

# THE RELATION BETWEEN INTERCULTURAL SENSITIVITY AND MULTICULTURAL TEACHING COMPETENCY OF PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS

Original scientific paper

UDC: 37.043

**Ines Blažević<sup>1</sup>, Mila Bulić<sup>2</sup>, Ivana Batarelo Kokić<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>1,2,3</sup> Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Split, Republic of Croatia

## Abstract

A multicultural society is based on respect for diversity, cooperation, and acceptance. The educational system should focus on intercultural action in a culturally diverse society, which requires well-prepared and competent teachers. Teachers should have intercultural sensitivity and multicultural competence to successfully teach in a multicultural society. In the past decades, teacher educators and educational policymakers attempted to implement content related to intercultural education through teacher education study programs and various forms of teacher training. The main goal of the research was to determine the level of self-assessed intercultural sensitivity and multicultural teaching competencies of primary school teachers while placing the research study results in the context of the current literature. The Intercultural Sensitivity Scale was used to collect data on teachers' intercultural sensitivity (Chen and Starosta, 2000). Teachers' self-assessed multicultural competence was examined using the Multicultural Teaching Competency Scale (Spanierman et al., 2011). Both scales were back translated into Croatian. The empirical research was conducted on a sample of 127 primary school teachers from Split-Dalmatia and Dubrovnik-Neretva counties. The factor structure of the used scales was determined by exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis. The level of self-assessed intercultural sensitivity and multicultural teaching competency of teachers is analyzed using descriptive statistics. The results of correlation analysis indicate a strong positive correlation between two aspects of intercultural sensitivity and knowledge of multicultural teaching. The results of this study can be used in further research and in shaping educational policies in an environment of cultural diversity.

**Keywords:** intercultural sensitivity, multicultural teaching competency, primary school teachers

## Introduction

Respect for difference, cooperation, and acceptance are the foundations of a multicultural society. The educational system in a culturally varied community should emphasize intercultural activity, which needs well-prepared and capable teachers. In an increasingly multicultural world, intercultural sensitivity is a critical competency (Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2021). Teachers should have intercultural sensitivity and multicultural teaching competency to teach in a multicultural society successfully.

We recognize more profound interconnections and influences between varying cultures, ideas, and ways of perceiving the world in the contemporary society. Because of the ongoing immigration and wars affecting Europe, demographic diversity has increased, raising the importance of social participation. Future teachers must be ready to fulfil the demands of a diverse student population while also accepting the challenges that diversity brings (Batarelo Kokić et al., 2016). Due to the rising number of immigrant students in schools in recent decades, the European Union considers Intercultural Education a desirable approach to integrate immigrant students and minorities. The EU provides a policy framework to establish intercultural education policies and procedures, while implementation strategies vary among European countries (Tarozzi, 2012).

## Research Background

Globalization in all aspects of contemporary society, including economic, political, social, and cultural spheres, is influenced by rapid technological, communication, and travel advances (Giddens, 2000). Global interconnectedness opens new opportunities to communicate with and learn from individuals from different cultures. At the same time, it is necessary to be aware of how global events impact us locally (Lourenço, 2018).

The critical determinants of the European educational policy perspective are the shared values that ensure the functioning of a culturally diverse society, such as multilingualism, social inclusion, and entrepreneurship (Batarelo Kokić & Kokić, 2021). With the growth of multicultural societies, educational policy efforts such as intercultural education have been implemented at all levels of education (Spinthourakis et al., 2009). Educational policy regulations guide the inclusion of children from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds in particular educational systems. In Croatia, in the context of social and cultural diversity, great efforts were made on educational policy and practices for teacher preparation to enable teachers to work in a diverse society (Batarelo Kokić et al., 2010). Intercultural education aims to develop positive attitudes toward intercultural knowledge and enable students to create and operate an intercultural school community as a model and incentive for broader social changes (Hrvatić & Sablić, 2008). Hence, the teachers are expected to educate students to understand different cultures and promote their own culture (Zloković & Vrcelj, 2010). The comparison of primary school teacher study programs in Croatia reveals that all programs include intercultural content, but that this content varies in quantity and form (Mlinarević & Tokić Zec, 2020).

