



ART FOR WELL-BEING: INSIGHTS INTO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN SLOVENIA AND ICELAND

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Potrjeno/Accepted

18. 7. 2025

Objavljeno/Published

1. 9. 2025

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Keywords:

cultural and arts education, health, preschool education, well-being, preschool teacher education.

Ključne besede:

kulturno-umetnostna vzgoja, zdravje, predšolska vzgoja, dobro počutje, izobraževanje predšolskih učiteljev.

UDK/UDC

373.2:7(497.4:491.1)

Izvleček/Abstract

In this article, we explore how arts education promotes well-being in preschool education by comparing the views of Slovenian and Icelandic educators and students. In Slovenia, a structured curriculum approach predominates, while in Iceland creativity, learning in nature and finding solutions in an open learning environment are emphasised. Both approaches promote emotional expression, ethical awareness, and sustainable education. We highlight the challenges in teacher training and emphasise the need for training and inclusion of pedagogical practises in the arts in relation to health and well-being, while also demonstrating the importance of the arts experience for the health and well-being of both educators and preschool students.

Umetnost za dobro počutje: vpogledi v predšolsko vzgojo v Sloveniji in na Islandiji

V članku preučujemo, kako umetnostna vzgoja spodbuja dobro počutje v predšolskem izobraževanju, pri čemer primerjamo poglede slovenskih in islandskih vzgojiteljev ter študentov. V Sloveniji prevladuje strukturiran kurikularni pristop, medtem ko Islandija poudarja ustvarjalnost, učenje v naravi in iskanje rešitev v odprtem učnem okolju. Oba pristopa podpirata čustveno izražanje, etično ozaveščenost in trajnostno izobraževanje. Izpostavimo izzive v izobraževanju učiteljev in poudarimo potrebo po izobraževanju in vključevanju pedagoških praks s področja umetnosti v povezavi z zdravjem in dobrim počutjem, hkrati pa pokažemo na pomen izkušnje z umetnostjo za zdravje in dobro počutje pri vzgojiteljih in študentih predšolske vzgoje.

DOI <https://doi.org/10.18690/rei.5396>

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University of Maribor Press

Introduction

Health and well-being in early childhood education include emotional, social, and cognitive dimensions, extending beyond physical health. Preschools play a key role in fostering holistic well-being, and arts education supports this through self-expression, creativity, and social integration.

A holistic view challenges the traditional mind–body divide (Duncan, 2000; Gorham, 1994). WHO (2021, 2022) frames well-being as emerging from environmental interaction, with illness as ecological imbalance. Arts participation contributes significantly to a fulfilling life, especially in early years.

Global research supports the role of the arts in education. WHO (2019) and Fancourt and Finn (2019) show that the arts enhance creativity, emotional expression, resilience, and healthy lifestyles. UNESCO (2022) highlights the arts' role in mental health and social cohesion during crises. OECD studies (OECD, 2019; Siciliani et al., 2013; Winner et al., 2013) link arts education to critical thinking and social skills, stressing the intrinsic value of the arts. The UNESCO Framework (2024) positions the arts as essential to sustainability, justice, and lifelong learning. Links between the arts and health policy are increasingly recognised. WHO (2021, 2022) promotes cross-sector well-being strategies, and the UN 2030 Agenda highlights quality education, sustainability, and social justice areas where the arts play a key role.

In this context, the present study examines how arts and well-being are integrated into early childhood education in Slovenia and Iceland. It explores three areas: (1) arts engagement and well-being, (2) policy influence, and (3) teacher education.

The Meaning of Art for Health and Well-being

Art can be seen as a communicative experience, where the creator's inner experiences take form in a creative expression that invites response. This process involves both a personal, often vulnerable engagement with a phenomenon, and an active, emotional—sometimes socially critical—reaction from the viewer or listener. As McCarthy et al. (2004, p. 42) note, “The process of experiencing (is) parallel to the process of creating, since individual experience is immediate and private, and interpretation is an attempt to express this intense inner experience to others.”

Art communicates through personal experience, engaging creators and audiences in intense emotional and cognitive processes. Individuals explore their feelings, values and self-identity through creation and interpretation, fostering dialogue and self-

reflection. These processes are essential for health and well-being (Sullivan and McCarthy, 2007).

