Teachers' Attitudes Towards Desirable Intercultural Competences Necessary for Working in Multicultural Classrooms

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Abstract—Teachers' intercultural competence is a key factor in the consistent implementation of intercultural principles in teaching practice. The study conducted among primary school teachers in North Macedonia aimed to examine the effect of sociocultural factors on the perception of desirable intercultural competencies for working in multicultural classrooms. 217 primary school teachers from multiethnic regions in North Macedonia participated in the study. The Scale for Assessing Desirable Intercultural Competences (SADIC) was used to collect data. Descriptive statistical procedures were employed in data processing to determine descriptive characteristics, and the comparison of respondents' attitudes was conducted using the t-test and ANOVA. Additionally, a post hoc test (Scheffe's test) was performed to determine the significance of the differences. The results showed a significant effect of sociocultural factors on the perception of desirable intercultural competencies. These perceptions range from teamwork skills to motivation for continuous learning and education, non-violent conflict resolution skills, a critical approach to societal events, openness to different cultures, and the ability to see problems from the perspective of culturally different students. This research forms a potential basis for considering the approach to designing a school that is open to diversity.

Keywords: teacher, intercultural competencies, multicultural classrooms, diversity

1. INTRODUCTION

Intercultural competence is the ability to effectively interact, communicate, and engage with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, demonstrating an understanding and appreciation of different cultural perspectives, values, and behaviors. It is a range of cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills that lead to effective and appropriate communication with people of other cultures (Deardorff, 2006). Similarly, according to Bennett and Bennett (2004) "intercultural competence is the ability to communicate effectively in cross-cultural situations and to relate appropriately in a variety of cultural contexts" (p. 149). In other words "intercultural competence may be defined as complex abilities that are required to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself" (Fantini, 2009, p. 458). For Wiseman (1995) intercultural competence is actually the intercultural communication competence (ICC). It is the aptitude to steer and work out across cultural boundaries, displaying cultural knowledge, self-awareness, and the ability to adapt one's behavior and communication style in culturally pertinent ways.

Numerous studies (Deardorff, 2006; Cushner, 2007; DeJaeghere, & Cao, 2009; Caingcoy et al., 2022; Liu, 2022) emphasize the critical role that teachers' intercultural competence plays in handling multicultural classrooms. Teachers with a high level of intercultural competence are better prepared to label and address students' diverse backgrounds, beliefs, and practices (Polat & Ogay Barka, 2014). They can effectively
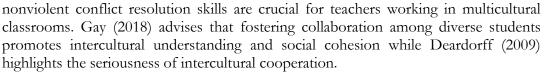
manage cultural differences, mitigate bias, and initiate purposeful intercultural dialogue and competition among students. In the context of North Macedonia, a country characterized by its cultural diversity, it is crucial to examine the teachers' intercultural competence. Research suggests that several factors influence teachers' intercultural competence including pre-service and in-service teacher education programs, professional development opportunities, intercultural experiences, and the educational policies and curriculum (Popova-Koskarova, 2015; Adili, Petrovska & Xhambazi, 2022; Sivevska, 2008). Understanding these factors is critical for scheming functional interventions and strategies to upgrade teachers' intercultural competence.

Research uncovers various challenges that North Macedonian teachers encounter as they strive to enhance their intercultural competence (Adili, 2022; Petrovska, & Adili, 2020; Adili, Petrovska & Xhambazi, 2022). These challenges include limited training opportunities, lack of teaching resources, language barriers, and stereotypes maintained by societal norms. Studies highlight the impact of intercultural education and teachers' intercultural competence on student outcomes (Golub, 2014; Deardorff, 2006; Zirkel, 2008; Okoye-Johnson, 2011). Teachers with elevated levels of intercultural competence play a pivotal role in fostering enhanced academic performance, heightened cultural awareness, diminished prejudice, and increased tolerance and sensitivity to discrimination among students (Golub, 2014). Moreover, teachers possessing intercultural competence play an essential role in equipping students to excel in an interconnected global environment (Hernández-Bravo, Cardona-Moltó & Hernández-Bravo, 2017). Increasing the intercultural competence of teachers is essential for the promotion of inclusive education and intercultural understanding in North Macedonia. It highlights the importance of this competence, identifies influencing factors and challenges, and presents promising practices and strategies.

