ENHANCING TEACHER COMPETENCE IN MULTICULTURAL CLASSROOMS

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Abstract: This article explores the pivotal role of intercultural competence and readiness in teachers operating within multicultural school contexts. It delves into how a teacher's personal history, including their family background, educational journey, and encounters with diverse cultures, significantly influences their ability to effectively engage with and teach students from a variety of cultural backgrounds. Highlighting the importance of comprehensive teacher education programs, the discussion emphasizes the need for curricula that not only impart knowledge of diverse cultures but also foster the essential skills and attitudes for promoting intercultural understanding, empathy, and respect in the classroom. The article argues that fostering such competencies is crucial for creating inclusive educational environments that recognize and value cultural diversity, thereby enhancing the learning experience for all students and preparing them for a globally interconnected world.

Keywords: Intercultural Competence, Multicultural Education, Teacher Readiness

ПОВИШАВАНЕ НА КОМПЕТЕНТНОСТТА НА УЧИТЕЛИТЕ В МУЛТИКУЛТУРНИ КЛАСНИ СТАИ

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Резюме: Статията разглежда ключовата роля на междукултурната компетентност и готовност при учителите, работещи в мултикултурна училищна среда. Тя се впуска в подробности за това как личната история на учителя, включително семейното му минало, образователният му път и срещите му с различни култури, оказва значително влияние върху способността му да общува ефективно и да преподава на ученици от различни културни среди. Подчертавайки важността на всеобхватните програми за обучение на учители, дискусията акцентира върху необходимостта от учебни програми, които не само предават знания за различни култури, но и развиват основните умения и нагласи

за насърчаване на междукултурното разбирателство, емпатията и уважението в класната стая. Насърчаването на такива компетенции е от решаващо значение за създаването на приобщаваща образователна среда, в които се признава и цени културното многообразие, като по този начин се подобрява учебният опит на всички ученици и те се подготвят за един глобално взаимосвързан свят.

Ключови думи: междукултурна компетентност, мултикултурно образование, подготовка на учителите

INTRODUCTION

The role of a teacher extends beyond the simple transmission of knowledge; it embodies a dynamic and evolving responsibility shaped by societal expectations, legal frameworks, and the diverse needs of students. Traditionally, a teacher's function has been defined by structured behaviors and prescribed duties within educational institutions. However, as societies become increasingly multicultural, the expectations placed upon educators have expanded significantly, requiring them to adopt new pedagogical approaches and cultural competencies to effectively engage with diverse student populations. (Konstantinou, 2015).

In today's globalized world, classrooms are microcosms of cultural diversity, reflecting the complexities of contemporary societies. Teachers are no longer just conveyors of subject matter; they are facilitators of inclusive learning environments that nurture intercultural understanding, empathy, and respect. This shift demands that educators possess not only a deep knowledge of their subject areas but also the skills and attitudes necessary to accommodate and celebrate cultural differences (Fykaris, 2014). An effective educator in a multicultural setting is one who acknowledges and integrates the varied cultural, national, and religious backgrounds of students into their teaching practices. By fostering an environment of inclusivity, educators can mitigate academic disparities, prevent social marginalization, and encourage all students to reach their full potential. This requires a proactive approach—one that challenges biases, promotes equity, and instills democratic values within the classroom. To meet the demands of increasingly diverse educational landscapes, teachers must develop intercultural competence and readiness (Konstantinou, 2015). This entails a commitment to continuous self-reflection, professional development, and innovative teaching methodologies that respond to the unique needs of all learners. Interculturally competent educators do not merely adapt to diversity; they leverage it as a strength, creating enriching educational experiences that prepare students for active participation in an interconnected world.

Adapting to the unique challenges of diverse educational landscapes, teachers are now tasked with meeting contemporary sociocultural and educational demands.

This shift necessitates interculturally competent educators who can adeptly navigate the complexities of varied student populations (Hagan & McGlynn, 2004). Their pivotal goal is to foster inclusive educational experiences, ensuring every student, irrespective of their background, is integrated into the educational and societal framework, thereby enhancing their learning outcomes. The educator's attitudes, beliefs, and methodologies are critical in this endeavor (Banks, 2014).