In the past decades, teacher educators and policymakers have sought to introduce intercultural education through teacher education study programs and different types of teacher training. Teacher training should support teachers' intercultural sensitivity and provide teachers with specific skills and knowledge to function in a culturally diverse society.

## Objectives

The main goal of this paper is to investigate the relationship between primary school teachers' self-assessed intercultural sensitivity and actual multicultural teaching competence, as well as to place the findings of the research study in the context of the current literature on intercultural sensitivity and multicultural teaching competence. The following questions were posed to achieve this goal:

- What is the level of self-assessed intercultural sensitivity of primary school teachers in the southern part of Croatia?
- What is the level of multicultural teaching competence of primary school teachers in the southern part of Croatia?
- Is there a relation between self-assessed intercultural sensitivity and the multicultural teaching competence of teachers in the southern part of Croatia?

## Review of Related Literature

The variety of intercultural theories and models tells us about the diversity and complexity of societies and cultures (Piršl, 2014). Hence, educational research studies focusing on intercultural education include studies that explore different aspects of intercultural competence. A number of studies focus on the acquisition and characteristics of intercultural sensitivity (Spithourakis et al., 2009; Batarelo Kokić, 2014; Rissanen et al., 2016; Segura-Robles & Parra-González, 2019; Kim & Connelly, 2019; Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2021), while other studies have a stronger focus on the exploration of multicultural and intercultural teaching competence development (DeJaeghere & Cao, 2009; Mischka, 2009; Buljubašić Kuzmanović & Blažević, 2015; Blažević, 2016; He et al., 2017; Romijn et al., 2021).

According to Chen and Starosta (1998, 231), intercultural sensitivity represents the affective aspect of intercultural communication competence, indicating one's desire to understand, appreciate and accept differences among cultures. According to Segura-Robles and Parra-González (2019), intercultural sensitivity is not a natural or universal element of human behavior. Hence accommodating persons from diverse cultures could be a difficulty for educational institutions. The findings indicate a positive relationship between multicultural teaching efficacy and pre-service teachers' multicultural teaching attitudes and all five sub-constructs of intercultural sensitivity, including general cultural sensitivity. The findings also indicated that pre-service teachers' attitudes and beliefs are crucial in teaching multicultural concepts effectively to young children (Kim & Connelly, 2019). Pre-service teachers' intercultural sensitivity is critical for any effort to increase future teachers' capacity to cope with the complexities of today's education, which is more shaped by diversity (Spithourakis et al., 2009). The development of intercultural competence of future teachers is essential for implementing intercultural education and intercultural dialogue.

Rodríguez-Izquierdo (2021) focuses on teaching methodology that fosters the development of intercultural sensitivity among higher education students. The study results indicate the necessity for intercultural service opportunities to advance intercultural sensitivity. The findings have extensive consequences for educators and policymakers who want to improve transformational learning opportunities and efficient teaching strategies for fostering intercultural sensitivity among higher education students. Batarelo Kokić (2014) researched the development of intercultural competence among teacher education students based on the developmental model of intercultural sensitivity, current research on the general development of intercultural competence, and the development of intercultural competence in teacher education. The research findings indicate that developing intercultural competence during teacher training is possible through reflective online discussions. More specifically, study results suggest that teacher education students express higher levels of intercultural competence while reflecting on the themes that they find relevant to their cultural context. Similarly, Rissanen et al. (2016) focused on developing intercultural sensitivity among student teachers through self-reflective learning processes in a pilot course on cultures and religions in education. The study results indicate that students are willing to engage in self-reflection to develop an ethno-relative orientation to diversity and sensitivity to religious identities.