1.1. Literature Review

In today's multicultural educational settings, the role of teachers is far-reaching in creating comprehensive and successful learning environments. To direct the difficulties of multicultural classrooms effectively, teachers must possess intercultural competencies. Many authors stress the significance of teachers' cultural awareness and sensitivity as basic intercultural competencies. Byram (2021) suggests that teachers need to understand their own cultural values and biases to effectively participate in with diverse student populations. Additionally, Bennett (1998) weighs the importance of developing cultural empathy and interest. Effective communication and language skills are crucial for teachers in multicultural classrooms. Byram (1997) argues that teachers must be skilled in adapting their communication styles to accommodate students with diverse linguistic backgrounds. Similarly, Chen and Starosta (2018) highlight the importance of developing intercultural communication competence. Respect and teamwork skills are essential competences for teachers working in multicultural classrooms. Villegas and Lucas (2007) emphasize the importance of teachers developing empathy towards culturally different students, valuing their perspectives, and creating a supportive educational setting. Banks and McGee Banks (2010) highlight the importance of respecting students' cultural identities and fostering confident teacher-student relationships. Teachers need to be adaptable and flexible in their teaching approaches to meet the diverse learning needs of students from various cultures. Sleeter (2011) insists that teachers must be willing to modify instructional materials, incorporate culturally relevant content, and employ genuine teaching methods. Bennett (2008) emphasizes the urgency of adaptive problem-solving in culturally diverse contexts. Collaboration and

nonviolent conflict resolution skills are crucial for teachers working in multicultural classrooms. Gay (2018) advises that fostering collaboration among diverse students promotes intercultural understanding and social cohesion while Deardorff (2009) highlights the seriousness of intercultural cooperation.

Research on intercultural competence have intensified, especially after the year 2000 (Hammer, Bennett & Wiseman, 2003; Olson & Kroeger, 2001; Penbek, Şahin & Cerit, 2012; Rissanen, Kuusisto & Kuusisto, 2016). In general, these studies can be divided into three groups. The first group consists of research that investigates the intercultural competence of teachers and students (Chen & Starosta, 2000; Olson & Kroeger, 2001; Liu, 2022; Caingcoy et al., 2022). The second group includes studies that examine the level of intercultural competence among teachers and students (Rissanen, Kuusisto & Kuusisto, 2016; Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen, & Hubbard, 2006; Polat & Ogay Barka, 2014; Penbek, Şahin & Cerit, 2012). The third group focuses on research that explores the attitudes of teachers and students towards the desired competencies of teachers in intercultural education (DeJaeghere & Cao, 2009; Fantini, 2009; Bedeković, 2015; Cushner, 2007).

In North Macedonia, research in the field of intercultural education have been focused on investigating the implementation approaches of intercultural education (Popova-Koskarova, 2015; Adili, Petrovska & Xhambazi, 2022; Sivevska, 2008) and the level of intercultural competence among teachers (Adili & Xhambazi, 2021; Adili, Petrovska, & Xhambazi, 2022; Petrovska & Adili, 2020). This research seeks to examine the effect of sociocultural factors on the perception of desirable intercultural competencies for working in culturally plural classrooms, starting from the hypothesis that there is a statistically significant correlation between the perception of desirable intercultural competencies necessary for working in culturally plural classrooms and the sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents (gender, cultural school structure, professional seniority, and the education level).

2. METHODS

2.1 Participants

The study involved 217 participants who were primary school teachers from multiethnic regions. Out of the participants, 59 were male and 158 were female. The teaching experience of the participants varied, with 152 teachers having less than 20 years of experience and 65 teachers having over 20 years of experience. In terms of educational qualifications, 186 teachers held a bachelor's degree, 23 teachers held a master's degree, and eight teachers held PhDs. In the context of the Republic of North Macedonia, a monocultural school refers to a school where only students of one ethnicity are enrolled, and the teaching process is conducted exclusively in one language, such as Macedonian, Albanian, or Bosnian.