Art, Imagination and Existential Reflection

Dissanayake (2015) emphasizes that art enables reflection on life, existence, and our relationship with the world. It fosters introspection, helping individuals confront the unknown and situate themselves within a broader context. Art conveys meaningful life experiences through diverse expressive forms.

As a lived experience, art involves perceptual, emotional, and bodily engagement with events performed, depicted, or enacted. Kearney (2021) highlights art's unique blend of distance and proximity, enabling reflection even on trauma. Through images, stories, and expression, art offers a safe emotional space, facilitating the embodied knowledge (Merleau-Ponty, 2006) and catharsis crucial for emotional balance.

Art connects us to our own and others' experiences, nurturing empathy and alternative perspectives. Nussbaum (1997) argues that engaging with art fosters respect for others' inner worlds, which is essential to understanding shared humanity.

Through compassionate imagination, individuals identify relational patterns, overcome stereotypes, and sensitively engage with diverse human experiences. This reflection on prosocial action reminds us of our shared vulnerability and potential for similar fates. Kroflič (2007) describes compassionate imagination as awakening virtue and overcoming personal fears and insecurities. He argues that its value today lies in fostering empathy for marginalised individuals in an increasingly diverse world.

Promoting Social Sensitivity and Inclusion through the Arts

One crucial aspect of art is its role in fostering communication. Art is an authentic way to connect with others and the world, as it enables individuals to express and understand existential truths (Kroflič, 2022). These interactions vary widely in language and form, expanding the communicative space and fostering dialogue across groups. Art encourages social participation, particularly for marginalised communities. Studies show that participatory art practices, such as group projects and public interventions, enhance social capital and connectedness (Putnam, 2000), while artistic engagement fosters social skills and community belonging (Matarasso, 1997, Županić Benić, 2016).

Art can also reflect alienation, reinforcing social divides, yet it promotes dialogue and inclusion. Historically, it has often depicted stereotypes of ‘otherness’ (Kroflič, 2017), but in recent decades, many works have emphasised respect for cultural and identity differences. Vulnerable groups, including migrants and those from disadvantaged backgrounds, use art to share their experiences and gain recognition. This engagement fosters compassionate responses, acknowledging shared suffering (Nussbaum, 1997). Ultimately, art is a transformative force that helps individuals understand and reshape social realities (Freire, 2000), promoting acceptance and well-being.

The Arts, Beauty, and Personal Fulfilment

The arts stimulate curiosity, wonder and an appreciation for the diverse meanings and experiences associated with beauty. Whether as creators or observers, we are invited to explore holistically, activating our senses, emotions, and intellect in the pursuit of personal fulfilment. Aristotle (2012) describes beauty as a natural source of human enjoyment, enhancing harmony between sense, reason, and emotion.

Public health research supports this view, linking artistic engagement to positive emotions such as joy, curiosity, and contentment—key elements of well-being. As Cameron et al. (2013) observe, arts projects promote learning, self-expression, and empathy, while building self-esteem: “People develop skills and learn about things in new and varied ways through arts projects. Art is a powerful means of communication and self-expression, and participation in art builds self-esteem and empathy” (p. 54).

The Role of the Arts in Preschools

Art plays a vital role in helping preschool children’s express emotions, thoughts and beliefs as their verbal and critical thinking skills emerge. Through creative activities, they explore, collaborate, and communicate across artistic forms. Research confirms the value of early arts education, linking it to increased emotional awareness, communication, and meaning making (Hommel and Kaimal, 2024; Kroflič et al., 2010; Malaguzzi, 1998; Wright, 2015). Chapman and O’Gorman (2022) add that art fosters sustainability awareness and global citizenship, while nature-based art builds agency, confidence, and environmental connection (Walshe et al., 2020).

The arts also support prosocial and moral development. Watt and Frydenberg (2024) report fewer behavioural issues and more empathy in preschool art projects.

Case study findings from Kindergarten Vodmat show that art, within an inductive educational model, strengthens social behaviour and reduces internalisation problems (Štirn Janota, 2015; Kroflič and Smrtnik-Virtulič, 2015).