The acquisition of intercultural competence is a long-term, lifelong development and dynamic process characterized by constant personal growth (Piršl, 2014). While there is a need to improve teachers' multicultural and intercultural competences, the research data indicates a significant positive relationship between hours of professional development and multicultural teaching skill but not multicultural teaching knowledge (Mischka, 2009). Furthermore, while the contextual approach to professional development is likely to increase teachers' intercultural competencies effectively, guided reflection and enactment are still rare in teacher programs (Romijn et al., 2021). According to Holmes and O'Neill (2012), the development of intercultural competence includes recognizing resistance and fear, confronting and questioning stereotypes, observing one's feelings and emotions, going through confusion, and struggling with complex issues. The results of a study by DeJaeghere and Cao (2009) indicate that intercultural competence can be developed through pre-service teacher programs and professional teacher training. More specifically, analyzed research studies show a positive impact of the specific teaching models aimed at developing intercultural competence among pre-service and in-service teachers (DeJaeghere & Cao, 2009). Furthermore, a research study concentrating on the study abroad program for in-service teachers reported on the program's influence on teachers' teaching practices and beliefs in addition to their development of intercultural competence. The study results indicate that reflection is a crucial part of a study abroad program since it may help teachers become more intercultural and globally aware, and international experience alone cannot achieve this (He et al., 2017).

The research findings show that teachers recognize the importance of collaborative and research-oriented teaching to achieve the most appropriate educational outcomes. The teachers are aware of the cross-curricular approach in teaching the interculturalism theme and correlate the teaching topic with all school subjects (Blažević, 2016). The co-construction of the curriculum also considers the basic pedagogical principles of its creation and design: balance, continuity, openness, flexibility, interculturality, inclusiveness, and student-oriented approach (Buljubašić Kuzmanović & Blažević, 2015).

## Overview of Methodology

### Study Participants and Instruments

The primary school teachers' self-assessed intercultural sensitivity and multicultural teaching competence were the emphases of this study. The survey included 127 teachers from Split-Dalmatia and Dubrovnik-Neretva counties, the two most southern counties in Croatia.

We employed two validated measures with robust metric characteristics to examine primary school teachers' self-evaluated level of intercultural sensitivity and multicultural teaching competency: the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (IS scale) and the Multicultural Teaching Competency Scale (MTCS) (MTC scale). The scales were chosen because of their good metric features and dimensional structure. The scales were adjusted to match our study's target population and research goals.

*The IS scale* was developed by Chen and Starosta (2000). The scale focuses on different aspects of teachers' intercultural sensitivity. The original scale consists of twenty-four statements and has five latent factors of teachers' intercultural sensitivity including: interaction engagement with 6-items (variance accounted for 22.8%), respect of cultural differences with 6-items (variance accounted for 5.2%), interaction confidence with 5-items (variance accounted for 3.9%), interaction enjoyment with 3-items (variance accounted for 3.0%) and interaction attentiveness with 3-items (variance accounted for 2.3%). Drandić (2016) translated the questionnaire into Croatian and used it with Croatian teachers. This previously translated version was also used in this research. The principal component factor analysis supported a 23-item scale with 3-factor structure including the following factors: interaction enjoyment with 7-items (Cronbach Alpha .736 and variance accounted for 19.89%); interaction engagement and interaction confidence with 9-items (Cronbach Alpha .717 and variance accounted for 15.24%); and respect of cultural differences and interaction attentiveness with 7-items (Cronbach Alpha .660 and variance accounted for 11.608%).

The multicultural teacher competence was examined using *the multicultural teaching competence scale* (Spanierman et al., 2011). The validated questionnaire consists of sixteen manifest statements and has two latent factors on multicultural teaching competencies. The original scale has a two-factor structure including: multicultural

teaching skill with 10-items ( $M = 4.36$ ,  $SD = .73$ , Cronbach Alpha .80, variance accounted for = 32.89%); and multicultural teaching knowledge with 8-items ( $M = 4.80$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ , Cronbach Alpha .78, variance accounted for = 8.76%). The Croatian version of the scale was translated by the back-forward technique. The high reliability of the Croatian version of the scale is confirmed by Cronbach's Alpha .939, while the reliability coefficients of the subsections were: multicultural teaching skill with 9-items (Cronbach Alpha .828 and variance accounted for 32.04%); and multicultural teaching knowledge with 7-items (Cronbach Alpha .816, and variance accounted for 22.05%).