An effective educator in a multicultural setting is one who addresses the individual needs of all students, thereby circumventing academic failure and social marginalization. Such educators must acknowledge and incorporate the diverse cultural, national, and religious backgrounds of their students into their teaching methodologies, leveraging these unique attributes to enrich the learning experience. They are expected to set high standards for all students, encouraging them to realize their full potential, while also being mindful of the diverse needs and perspectives that students bring to the classroom. This includes proactively addressing and preventing discriminatory practices and fostering a school environment characterized by mutual respect and effective communication. The teacher's role extends to critically assessing the curriculum and fostering an educational atmosphere that transcends the limitations imposed by conventional educational frameworks, thus preparing students for a multicultural world. This involves a commitment to reflective practice, innovative pedagogy, and ongoing professional growth, ensuring that teaching methods are continually refined and responsive to the diverse needs of the student body (Debbağ & Fidan, 2020; Kesidou, 2008). Effective educators are also aware of the potential for bias in disciplinary practices and strive to cultivate a learning environment where students are encouraged to engage with diverse forms of knowledge and communication (Thompson, 2013).

To realize these objectives, it's crucial for educators to challenge their own biases and foster democratic values and a positive outlook towards diversity. Engaging in self-reflection to enhance one's value system is deemed essential for ensuring that all students have access to equal educational opportunities (Sharma, 2005).

Moreover, a teacher's effectiveness in a culturally diverse classroom hinges not just on their intercultural attitudes and perceptions but also on their mastery of relevant theoretical knowledge and their proficiency in applying this knowledge practically. Effective teaching in ethnically and culturally mixed classrooms requires educators to possess both intercultural competence and readiness, which are indispensable for fulfilling the aims of intercultural education (Papachristos, 2010).

INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE AND READINESS OF EDUCATORS

Educating within the diverse context of a multicultural school necessitates teachers having a substantial command over methods and practices for addressing

diversity effectively. This requires them to embrace an inclusive and adaptable approach to education, catering to the varied needs of every student in the classroom (Coelho, 2007). Yet, for educators to effectively meet these diverse needs, it's essential they develop both intercultural competence and readiness (Miliou, 2013).

There exists a broad theoretical and conceptual framework surrounding these notions, often leading to confusion due to the perceived overlap or conflation of the two terms. This ambiguity largely stems from the cultural specificity of these concepts, which are shaped by the educational objectives and the intercultural education frameworks unique to each country (Barros, 2008).

In both Greek and global academic discourse, the term "adequacy" is broadly interpreted, thereby broadening its definition and sometimes merging it with other distinct concepts, which can lead to misunderstandings or a distorted view of reality. "Adequacy" can imply two main things: one being the quantitative sufficiency of resources, like food, and the other being the sufficiency related to an individual's capabilities, where qualitative attributes are also considered, such as knowledge proficiency. Within the educational sphere, this term is associated with teachers' pedagogical competence, as defined by the Ministry of Education. It pertains to the essential skills and knowledge educators must possess for effective teaching, validated through a formal certification that endorses their qualification to teach a specific subject legally in the educational system (Georgoyiannis, 2009).

In the educational discourse, "intercultural competence" or "intercultural skill," was first introduced in American academic discussions during the 1960s (Kesidou & Papadopoulou, 2008). This term has since been intertwined with a variety of related but distinct concepts such as cultural sensitivity, culturally sensitive teaching, culturally relevant pedagogy, intercultural adaptation, intercultural sensitivity, cultural intelligence, cultural communication, and intercultural awareness. These variations often reflect the diverse terminologies and emphases placed on the concept in different national contexts (Romijn, Slot & Leseman, 2021). Intercultural competence in educators signifies their formal education and training in intercultural matters, encompassing theoretical, scientific, and practical aspects of teaching in diverse cultural settings.

Koehn and Rosenau (2002) expanded on this concept, detailing four dimensions of intercultural competence:

- Analytical competence involves understanding and appreciating the beliefs, values, practices, and traditions of diverse groups, aiming for effective intercultural interactions.
- Emotional competence is about embracing and respecting diversity, fostering positive intercultural exchanges, and managing diverse identities.
- Creative competence focuses on collaborative problem-solving that leverages diverse cultural perspectives to find universally acceptable solutions.

- Behavioral competence includes mastering effective intercultural communication skills, such as understanding and appropriately using languages, recognizing non-verbal intercultural cues, deciphering varied cultural messages, and conducting meaningful dialogues while preventing miscommunications.