The Slovenian Cultural Enrichment of Young Children project demonstrates how music, movement, storytelling, and visual arts help children form friendships, resolve conflicts and express emotions (Kroflič, 2010; Štirn Janota and Jug, 2010). Artistic expression enhances problem-solving and emotional well-being by helping children interpret and navigate their world.

Art, Creativity, and Well-being in Slovenian and Icelandic Preschool Curricula

The Slovenian Preschool Curriculum (Bahovec et al., 1999) links the arts to health and well-being, highlighting artistic experiences as key to children's balanced development and emotional expression. However, less attention is given to the imaginative, cathartic, and socially inclusive potential of the arts.

The Icelandic National Curriculum Guide (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012) frames creativity broadly—as central to play, problem-solving, self-expression and environmental awareness—rather than focusing solely on the arts. Supplements on Creativity, Health and Well-being, and Sustainability support a play-based, exploratory approach that nurtures well-being, social competence, and sustainability.

Arts education is significant in Icelandic preschools, fostering creativity and emotional and social development (Bamford, 2009). Yet, inconsistent implementation and limited teacher training present challenges. While art is promoted as a key learning tool, more structured pedagogical support is needed.

Table 1
Comparing the Slovenian and Icelandic Approaches to Arts and Creativity

Aspect	Slovenian Curriculum	Icelandic Curriculum
Main Focus	The arts, visual arts, music, dance, and drama are treated as distinct disciplines essential to children's holistic development and aesthetic education. Each involves specific materials, techniques, and expressive forms. Art is valued both as a developmental tool and as a means of supporting identity, imagination, and emotional growth.	'Creativity and culture' are presented as an interdisciplinary field spanning all learning areas, emphasising expression, cultural appreciation, and innovation. Rather than treating the arts as separate subjects, creativity is embedded across the learning environment as central to child development.

Role in Development	The curriculum highlights that the arts play a vital role in shaping a child's identity and aesthetic sensibility, offering unique modes of learning and expression.	Creativity plays a key role in supporting play-based exploration, social competence, emotional expression, and the development of problem-solving skills.
Well-being Connection	Well-being is closely tied to mental health, and self-expression is a core principle of early childhood education, encompassing physical, emotional, social, and psychological dimensions. The curriculum highlights the need for safe, supportive environments that build self-reliance and positive peer and adult relationships.	Well-being is embedded across the curriculum and closely tied to creativity, play, sustainability, and holistic learning. The preschool environment is expected to promote safety, emotional security and meaningful connections that support children's growth and resilience.
Social Inclusion	Social inclusion is addressed indirectly through principles such as equal opportunity, respect for diversity, multiculturalism, democracy, and pluralism.	Social inclusion is explicitly promoted through collaborative creativity, shared projects, and an emphasis on environmental and social responsibility.

As shown in Table 1, the Slovenian curriculum treats the arts as structured disciplines with intrinsic educational value, whereas the Icelandic curriculum frames creativity as broad, interdisciplinary, and open-ended, emphasising social interaction, sustainability, and play-based learning across domains.

On the Role of Educators

For the arts to support preschool children's holistic development and well-being, educators must first understand and personally experience their significance (Štirn Janota, 2015; Štirn Janota and Štirn, 2022). Only then can they design arts education that enables children to engage in a dialogic artistic experience, observing, interpreting, and responding in ways that integrate emotional, social, and cognitive dimensions.

Artistic expression should offer children a deep sense of fulfilment, fostering self-knowledge and moral awareness. This goes beyond well-being as comfort, linking instead to the idea of a good life (Koopman, 2005). According to Koopman, children should engage in artistic activities that refine perception, stimulate reflection, and expose them to varied forms—allowing full, moment-to-moment participation in receiving, creating, or performing art (p. 91).

Methodology

This study examines how arts engagement relates to well-being and sustainability in early childhood education, drawing on the perspectives of preschool teachers and early education students in Iceland and Slovenia. The study has two aims: to compare how the arts are embedded in each country's national preschool curriculum, and to explore how participants perceive the links between the arts, well-being, and sustainability.

Three research questions guide the study: How are the arts positioned within the national preschool curricula of Slovenia and Iceland? How do preschool teachers and students in both countries perceive the role of the arts in relation to well-being and sustainability?

To what extent do educators and students see a need for further training in this area?