2.2 Instrument

The Scale for Assessing Desirable Intercultural Competences developed by Bedeković (2012) contains 11 items evaluated using a Likert-type scale with five degrees of intensity from 1 (complete agreement) to 5 (complete disagreement). The Scale was translated into Albanian and Macedonian. The scale's internal consistency coefficient is 0.931, which is considered a high level of reliability. Bedeković (2012) reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.902 for this scale.

2.3 Data Collection and Data Analysis

In cooperation with the school principals, a link containing a Google form questionnaire was sent to 300 primary school teachers. Finally, 217 complete responses were collected, so the valid response rate was 72.33%. Collected data were input into SPSS v. 25 software. To test the Scale reliability, Cronbach's Alpha was used. Descriptive statistics procedures were used in data processing to determine descriptive characteristics, and the comparison of respondents was performed using the t-test and ANOVA, while a post hoc test (Scheffe's test) was performed to determine the significance of the differences.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The special role in the education of interculturally competent individuals necessarily belongs to the school as a place of everyday contact between members of different cultures. The role of teachers in shaping a culturally plural perspective is reflected not only in their good knowledge of other cultures but also in creating new relationships aimed at equipping students for successful intercultural communication. In this sense, the goals and outcomes of education need to be considered in the context of the real life characterized by intercultural encounters, contacts, and the intertwining of different cultures. Therefore, in our research, we were interested in examining the attitudes of participants towards desirable intercultural competencies necessary for working in culturally plural classrooms.

Table 1. Teachers' Attitudes Towards Desirable Intercultural Competences Required for Working in Multicultural Classrooms

To what extent are the listed competencies desirable for working in multicultural classrooms?		
Item	M	SD
1. Understanding key terms (interculturalism, multiculturalism, identity, ethnocentrism...)	3.33	1.209
2. Sensitivity to discrimination	3.51	1.028
3. Nonviolent conflict resolution skills	3.58	1.052
4. Communication skills	3.45	.952
5. Teamwork skills	3.71	.935
6. Critical approach to events in society	3.55	1.084
7. Ability to analyze socially sensitive topics	3.48	1.005
8. Skill in applying active teaching methods and strategies	3.49	.888
9. Ability to see problems from the student's perspective	3.51	.987
10. Motivation for continuous information and education	3.62	1.039
11. Openness to different cultures (intercultural sensitivity)	3.54	1.110

The results of the study (Table 1) have shown that the participants' attitudes towards desirable intercultural competencies are positively oriented, as confirmed by the descriptive parameters of the items on the scale of desirable intercultural competencies (M ranging from 3.33 to 3.71). The highest mean values appear in statements related to the most desirable intercultural competencies needed for working in culturally plural environments: teamwork skills (M=3.71), motivation for continuous information and education (M=3.62), nonviolent conflict resolution skills (M=3.58), and critical approach to events in society (M=3.55). Subsequently, there is openness to different cultures (intercultural sensitivity), the ability to understand problems from students'

perspectives, sensitivity to discrimination, skills in applying active teaching methods and strategies, the ability to analyze socially sensitive topics, communication skills, as well as an understanding of key concepts (interculturalism, multiculturalism, identity, ethnocentrism...).

Previous studies' results (Bedeković, 2015; Mrnjaus & Rončević, 2012; Piršl et al., 2009; Piršl, 2011) have shown that participants rank openness to different cultures, and intercultural sensitivity, nonviolent conflict resolution skills, communication skills, sensitivity to discrimination, and the ability to understand problems from students' perspectives among the most desirable intercultural competencies needed for working in multicultural classrooms. Comparing the results of our study with the mentioned research leads to the conclusion that students generally perceive these intercultural communication and behavior skills and abilities positively, expressing positive attitudes towards intercultural competencies. Among these competencies, they highly rank skills and abilities that can be summarized into three main categories: value orientations, personality traits, and skills. One of the fundamental assumptions for acquiring intercultural skills and abilities is continuous professional development and lifelong learning. Considering that the participants in our study highly rank motivation for continuous education among desirable intercultural competencies, it can be concluded that they perceive an interculturally competent teacher as a professional whose knowledge, attitudes, and skills are reflected in the ability to continuously monitor, interpret, and appropriately respond to situations and events from a multicultural perspective.

Sociocultural factors can significantly influence an individual's behavior in contact with members of different cultures. Given that competence in intercultural contact generally entails appropriate and effective adjustment of interculturally competent individuals in changing cultural environments, our further research aimed to investigate the extent to which gender, school structure, teaching experience, and level of education influence the perception of desirable intercultural competencies necessary for working in multicultural classrooms.

The results of the t-test (see Table 2) show a statistically significant difference among teachers based on gender in 5 out of 11 statements on the scale for assessing the necessary intercultural competencies of the teacher for educational work in a multicultural classroom (namely: 3. Non-violent conflict resolution skills; 4. Communication skills; and 5. Teamwork skills). From Table 2, it can be observed that male participants showed a higher level of agreement in 10 out of 11 statements. Female participants achieved a higher mean (M=3.37, SD=1.114) compared to male participants (M=3.22, SD=1.439) only in the first statement, stating that the most necessary intercultural competence for teachers working in a multicultural classroom is "understanding key concepts (interculturality, multiculturalism, identity, ethnocentrism, etc.)".

In contrast, the results of Bedeković's (2015) research showed that among all necessary intercultural competencies for working in multicultural classrooms, female participants express a higher degree of average agreement, which suggests the need for further exploration of the relationship between this variable and teachers' attitudes towards desired intercultural competencies for working in multicultural classrooms. In their study, Caingcoy et al. (2022) found that female practice teachers outperform their male counterparts in fostering a learning experience characterized by respect and connectedness, which encourages choice and personal relevance, facilitates engagement in challenging learning tasks, and enhances authenticity and effectiveness.

Table 2. Desirable Intercultural Competences for Work in Multicultural Classrooms and Gender

To what extent are the listed competencies desirable for working in multicultural classrooms?

Item	Female (N=158)		Male (N=59)		t	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
1. Understanding key terms (interculturalism, multiculturalism, identity, ethnocentrism...)	3.37	1.114	3.22	1.439	.795	.428
2. Sensitivity to discrimination	3.47	1.026	3.61	1.034	-.904	.367
3. Non-violent conflict resolution skills	3.41	1.060	4.02	.900	-3.895	.000*
4. Communication skills	3.29	.979	3.88	.721	-4.219	.000*
5. Team work skills	3.54	.928	4.15	.805	-4.447	.000*
6. Critical approach to events in society	3.53	.956	3.61	1.377	-.512	.609
7. Ability to analyze socially sensitive topics	3.42	.999	3.63	1.015	-1.327	.186
8. Skill in applying active teaching methods and strategies	3.44	.892	3.63	.869	-1.362	.175
9. Ability to see problems from the student's perspective	3.37	1.037	3.88	.721	-3.505	.001*
10. Motivation for continuous information and education	3.37	1.043	4.29	.671	-6.310	.000*
11. Openness to different cultures (intercultural sensitivity)	3.46	.994	3.75	1.359	-1.683	.094

*$p<0.05$

As can be seen in Table 3, teachers working in multicultural schools achieved a higher mean score in all statements on the scale for assessing the necessary intercultural competencies of teachers for work in a multicultural classroom. The results of the t-test show statistically significant differences among participants in four out of 11 statements. A statistically significant difference was found in the statements "understanding key concepts (interculturality, multiculturalism, identity, ethnocentrism, etc.)", "communication skills," "ability to understand problems from the student's perspective," "motivation for continuous information and education," where teachers working in multicultural schools showed a higher level of agreement compared to teachers working in monocultural schools.

These results can be explained by the fact that teachers working in multicultural schools face specific needs in terms of knowledge and skills for working in multicultural classrooms, and they have acquired more knowledge and information about the necessary or desired competencies for working with culturally diverse students. It is possible that these teachers participated in multiple training programs in the field of intercultural education. These results suggest that teachers working in multicultural schools are more aware of the intercultural competencies required by the teacher for their educational work in a multicultural classroom. Additionally, it is necessary to
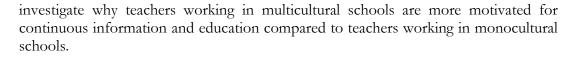
investigate why teachers working in multicultural schools are more motivated for continuous information and education compared to teachers working in monocultural schools.