An interculturally competent educator is therefore one who can effectively navigate and contribute positively to intercultural educational and social environments. This involves developing a deep socio-cultural understanding, embracing the diversity of students, and leveraging this diversity as a pedagogical tool. Such educators are skilled in crafting educational experiences that build on and extend students' existing knowledge bases, advocating for educational adaptations to meet the evolving needs of students, addressing discriminatory practices proactively, and engaging closely with students and their families to enrich their understanding of diverse cultural backgrounds (Aslanidou & Derri, 2013; Deardorff, 2011).

INTERCULTURAL READINESS OF EDUCATORS

Discussions around intercultural preparedness emphasize several key aspects: integrating intercultural perspectives into educational content, identifying and addressing cognitive biases that foster prejudice and discrimination, employing strategies and pedagogical models to mitigate such biases, and engaging in fair educational practices that enhance the achievements and experiences of success for students from immigrant backgrounds. The importance of a flexible educational structure that supports and validates the involvement of these students in school life is also highlighted. Specifically, a teacher who is ready for intercultural engagement is seen as someone who (Baros, 2008):

- Acknowledges the capacity of individuals to ascribe meanings to cultural symbols and interpret social realities in ways that might diverge from the normative narratives of their original cultural settings.
- Analyzes personal behavioral patterns for their cultural underpinnings, while being open to recognizing both deviations from and alignments with established cultural norms.
- Utilizes the challenges and ambiguities encountered in cross-cultural communication as opportunities for critical reflection on both his own and his students' culturally influenced belief systems.
- Is skilled in dismantling conventional thought, interpretation, and behavioral patterns that conform to cultural stereotypes, and in reevaluating them from the standpoint of cultural alterity.
- Reflects on his potential role in generating conflicts due to his adherence to rigid cultural behaviors.
- Demonstrates adaptability in using the scope offered by educational policies to foster solutions that respect the needs of all involved in the educational context.

- Recognizes the adverse effects of overlooking cultural distinctions and shared histories, while also understanding the limits of self-assessment, thus valuing collaborative professional reflections to navigate complex educational scenarios.

These considerations outline distinct yet interconnected competencies essential for educators in multicultural settings, aiming to create inclusive environments that embrace a diverse student body. Effective teaching in such contexts requires both intercultural competence and readiness, underpinned by intercultural sensitivity — the capacity to perceive, appreciate, and adapt to cultural differences. This implies a genuine interest in other cultures, an acute awareness of cultural distinctions, and a readiness to adjust one's own behaviors in a manner that respects diverse cultural backgrounds (Georgiannis, 2009).

Research of Stunell (2021) refers that both teachers and teacher educators have concerns about the language and cultural diversity that is becoming more and more prevalent in European schools. This specific study was conducted on students and teachers in schools in France, exploring their readiness to face the challenges of the multicultural classroom. Their perspectives on the linguistic and cultural diversity of their classes, as well as their ability to do more than just "manage" the situation, are examined. The findings imply that the rich opportunities to foster positive attitudes toward inclusion and interculturality provided by the presence of multilingual and multicultural children in primary school classrooms will continue to be disregarded in the absence of significant changes in approach at the levels of teacher education, school administration, and within schools themselves.

Also, Huda & Bakar (2024) aimed to analyze interracial teachers' everyday interactions in the classroom to gain a critical understanding of the strategic approach of culturally responsive and communicative teaching (CRCT). Ten interracial teachers were interviewed in order to gather the empirical data. To get a lot of information from the interviews, a theme approach was used for the analysis. The results demonstrate that efforts to fully understand CRCT are realized through regular interaction in a multicultural school setting, which leads to the internalization of responsive awareness regarding social engagement in global learning, the construction of emotional and social development on cultural awareness, and the embedding of self-awareness of cultural competence in a multicultural classroom.