Participants and Sampling

A total of 374 individuals participated in the study, comprising both preschool teachers and early education students from Iceland and Slovenia. This distribution reflects the diversity of experience and educational background across both groups. Table 2 presents the total number of respondents from Iceland and Slovenia, categorised as either teachers or students. The data show the distribution of participants across the four groups, providing context for subsequent analyses.

Table 2
Distribution of Participants by Country and Role

	Slovenia	Iceland	Total
Teachers	30	158	188
Students	106	80	186
Total	136	238	374

Data Collection

A cross-sectional survey was used for data collection, combining both quantitative and qualitative elements. The questionnaire was distributed digitally through university mailing lists, social media platforms (including a Facebook group for Icelandic preschool teachers), and direct communication with educational institutions. The same version of the questionnaire was used in both countries, allowing for consistent comparison. Originally developed in English, the survey was

translated into Icelandic and Slovenian, and a back-translation process was applied to ensure conceptual and linguistic equivalence across all three language versions.

Survey Structure

The questionnaire had two sections. The first assessed participants' attitudes toward the arts and well-being using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Statements covered enjoyment of cultural activities, the role of the arts in understanding society, impact on mood and stress, creative expression as coping with stress, and links to physical activity.

The second section included open-ended questions on the role of the arts and well-being in early childhood curricula. Participants reflected on the arts–health connection, the need for such content in university programmes, and their personal views on the value of the arts.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics to identify patterns in responses across participant groups and national contexts. Qualitative data from the open-ended responses were subjected to thematic analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994), allowing for the identification of recurring themes and nuanced insights into how the arts are perceived in relation to health, pedagogy, and sustainability.

Ethical Considerations

All procedures in the study adhered to ethical guidelines for educational research. Participants' anonymity and confidentiality were preserved throughout the study, and all data were stored securely.

Results

Engagement with Arts and Cultural Activities

The data show clear differences in participation in artistic and cultural activities between teachers and students in Iceland and Slovenia. Slovenian teachers (49%) reported the highest engagement, reflecting how art is deeply embedded in both their work and personal lives. As one noted, "Art is not an extra but a necessity." By contrast, only 31% of Icelandic teachers reported strong engagement, though their responses emphasised informal, nature-based approaches.

One explained, “We use nature as our canvas. Children paint with water, build with found materials, and learn through play.”

University students in both countries were less engaged. Among Icelandic students, just 17% strongly agreed with the statements, suggesting art is a low priority in their training. “I enjoy art,” said one, “but it feels secondary. There’s no structured encouragement.” Slovenian students showed more uncertainty (36% neutral), owing to time constraints or cultural expectations. As one reflected, “I know art matters, but I don’t yet see how it fits into my future profession.”

These findings indicate that professional experience supports artistic engagement, while students often lack opportunities or motivation to participate.

Art as a Tool for Emotional Expression and Stress Management

Half the Slovenian teachers (49%) strongly agreed that art supports emotional processing, underscoring its structured role in both self-reflection and pedagogy. As one teacher noted, “Art provides relief from emotional distress for both educators and children. It allows us to express what words sometimes cannot.”

Icelandic teachers (35%) also agreed with integrating the arts into their personal and professional well-being. One noted, “I turn to painting when I need to unwind. It helps me reconnect with myself.”

Students had a lower agreement rate, with Icelandic students (34%) being the most neutral, indicating that many have not yet developed a conscious connection between art and emotional well-being. One student admitted, “I see art as entertainment rather than a tool for well-being. Maybe, that will change with experience.”

Art as a Tool for Coping with Stress

Teachers and students in both countries differed notably in how they viewed art as a means of emotional expression. While most teachers recognised its value in processing emotions, students were less certain.

Slovenian teachers (46%) showed the strongest agreement that art supports stress management, suggesting its role as an established form of self-care. “After a challenging day, I turn to music and drawing, it helps me focus,” one shared.

Icelandic teachers (38%) also used art to manage stress, though often in more informal ways. As one explained, “There’s an intuitive link between creativity and stress relief, but it’s not something we explicitly teach.”