### Data Analysis

On a descriptive level, data were analyzed using mean score, and standard deviation measures. The significance of the differences between the test and retest arithmetic means was explored using a t-test for dependent samples. In addition to t-test as an indicator of reliability, the correlation coefficients between test and retest were calculated. Pearson coefficient of correlation was used on the  $p < .01$  and  $p < .05$  levels to determine the correlation between self-assessed intercultural sensitivity and multicultural teacher competence.

### Findings and Discussion

To gain a deeper insight into the reliability of the measurement procedure, we performed a test-retest method to examine the consistency of the obtained data at two different measurement points. The implementation method was realized by completing a subsample of 34 respondents twice. The result of the t-test on the significance level  $p < .05$  for the 24-item IS scale indicates 3 variables with a significant difference and 21 with no significant differences between test and retest. Furthermore, the t-test on the significance level  $p < .05$  for the 16-item MTC scale observed no significant differences between the test and retest. The paired samples' correlation on the significance level of  $p < .01$  ranges from .54 to .94, indicating a high and significant correlation. These results favor the representativeness of the data obtained by this research.

In further analysis we present the test results. The level of teachers' self-assessed intercultural sensitivity and multicultural teaching competency is analyzed using descriptive statistics (see Table 1). The IS scale was measured on a 5-point Likert scale. The analysis of the mean scores showed a low to medium level of self-assessed intercultural sensitivity. The analysis of the mean scores for the subsections of the IS scale showed that the highest level of self-assessed intercultural sensitivity was related to the aspect of interaction engagement and interaction confidence ( $M = 3.62$ ,  $SD = .51$ ), self-assessed intercultural sensitivity was associated with the respect of cultural differences and interaction attentiveness ( $M = 3.01$ ,  $SD = .35$ ), and the lowest level of self-assessed intercultural sensitivity was related to the aspect of interaction enjoyment ( $M = 2.16$ ,  $SD = .58$ ).

The participants self-assessed the multicultural teaching skill and knowledge as average. The analysis of the mean scores for the subsections of the MTC scale showed that the higher level of self-assessed multicultural teaching competence was related to the multicultural teaching skill ( $M = 3.25$ ,  $SD = .66$ ). The somewhat lower level of self-assessed multicultural teaching competence was related to the multicultural teaching knowledge ( $M = 3.12$ ,  $SD = .68$ ).

**Table 1** Descriptive statistics of IS scale and MTC scale subsections

	M	SD
IS scale		
interaction enjoyment	2.16	.58
interaction engagement and interaction confidence	3.62	.51
respect of cultural differences and interaction attentiveness	3.01	.35
	M	SD
MTC scale		
multicultural teaching skill	3.25	.66
multicultural teaching knowledge	3.12	.68

\* Means and standard deviations of the scales are divided by the number of items in each.

The inter-correlations between the IS scale and MTC scale and their subsections are presented in Table 2. Results of correlation analysis indicate a strong positive correlation between two aspects of intercultural sensitivity and knowledge of multicultural teaching. The Pearson correlation coefficient indicated a correlation between ISS: interaction enjoyment and MTCS: multicultural teaching knowledge  $r(125) = -.237$ ,  $p = .007$ ; and ISS: interaction engagement and interaction confidence and MTCS: multicultural teaching knowledge,  $r(125) = .452$ ,  $p = .000$ .

**Table 2** Inter-correlations between ISS and MTCS subsections

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
1. ISS: interaction enjoyment	1				
2. ISS: interaction engagement and interaction confidence	-,537**	1			
3. ISS: respect of cultural differences and interaction attentiveness	,015	,087	1		
4. MTCS: multicultural teaching skill	-,032	,224*	-,170	1	
5. MTCS: multicultural teaching knowledge	-,237**	,452**	,116	,510**	1

\*\*correlation is significant at  $p < .01$  (2-tailed)

\*correlation is significant at  $p < .05$  (2-tailed)

Furthermore, the Pearson correlation coefficient indicated a correlation between ISS: interaction engagement and MTCS: multicultural teaching skill  $r(125)=-.224$ ,  $p=.012$ . The findings do not indicate a statistically significant correlation between ISS: interaction enjoyment and respect of cultural differences and ISS: interaction attentiveness and MTCS multicultural teaching skills. Nevertheless, MTCS multicultural teaching skill is correlated with the MTCS multicultural knowledge  $r(125)=.510$ ,  $p=.000$ .

## Recommendations and Conclusions

This research study provided insight into the level of self-assessed intercultural sensitivity of primary school teachers in southern Croatia and their self-assessed multicultural teaching competence. The observed levels of intercultural sensitivity and multicultural teaching competencies are medium and reflect country-specific teachers' characteristics in the given time period. Although an overall positive attitude towards different aspects of intercultural education was demonstrated, pre-service and in-service teacher education programs should continue supporting intercultural sensitivity to ensure multicultural teaching practices.

Furthermore, the collected data showed a high correlation between certain aspects of intercultural sensitivity and multicultural teaching knowledge. At the same time, the results did not indicate a statistically significant correlation between different parts of intercultural sensitivity and multicultural teaching skills.

The results of this study can be used in further research and in shaping educational policies in an environment of cultural diversity. Higher levels of intercultural sensitivity of primary school teachers might be helpful for work in the multicultural classroom but also can be beneficial in developing the intercultural values of primary school students. Additional research should explore the issue of primary school teachers' knowledge and readiness to work with diverse students and appreciate the implications of multicultural diversity.

## References

- Batarelo Kokić, I. & Novosel, V. (2014). The Ball is in Your Court: Information Literacy Self-efficacy and Information Literacy Competence Relation. In Kurbanoglu, S., Špiranec, S., Grassian, E., Mizrachi, D., & Catts, R (Eds.), *Information Literacy. Lifelong Learning and Digital Citizenship in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (pp. 512-520). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-14136-7\\_54](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-14136-7_54)
- Batarelo Kokić, I. (2014). Razvoj interkulturalne kompetencije studenata nastavničkih studija uz korištenje informacijsko-komunikacijske tehnologije. *Pedagoški istraživanja*, 11(2), 41-50.
- Batarelo Kokić, I., & Kokić, T. (2021). Obrazovno-političke postavke u Europskoj uniji: što o obrazovanju možemo naučiti od Sparte i Atene? *Nova prisutnost*, 19(3), 541-556. <https://doi.org/10.31192/np.19.3.5>



- Batarelo Kokić, I., Vukelić, A., & Ljubić, M. (2010). *Mapping policies and practices for the preparation of teachers for inclusive education in contexts of social and cultural diversity-Croatia country report*. European Training Foundation.
- Blažević, I. (2016). Interkulturalizam u nastavi prirode i društva, *Školski vjesnik*, 65(Tematski broj), 189-200.
- Buljubašić Kuzmanović, V., & Blažević, I. (2015). Školski kurikulum u funkciji razvoja socijalnih vještina učenika. *Pedagogijska istraživanja*, 12(1-2), 71-84.
- Chen, G. M., & Starosta, W. J. (1998). A review of the concept of intercultural awareness. *Human Communication*, 2, 27-54.
- Chen, G. M., & Starosta, W. J. (2000). The development and validation of the intercultural sensitivity scale. *Human Communication*, 3, 1-15.
- DeJaeghere, J. G. & Cao, Y. (2009). Developing US teachers' intercultural competence: Does professional development matter?. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 33(5), 437-447.
- Drandić, D. (2016). Intercultural sensitivity of teachers. *Croatian Journal of Education*, 18(3), 837-857.
- Giddens, A. (2000). *Runaway World: How Globalization is Reshaping Our Lives*. Routledge.
- He, Y., Lundgren, K., & Pynes, P. (2017). