlighted the importance of continual learning, noting, *"I consider ongoing training, self-analysis, and supervision fundamental"*. Participants also emphasized the role of pedagogical tools and approaches in promoting engagement and learning outcomes. Key didactic tools included educational technologies such as Google Classroom, Kahoot!, and Padlet, alongside digital resources like videos, simulations, and concept maps, as well as interactive whiteboards and tablets. Pedagogical approaches highlighted were active learning ("learning by doing"), group work, problem-solving, debates, differentiated instruction, gamification, and metacognitive strategies. Classroom management techniques, including building positive relationships, establishing clear rules, and applying time-management strategies such as the Pomodoro method, were also considered essential. The value of peer exchange and collaboration was noted, with participants reporting benefits from observing colleagues, sharing best practices, and engaging in professional communities. Finally, the integration of student feedback and self-reflection was emphasized as a means to continuously improve instructional practice: *"Feedback and self-reflection: gathering student input and critically reviewing one's own lessons."*

## Coping with Discomfort

Participants described a range of coping strategies aimed at managing stress, discouragement, and emotional challenges. Techniques included mindfulness, reflective practice, body- and cognition-based mastery methods, emotion regulation, seeking social support, and professional guidance when necessary. One participant highlighted the structured use of such strategies, noting, *"Through mastery-based coping strategies targeting body, thought, and reflection (first, second, and third levels)."* Others emphasized reflective approaches, describing how they *"manage discouragement by taking time to reflect on my emotions, identifying their causes, and seeking concrete solutions, sometimes asking for support"*. Acceptance and self-compassion were recurrent themes. As one participant explained, *"I believe it is important to accept emotions without judgment. I pause,*

*breathe deeply, and try to understand the roots of distress. I seek distractions through pleasant activities (reading, music, walking), share with trusted friends, focus on controllable aspects, and practice gratitude. If discomfort persists, I consider seeking professional help"*. Continuous learning and personal growth were also noted as key factors, with participants reflecting on past experiences to guide current coping: *"My training has taught me to cope with discouragement by constantly seeking new stimuli and strategies"* and *"I think back to past experiences where I made a difference."*

### The Individual as an Agent of Change in Professional Practice

Participants recounted multiple examples of positive impact resulting from their educational initiatives, which targeted both individual and collective outcomes. These included interactive reading projects, emotional education programs, and the sharing of personal experiences to foster empathy and understanding. One participant reflected, "*Over the years, I have noticed positive changes thanks to my work, both at the individual and collective level. For example, I launched a reading project with a disengaged class, introducing interactive methods such as read-aloud, debates, and real-world connections. Over time, students showed greater interest and comprehension, and one previously struggling student gained the confidence to read aloud in class*". Emphasis was placed on the role of emotional education in promoting collaboration and conflict resolution. As another participant described, "*Through an emotional education project, I guided students to better express and understand their emotions, leading to improved conflict resolution and collaboration*". Participants also highlighted the transformative power of personal disclosure in creating trust and empathy. One respondent recounted sharing their own experience as a bullying victim with a final-year high school class, noting that this vulnerability encouraged students to reveal previously hidden incidents of bullying: "*The students, confronted with my vulnerability and resilience, empathized deeply. This allowed one student to confide that a peer with disabilities in their school was being bullied, revealing a hidden reality.*"

## Discussion

The present study explored cognitive and metacognitive strategies, environmental sensitivity, bullying, prejudice, and self-efficacy among participants in professional and social contexts. Overall, the findings provide insight into the complex interplay between individual traits, social dynamics, and professional practices, highlighting both challenges and potential avenues for intervention.

Participants consistently identified the primary actors in bullying, emphasizing the critical role of bystanders. However, they tended to overlook subtler aspects of the phenomenon, such as the emergence of bully–victims or the fact that bullies may originate from socioeconomically advantaged contexts, not solely from dysfunctional environments (Minton, 2012). This suggests that while participants have a solid understanding of overt dynamics, further awareness of the nuanced sociocultural contributors to bullying could enhance prevention strategies.

Participants recognized the severity of prejudice and its pervasive impact on individual and social development. Prejudices were described as filters that can shape behavior, influencing the likelihood of proactive actions while potentially leading individuals to underestimate or ignore associated acts of violence (D'Urso & Petruccelli, 2022). Moreover, participants noted that prejudice can undermine self-esteem (e.g., Major et al., 2003). Rather than being merely cognitive distortions or stereotyped attitudes, prejudices can become lived experiences, internalized in ways that affect how individuals perceive themselves and their potential. This internalization may diminish motivation to pursue previously desirable goals, with consequential effects on emotional and relational functioning.

In terms of cognitive functioning, participants demonstrated generally effective strategies, with some exhibiting particularly sophisticated approaches. This aligns with literature suggesting that individuals who actively construct their own understanding, rather than passively accepting external input, achieve more adaptive problem-solving outcomes (Woolfolk, 2020). Importantly, this reflective capacity was evident even among highly sensitive participants, indicating that cognitive engagement is not hindered by heightened environmental reactivity. Nonetheless, prejudices and fear of challenging personal beliefs may inhibit action, as individuals sometimes avoid interventions to protect existing values.

Participants emphasized the importance of continuous professional development and collaborative engagement among colleagues as key tools to address social challenges. Several participants demonstrated detailed knowledge of interventions aimed at improving educational contexts and highlighted how personal experiences can serve as effective models for conveying inclusive messages. Highly sensitive participants, often described as "orchids" (Pluess et al., 2023), were able to leverage their emotional experiences to manage distress and reflect upon past events, representing a valuable investment in personal growth without undermining self-efficacy. Indeed, self-efficacy was perceived as strengthened by experience, knowledge, and ongoing training, consistent with Bandura's framework ().

The role of the self in educational relationships emerged as particularly salient. Participants highlighted how the educator's presence can serve as a foundation for fostering a

positive social climate, facilitating reflection on emotional experiences, and encouraging sharing among students. Emotional regulation was considered essential both for managing personal feelings and for applying targeted cognitive strategies to problem-solving, provided such strategies are recognized and supported (Güss & Starker, 2023). Consistent with prior findings (Sperati et al., 2024), high sensitivity was associated with both increased emotional reactivity and vulnerability to stress, as well as a remarkable capacity for empathy and understanding others' experiences. These dual characteristics suggest that professional development programs should leverage empathic strengths while providing strategies to manage emotional overload.

Interviews provided nuanced insights into bullying dynamics and the pivotal role of bystanders. Participants consistently highlighted the triadic nature of bullying (bully, victim, bystander) and identified key psychosocial contributors, such as parental influence, emotional instability, and social context (Olweus, 1993). These findings reinforce the importance of multi-level preventive strategies, including peer education, family involvement, and institutional policies.

Prejudice was reported to affect relational, educational, and professional domains, influencing expectations, opportunities, and interactions. The observed impact on self-esteem, motivation, and social inclusion aligns with research on bias and stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995), supporting the need for interventions that cultivate awareness, empathy, and equitable practices.

Participants also emphasized the continuous reinforcement of self-efficacy, particularly when working with students who are provocative or uncooperative. While perceived self-efficacy was generally high, it was contextually sensitive, decreasing in environments with low collaboration or resistance. Coping strategies spanned reflective practices, emotion regulation, peer collaboration, and professional support, demonstrating a multidimensional approach to managing professional stress. These observations are consistent with Bandura's (1999) model, highlighting the dynamic interplay among self-efficacy, outcome experiences, and social modeling.

Overall, the findings indicate that participants' cognitive and metacognitive competencies, emotional sensitivity, and reflective capacities provide a strong foundation for addressing bullying, prejudice, and professional challenges. By fostering empathy, structured problem-solving strategies, and continuous training, practitioners can enhance both individual and collective efficacy, contributing to more inclusive and supportive educational and professional environments.

The study should be considered in light of its limitations. First, given its qualitative nature and the relatively small number of participants, the findings cannot be generalized to the broader population. Previous research has similarly shown that even specialized professionals, such as teachers, often lack specific training to effectively prevent and address bullying (e.g., Bordi et al., 2025; D'Urso et al., 2023a, 2023b, 2023c). In contrast, in the present study, many participants were aware of these practices, including evidence-based approaches. Second, the use of self-report measures may lead participants to overestimate their knowledge, skills, or competencies, particularly when reflecting on their own practices and experiences. Moreover, the findings have limited transferability, as is common in qualitative research, and the participants' professional roles may have increased the risk of social desirability bias, potentially influencing how they reported their perceptions and experiences.

## Conclusions

This study provides a comprehensive examination of the interplay between individual traits, social dynamics, and professional practices in contexts characterized by bullying, prejudice, and interpersonal challenges. The findings indicate that participants generally possess effective cognitive and metacognitive strategies, and that highly sensitive individuals can leverage their emotional awareness as a strength in both professional and social interactions. At the same time, the study highlights the pervasive influence of prejudice and the critical role of bystanders in sustaining or mitigating bullying dynamics, emphasizing the need for interventions at multiple ecological levels. Participants' experiences underscore the importance of continuous professional development, reflective practice, and collaborative engagement among colleagues to enhance self-efficacy and foster inclusive environments. The combination of reflective cognitive strategies, emotional sensitivity, and proactive professional practices can promote positive social interactions, reduce the impact of prejudice, and enhance the well-being and efficacy of both educators and learners. The results further underscore the importance of integrating training in cognitive strategies, emotional regulation, and sensitivity management into professional development programs, and of adopting systemic interventions involving students, educators, families, and institutional structures that combine preventive and responsive components. Recognizing and supporting highly sensitive individuals as potential agents of positive change may enhance relational quality and educational outcomes, while context-sensitive programs tailored to specific social and cultural environments can strengthen both personal growth and collective responsibility. Despite providing rich qualitative and quantitative insights, the study is limited by its relatively small and context-specific sample, which may affect the generalizability of the findings, as well as by its cross-sectional

design, which limits the ability to examine changes over time or causal relationships between traits, social dynamics, and professional practices. Future research should explore these dynamics across diverse populations and professional settings, examine longitudinal effects of interventions, and investigate the interactions between sensitivity, cognitive strategies, and social influence more systematically, including the role of bystanders and contextual factors that shape bullying and prejudice. Overall, this study highlights the complex interrelations between individual traits, social dynamics, and professional practice, demonstrating that by acknowledging the strengths and vulnerabilities of highly sensitive individuals, fostering effective cognitive and metacognitive strategies, and implementing comprehensive anti-bullying and anti-prejudice interventions, practitioners can create more inclusive, empathetic, and effective professional environments. The findings offer valuable insights for the design of educational and professional programs aimed at fostering empathy, inclusion, and resilience, ultimately contributing to the development of more equitable and supportive social contexts.

**Acknowledgements** Not applicable.

**Funding** Open access funding provided by Università degli Studi Mediterranea di Reggio Calabria within the CRUI-CARE Agreement.

**Data Availability** The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author(s) upon reasonable request.

**Declarations**

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

**Ethical approval** All procedures were conducted in accordance with national regulations and the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and its subsequent revisions.

**Other:** AI tools were used solely to assist with English language editing, as the authors are non-native English speakers, and to ensure clarity, consistency, and accuracy in the expression of the concepts presented in the manuscript.

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