Table 3. Desirable Intercultural Competences for Work in Multicultural Classrooms and Cultural School Structure

To what extent are the listed competencies desirable for working in multicultural classrooms?						
Item	Monocultural school (N=154)		Multicultural school (N=63)		t	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
1. Understanding key terms (interculturalism, multiculturalism, identity, ethnocentrism...)	3.22	1.133	3.59	1.352	-2.042	.042*
2. Sensitivity to discrimination	3.45	.997	3.63	1.097	-1.174	.242
3. Non-violent conflict resolution skills	3.51	1.056	3.73	1.035	-1.383	.168
4. Communication skills	3.34	.979	3.71	.831	-2.635	.009*
5. Teamwork skills	3.64	.920	3.89	.952	-1.816	.071
6. Critical approach to events in society	3.54	.930	3.57	1.399	-.200	.842
7. Ability to analyze socially sensitive topics	3.43	.956	3.60	1.115	-1.163	.246
8. Skill in applying active teaching methods and strategies	3.44	.893	3.62	.869	-1.339	.182
9. Ability to see problems from the student's perspective	3.37	1.016	3.84	.827	-3.264	.001*
10. Motivation for continuous information and education	3.44	1.016	4.05	.974	-4.035	.000*
11. Openness to different cultures (intercultural sensitivity)	3.53	1.017	3.56	1.317	-.139	.890

*$p<0.05$

The obtained results indicate that teachers with greater work experience achieved a higher level of average agreement in all 11 statements on the scale for assessing the necessary intercultural competencies for work in a multicultural classroom. A statistically significant difference among participants was found in the t-test for the statements "skills for nonviolent conflict resolution (negotiation, finding compromises, etc.)," "communication skills," "teamwork skills," "ability to understand problems from the student's perspective," and the statement "motivation for continuous information and education," where less experienced teachers (under 20 years) demonstrated a lower level of agreement compared to teachers with more work experience.

Based on the obtained results, it can be concluded that work experience significantly influences attitudes towards the required intercultural competencies for work in a multicultural classroom. Teachers with more work experience (over 20 years) express more positive attitudes towards all 11 proposed intercultural competencies. Similar results were shown in the research conducted by Bedeković (2015), where the

oldest participants, aged between 31 and 51 years, expressed the most positive attitudes towards 7 out of the total of 11 proposed statements.

The study conducted by Jund (2010) revealed that the majority of participants have a problem of unconsciously creating boundaries between different cultures and unconsciously forming stereotypes. This highlights the necessity of paying attention to an individual approach based on experiential learning and understanding issues from the students' perspective. Such an approach enables the development of adaptive mechanisms without fear of losing one's own cultural identity and falling into stereotypes.

Table 4. Desirable Intercultural Competences for Work in Multicultural Classrooms and the Seniority

To what extent are the listed competencies desirable for working in multicultural classrooms?					
Item	Under 20 years (N=152)		Over 20 years (N=65)		t	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
1. Understanding key terms (interculturalism, multiculturalism, identity, ethnocentrism...)	3.29	1.143	3.42	1.357	-.702	.484
2. Sensitivity to discrimination	3.50	1.016	3.52	1.062	-.151	.880
3. Non-violent conflict resolution skills	3.47	1.073	3.83	.961	-2.357	.019*
4. Communication skills	3.35	.951	3.69	.917	-2.464	.015*
5. Teamwork skills	3.59	.931	4.00	.884	-3.049	.003*
6. Critical approach to events in society	3.53	.927	3.58	1.391	-.321	.748
7. Ability to analyze socially sensitive topics	3.46	1.009	3.52	1.002	-.419	.676
8. Skill in applying active teaching methods and strategies	3.46	.920	3.57	.809	-.826	.410
9. Ability to see problems from the student's perspective	3.40	1.050	3.75	.771	-2.439	.016*
10. Motivation for continuous information and education	3.39	1.011	4.14	.916	-5.101	.000*
11. Openness to different cultures (intercultural sensitivity)	3.51	.997	3.62	1.343	-.661	.509

*$p<0.05$

The research findings by Magos and Simopoulos (2009) demonstrated that teachers rarely utilize the advantages of intercultural experiences and the cultural backgrounds of their students as opportunities for establishing intercultural communication in the classroom. They also show a limited willingness to consider issues from the students' perspective. The study revealed a certain level of mistrust among teachers towards migrant students based on stereotypes and prejudices, as well as a perception and expression of their own culture as superior, which is reflected in a pronounced ethnocentric orientation of the teachers. These findings also raise the question of dedicating greater attention to the systemic preparedness of younger

teachers for intercultural topics, which should be directed towards raising the level of intercultural sensitivity as a fundamental prerequisite for acquiring intercultural competencies. Green's (2019) study among Pakistani undergraduate students revealed that "not so much the teaching methods, as the affective course and dimensions of emotionalized learning experiences promote social competence" (p. 337) in Pakistan's bachelor's students.

Table 5. Desirable Intercultural Competences For Work in Multicultural Classrooms and the Level of Education

To what extent are the listed competencies desirable for working in multicultural classrooms?

Item	Bachelor (N=186)		Master (N=23)		PhD (N=8)		F	p
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
1. Understanding key terms (interculturalism, multiculturalism, identity, ethnocentrism...)	3.22	1.212	3.70	.926	4.75	.707	7.793	.001*
2. Sensitivity to discrimination	3.43	.952	3.70	1.396	4.75	.707	7.141	.001*
3. Non-violent conflict resolution skills	3.51	1.031	3.87	1.217	4.25	.707	2.948	.055
4. Communication skills	3.39	.948	3.87	.869	3.75	1.035	3.096	.047*
5. Teamwork skills	3.67	.898	4.22	.850	3.25	1.488	4.714	.010*
6. Critical approach to events in society	3.48	1.087	4.04	.976	3.75	1.035	2.978	.053
7. Ability to analyze socially sensitive topics	3.38	.952	4.22	1.204	3.75	.707	7.950	.000*
8. Skill in applying active teaching methods and strategies	3.52	.890	3.17	.887	3.75	.707	1.933	.147
9. Ability to see problems from the student's perspective	3.55	.964	3.17	1.230	3.38	.518	1.600	.204
10. Motivation for continuous information and education	3.73	1.011	3.00	1.000	2.88	.991	7.544	.001*
11. Openness to different cultures (intercultural sensitivity)	3.51	1.077	3.57	1.409	4.25	.707	1.746	.177

*$p < 0.05$

From Table 5, it can be observed that teachers with a Ph.D. demonstrated a higher level of agreement in the statements "1. Understanding key terms (interculturalism, multiculturalism, identity, ethnocentrism, etc.)," "2. Sensitivity to discrimination," "3. Non-violent conflict resolution skills," "8. Skill in applying active teaching methods and strategies," and "11. Openness to different cultures (intercultural sensitivity)." Teachers with a master's degree had a higher score in the statements "4. Communication skills," "5. Teamwork skills," "6. Critical approach to events in society,"

and "7. Ability to analyze socially sensitive topics," while teachers with a bachelor's degree scored higher in the statements "9. Ability to see problems from the student's perspective" and "10. Motivation for continuous information and education."

The results of the ANOVA test (Table 5) indicate a statistically significant difference among teachers with a Ph.D., teachers with a master's degree, and teachers with a bachelor's degree in 6 out of 11 statements. The post hoc (Scheffe) test revealed a statistically significant difference between teachers with a Ph.D. and those with a bachelor's degree in the statements "1. Understanding key terms (interculturalism, multiculturalism, identity, ethnocentrism, etc.)" and "2. Sensitivity to discrimination." The test also showed a statistically significant difference between teachers with a master's degree and those with a bachelor's degree in the statements "5. Teamwork skills" and "10. Motivation for continuous information and education." Furthermore, a statistically significant difference was found between teachers with a bachelor's degree and those with a Ph.D. in the statements "1. Understanding key terms" and "2. Sensitivity to discrimination." These results suggest that the level of education influences teachers' attitudes towards the desired competencies for working in multicultural classrooms.

4. CONCLUSION

The issue of teachers' intercultural competence becomes even more important due to the educational reality in Macedonia. The legal regulations allow the functioning of schools as monoethnic and monocultural. Such practices particularly dominate in multicultural contexts, contradicting the European model of inclusive and multicultural schooling. In this reality, teachers hold the greatest hope for implementing new initiatives that align with the European aspirations of the country. Teachers must adapt themselves and the educational rules of the country to European educational standards. Implementing new approaches in intercultural education requires establishing a continuous professional development process that begins with improving initial teacher education, employment, in-service training, and lifelong learning. Meanwhile, it is crucial that appropriate changes in initial teacher education undergo a comprehensive, open, and continuous improvement process. This would create conditions for ongoing learning and lifelong education as an important segment of teachers' continuous professional development.

The results of the study have demonstrated a significant effect of sociocultural factors on the perception of desirable intercultural competencies necessary for working in culturally diverse classrooms. Generally, primary school teachers' attitudes towards desirable intercultural competencies are positively oriented, and their perception ranges from the ability to understand key concepts in the field of interculturalism and openness to different cultures, to communication skills and nonviolent conflict resolution skills, as well as the ability to consider issues from the perspective of culturally diverse students, intercultural sensitivity, skills in critically approaching societal events and skills in handling socially sensitive topics.

Working in culturally heterogeneous classrooms requires teachers to have mastery over several intercultural competencies that enable them to effectively direct diverse cultural backgrounds, nurture inclusivity, and promote relevant learning experiences for all students. We suggest fostering these intercultural competencies essential for working in multicultural classrooms: Cultural Awareness: Developing cultural awareness includes acknowledging and understanding one's own cultural background, beliefs, and biases, as well as appreciating the cultural diversity present in

the classroom and being open to learning about. It includes understanding cultural norms and values, and accepting communication styles. Communication and Language Skills: Effective communication is determinative in multicultural classrooms. Teachers should have advanced especially nonverbal communication skills to bridge language barriers, and convey information in a way that is understandable to students from dissimilar linguistic provenience. Empathy and Respect: Raising empathy and respect presupposes valuing, understanding, and accepting the identities, and perspectives of students from many cultural backgrounds. Teachers must treat all students equitably, show empathy, and create a respectful classroom setting where students feel accepted and valued. Flexibility and Adaptability: When working in multicultural classrooms, being adaptable and flexible is vitally important. Teachers need to be capable of adjusting the school curriculum to meet the culturally diverse students' needs and expectations, incorporating culturally relevant teaching approaches as well as considering different learning styles. Intercultural Communication Skills: Intercultural communication skills demand an ability to manage cultural differences, promote dialogue among culturally diverse students, and engage in functional cross-cultural interrelations. It is the teacher's duty to inspire and ease true discussions that promote respect, understanding, and the exchange of diverse perspectives. Conflict Resolution: Multicultural classrooms may experience antagonisms occurring from misunderstandings or cultural differences. Mastering conflict resolution skills such as mediation, problem-solving, and active listening will help teachers manage conflicts constructively and promote good relationships among students. Continuous Learning: Teachers should pay more attention to professional development, self-reflection and constantly upgrade their intercultural knowledge and skills.

4.1. Implications

The results of this research and the works of Byram (1997; 2021), Bennett (2008), Chen and Starosta (2000; 2018), Villegas and Lucas (2007), Banks and McGee Banks (2010), Sleeter (2011), Gay (2018), and Deardorff (2009) provide useful insights into the significance of these competencies. Further research should continue to explore the impact of specific training programs and interventions aimed at developing these competencies and their influence on student outcomes in multicultural educational settings. Mastery of these intercultural competencies will enable teachers to work successfully in multicultural classrooms by creating an inclusive and supportive environment that celebrates diversity, promotes cultural understanding, and empowers students from all backgrounds to thrive academically and socially. The results of this research may contribute to the development of education policies oriented towards enhancing the intercultural competencies of teachers. Moreover, this study has the potential to initiate further research on other factors influencing the formation of teachers' attitudes towards the necessary intercultural competencies for working in diverse environments.

4.2. Limitations

One limitation of the research conducted among 217 primary school teachers in North Macedonia via Google Forms is the potential bias introduced by self-report measures, as participants may provide socially desirable responses. Additionally, the study's sample may not be fully representative of all primary school teachers in North Macedonia, as it focused on a specific region and relied on voluntary participation.

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