Besides, in today's globalized world, culturally responsive and communicative teaching serves as a critical approach to ensuring that students from all backgrounds feel valued, understood, and engaged in the learning process. Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is an educational framework that acknowledges and incorporates students' cultural identities into the teaching and learning process (Markey et al., 2021). Developed as a response to the increasing diversity in education, CRT emphasizes the importance of recognizing students' unique

THEORETICAL AND APPLIED RESEARCH

ТЕОРЕТИЧНИ И ПРИЛОЖНИ ИЗСЛЕДВАНИЯ

cultural backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives as valuable assets rather than barriers to learning. This approach goes beyond merely acknowledging diversity; it actively integrates cultural knowledge, traditions, and communication styles into the curriculum and instructional practices. In addition to cultural responsiveness, communicative teaching plays a vital role in fostering integration in multicultural settings (Berlian & Huda, 2022). Effective communication is the foundation of a successful learning environment, especially in classrooms where students may have different linguistic abilities and communication styles. Communicative teaching emphasizes interaction, dialogue, and meaningful exchanges between students and teachers, helping to bridge cultural and linguistic gaps (Lau & Shea, 2024).

At its core, culturally responsive teaching relies on three fundamental principles:

Cultural Awareness – Educators must develop a deep understanding of their own cultural perspectives and biases while also striving to learn about the cultural backgrounds of their students. Self-reflection is essential in dismantling stereotypes and fostering an inclusive mindset.

Student-Centered Pedagogy – Instruction should be designed to reflect students' lived experiences, languages, and values. This may include incorporating diverse literature, examples, and teaching materials that resonate with students' identities.

Inclusive and Equitable Teaching Methods – Teaching strategies should promote active participation and engagement for all students, ensuring that marginalized voices are heard and validated. This may involve differentiated instruction, cooperative learning, and the use of multilingual resources (Berlian & Huda, 2022).

In addition, according to Chahar Mahali & Sevigny (2022), many teachers lack the courage to accommodate cultural diversity and have little cross-cultural awareness when they first walk into the classroom. Teachers must therefore possess culturally responsive teaching self-efficacy (CRTSE) in order to instruct a diverse group of students. The findings of the study on the variables influencing instructors' self-efficacy in instructing diverse students have been conflicting. In the same research Tests of political orientation, CRTSE, cross-cultural experiences, and teacher burnout were completed by 110 preservice teachers from a medium-sized public Canadian university. Lower levels of emotional exhaustion, a major component of burnout syndrome, and more frequent cross-cultural encounters during childhood and adolescence were associated with higher levels of preservice teachers' CRTSE.

INTERCULTURAL DIMENSION IN TEACHER TRAINING

The intercultural aspect of teacher education emphasizes the transformation of an educator's perspective, a process intricately tied to both educational and life experiences accumulated over time. Teacher training encompasses initial and continuous education, focusing on three main areas: cognitive, emotional,

and pedagogical skill development. The cognitive aspect involves acquiring knowledge through formal education. Educators are encouraged to learn about the life circumstances of immigrant communities, comprehend their challenges, and explore effective multicultural management strategies, essentially acclimating to societal cultural diversity.

Emotionally, training programs should enhance awareness of multicultural issues, encourage the embrace of diversity, and foster the rejection of discriminatory beliefs while equipping teachers to handle cultural conflicts. Pedagogically, the training aims to equip teachers with the flexibility and adaptability necessary to acknowledge and respect the varied cultural, linguistic, and social backgrounds of their students. This includes tailoring teaching materials and approaches to suit a multicultural classroom setting (DeJaeghere & Cao, 2009).

Additionally, a scholarly perspective suggests that teacher training for multicultural settings should integrate three foundational elements: a theoretical framework, an understanding of linguistic and cultural diversity, and practical experience (Sharma, 2005).

The literature suggests that initial university education for prospective teachers, focusing on intercultural education, predominantly consists of pedagogical and teacher training courses. However, the development of such programs is often hindered by the evolving nature of Intercultural Pedagogy, a lack of comprehensive educational policies on multiculturalism, and the unclear definition of the competencies required for managing multicultural educational settings (Liakopoulou, 2007).

This foundational education should be supplemented with continuous training, addressing both the intra-school context—emphasizing collaborative learning within the school community—and the inter-school context, involving training provided by external organizations. The effectiveness of these programs may vary based on whether they are delivered in-person or online, their format (blended learning that combines theoretical training with practical application), the training approach (directive or facilitative), and the level of learner autonomy (Papanaoum, 2014).

Nonetheless, it is emphasized that theoretical knowledge alone is insufficient without practical experience. Teachers need hands-on training to effectively navigate real-world multicultural situations, manage conflicts, and collaborate with peers, thereby achieving genuine intercultural competence and readiness (Leeman & Ledoux, 2003).