Students were less confident. Among Slovenian students, 30% were neutral, reflecting limited experience with art as a coping tool. One noted, “I never considered using art this way. Maybe, I should try.” In contrast, 29% of Icelandic students reported higher engagement, linked to the cultural focus on creative expression in early childhood settings.

Need for Additional Training in Art and Well-being

Both teachers and students in Iceland and Slovenia expressed a strong interest in further training related to art and well-being. However, their priorities varied by group and country. Table 3 presents the percentage of participants in each group who agreed (selected ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’) that they would benefit from additional training in specific areas of arts-based education.

Table 3

Need for Additional Training in Art and Well-being

Training Needed	Icelandic Teachers (%)	Slovenian Teachers (%)	Icelandic Students (%)	Slovenian Students (%)
Using art as a teaching tool	67%	72%	85%	88%
Training in specific art techniques	52%	60%	69%	77%
Movement-based creative training	45%	58%	64%	68%

Overall, students reported the greatest need for training, with 88% of Slovenian students and 85% of Icelandic students indicating a desire to learn more about integrating art into educational practice. As one Slovenian student reflected, “We learn about art but don’t learn how to use it effectively in education. That needs to change.”

Summary of Main Differences

To synthesise the key findings, Table 4 presents a comparative overview of engagement levels, perceptions of art’s role in well-being, and the demand for further training across all respondent groups.

Table 4*Summary of Main Differences in Art Engagement and Perceptions*

Category	Icelandic Teachers	Slovenian Teachers	Icelandic Students	Slovenian Students
Engagement with art	Informal use of art, often linked to outdoor play and nature-based experiences; spontaneous and child-led	Formal and structured use of art, typically teacher-led with planned goals and outcomes	Lowest engagement: art is seldom used in daily routines	Moderate engagement; art present but with limited variation
Art as a tool for emotional expression and coping with distress	Moderate agreement (35%); some value art for emotional processing	Highest agreement (49%); art seen as essential for emotional support	High neutrality (34%); uncertainty about using art for coping	Moderate engagement; mixed views on emotional value
Art for coping with stress	38% reported moderate agreement; art is seen as helpful but used inconsistently	46% showed strong agreement; art clearly viewed as beneficial	29% indicated engagement, but not widespread	30% remained neutral; many unsure of the connection
Need for training	Focus on advanced, methodologically oriented training	Interest in structured, curriculum-linked programmes	High demand for basic training and tools (85%)	Strong demand for deeper integration and skills development (88%)

These findings reveal notable differences between teachers and students in both countries regarding their engagement with and understanding of the arts in relation to well-being and education. Teachers, particularly in Slovenia, consistently reported higher levels of involvement and a stronger appreciation of art's benefits. In contrast, students—especially those in Iceland—expressed greater uncertainty and lower levels of engagement. Despite these differences, all groups highlighted the need for additional training. While students called for more foundational guidance, teachers sought more advanced, practice-oriented approaches.

Discussion

Art plays a critical role in early childhood education, supporting well-being, social connection, and ethical development. While Slovenia and Iceland demonstrate different approaches—structured arts education versus informal, nature-based creativity—both highlight the importance of artistic engagement.

The Role of Art in Early Childhood Well-being and Education

This study underscores the vital role of the arts in promoting well-being, resilience, and social connectedness in early childhood education. The findings align with international frameworks (WHO, UNESCO, OECD), illustrating how artistic engagement can support emotional regulation, interpersonal relationships, and stress management in young children.

Importantly, the study reveals clear cross-national differences in how the arts are integrated into early childhood settings, shaped by each country's unique educational traditions, cultural norms, and historical practices. These insights carry significant implications for teacher education and pedagogy, highlighting the importance of culturally responsive approaches when developing and implementing arts-based practices.

Art as a Path to Well-being

Art is essential for self-expression and meaning making (Dissanayake, 2000; McCarthy et al., 2004; Nussbaum, 1997). Our survey respondents acknowledged its role in emotional regulation, self-expression, and social interaction, though students expressed less confidence in these links than experienced teachers did, suggesting that understanding deepens with practice.

Engaging with art fosters self-reflection and emotional exploration (Merleau-Ponty, 2006; Nussbaum, 1997), allowing individuals to confront complexities and explore ethical questions (Kroflič, 2010). Pedagogical approaches vary: Slovenian teachers implement structured, planned artistic activities, whereas Icelandic teachers favour informal, nature-based creativity. These differences prompt discussion on the significance of deep artistic engagement and its integration into teacher education.

Intercultural Approaches to the Arts in Education

Slovenian preschool teachers integrate art as a structured curricular component, while Icelandic teachers adopt a more open-ended, child-led approach, often inspired by outdoor environments. These contrasting methods reflect broader educational philosophies—Slovenia emphasizes structured arts education, while Iceland prioritizes experiential learning (Bamford, 2009). Slovenia's approach aligns with UNESCO's (2024) Framework for Cultural and Arts Education, promoting accessibility and lifelong artistic learning. In contrast, Iceland's process-oriented approach connects with research on embodied creativity, which emphasizes learning

through the body, movement, and sensory engagement as integral to artistic exploration (Vecchi, 2010). Creativity is thus deeply rooted in physical interaction with materials, space, and others. A balanced integration of structured and informal arts engagement could enhance teacher training and deepen both children's and students' involvement.

Slovenia's 2025 curriculum reform maintains art as a distinct domain, emphasizing artistic expression and participation, while incorporating play and the arts to foster well-being, social competence, and emotional expression.

The Arts as a Social and Ethical Practice

Beyond individual well-being, the arts enhance social connection and ethical awareness. Studies indicate that artistic engagement fosters empathy, prosocial behaviours, and a sense of belonging (Matarasso, 1997; Nussbaum, 1997; Putnam, 2000, Županić Benić, 2016). Slovenian teachers who engaged in museum visits, performances and collaborative art projects emphasised these social dimensions.

In Iceland, arts integration occurs through storytelling, movement, and play-based interactions, reinforcing research that links process-oriented art with agency and social cohesion (Walshe et al., 2020). While shaped by different cultural traditions, both the Icelandic and Slovenian contexts emphasise the arts as central to fostering ethical sensibilities, relational awareness, and a sense of community in early childhood education.

Challenges in Teacher Training

Many teachers and students report limited training in arts-based pedagogy, despite acknowledging its benefits. Students, in particular, express uncertainty about the link between the arts and well-being, revealing gaps in teacher education (UNESCO, 2024). Effective engagement requires direct, authentic experiences with the arts—for students, educators, and children alike (Štirn Janota, 2015).

Teacher preparation should integrate both learning about the arts and learning through them, including first-person artistic encounters (Kroflič, 2022; Štirn Janota and Štirn, 2024), and nature-based approaches that emphasise child participation. As Koopman (2005) argues, the value of art lies in active engagement rather than passive evaluation. Holistic, experiential models could better prepare educators for arts-based and cultural pedagogy.

Adapting teacher training to national contexts would further enhance its impact. In Iceland, more structured arts training could raise awareness of its role in well-being.

Slovenia's current reforms offer an opportunity to embed interdisciplinary modules linking art, health, and well-being into teacher education, particularly in early childhood programs.

The Arts, Sustainability and Social Justice

This study contributes to discussions on the role of arts education in sustainability and social justice. UNESCO (2024) emphasises the importance of integrating the arts into sustainability initiatives, recognising their capacity to foster critical thinking on social and environmental issues. Participants in our study associated artistic engagement with emotional resilience, social belonging, and ethical awareness; however, student feedback suggests that teacher education could further emphasise the arts' role in sustainability.

Conclusion

This study reaffirms the essential role of the arts in well-being, meaning making, and social cohesion in preschool education. Strengthening arts education in teacher training is crucial to ensure that future educators recognize its potential for fostering well-being, sustainability, and social justice.

Future research should explore how different pedagogical approaches to the arts, ranging from structured, curriculum-based models to open-ended, exploratory practices, impact children's development. It should also examine whether combining these approaches enhances well-being and participation for both educators and children. While international frameworks emphasize the importance of linking art, mental health, and sustainability holistically, most research has focused on school-aged children, leaving a gap in understanding these connections in early childhood education.

To fully realize the benefits of arts education, it must be embedded from the earliest years. Providing educators with systemic opportunities to engage with the arts and receive training in mental health, social-emotional competences, and pedagogical applications of art is essential. Our findings highlight this as a critical area for development.

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