Choi & Mao (2021) refers that as classroom diversity grows, educators are expected to be able to effectively instruct pupils in multicultural settings. Globally, professional development in multicultural education (PDME) has been adopted to give educators the tools they need to effectively address the educational demands of a varied student body. The Teaching and Learning International Survey 2018 data from 47 nations is used in this study to demonstrate how PDME supports teachers' growth in self-efficacy in multicultural classrooms. The same study discovered that the positive association between PDME and TSMC

is strengthened by instructor classroom autonomy. This study has implications for teacher learning and development, multicultural education, and school organization, acknowledging that diversity in schools will only grow.

In addition, Koirala (2021) focuses on the methods used by a Nepalese public secondary level science teacher who was specifically chosen to teach science in a culturally diverse classroom. It emphasizes the dynamic, innovative, cooperative, and inclusive nature of science instruction in this science teacher's classroom. Also, the paper describes how multicultural science knowledge can be developed and expanded in the educational setting. In addition to observations of his science teaching activities in the classroom that were recorded in a diary, a 50-minute in-depth interview was conducted and transcribed. The researcher transcribed and coded classroom observation notes and interview transcriptions into English. After analyzing all the data, it was determined that the secondary science teacher's efforts were not culturally relevant since they were impacted by institutional, pedagogical, and environmental issues. In a classroom with a diverse student body, a strong focus on the national scientific curriculum is ruining the teaching methods of the teachers.

INFLUENCES OF TEACHERS' PERSONAL HISTORIES ON THEIR INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

The concept of biography in this context refers to the cumulative experiences and influences throughout an individual's life that shape their personality, perspectives, attitudes, and beliefs. Central to these influences are the experiences stemming from one's family background and educational journey, both as a student and a professional. Family plays a crucial role initially, imparting ethno-cultural values and attitudes through upbringing and the transmission of specific cultural values and norms. Literature suggests that a person's cultural background—including values, beliefs, traditions, and social norms—profoundly shapes their attitudes towards diversity. This background is crucial for understanding an individual's responses to cultural differences (Karacabey, Ozdere & Bozkus, 2019). Teachers from diverse ethno-cultural backgrounds tend to exhibit greater intercultural sensitivity and are often more adept at navigating cultural differences in educational settings (Sotiropoulou, 2016). Research by He (2013) highlights that teachers with immigrant experiences or who have studied abroad demonstrate enhanced empathy and effectiveness in teaching diverse student populations.

Moreover, educational experiences are pivotal in developing a teacher's positive attitudes towards diversity and their intercultural competence and preparedness, essential for implementing intercultural education effectively (Papachristos, 2010). Literature supports the notion that teacher education programs fostering exposure to diverse cultures, promoting democratic values, equality, and respect, can empower teachers to recognize and address institutional racism and contribute

to building interculturally enriched learning environments (Sotiropoulou, 2016). Engaging with diverse groups and experiencing multicultural settings, including travel, are highlighted as transformative experiences that cultivate empathy and a positive orientation towards diversity (Beutel & Tangen, 2018).

CONCLUSION

The intercultural competence and readiness of teachers are pivotal for the effective functioning of multicultural school environments. The synthesis of a teacher's personal and professional experiences, including their upbringing, education, and exposure to diverse cultures, fundamentally shapes their ability to engage with and educate students from varied backgrounds. The literature underscores the significance of a teacher's ethno-cultural background and educational experiences in cultivating a nuanced understanding of multiculturalism, empathy towards students' diverse experiences, and the ability to implement intercultural education principles. Teachers who possess a rich background of diverse cultural experiences or who have actively engaged with different cultures through education or personal experiences are often more adept at fostering inclusive, empathetic, and understanding educational environments.

Furthermore, the necessity for targeted educational programs that enhance teachers' intercultural competencies is evident. Such programs should not only focus on imparting knowledge about diverse cultures but also on developing teachers' skills in recognizing and combating institutional biases and promoting equity within the classroom. The development of intercultural competence and readiness involves a continuous process of learning, reflection, and application, enabling teachers to effectively navigate the complexities of multicultural classrooms. Ultimately, equipping teachers with the necessary intercultural skills is not just about improving educational outcomes but also about fostering a school culture that respects, celebrates, and incorporates the richness of diverse cultural backgrounds, thus preparing students to thrive in a globally interconnected world.

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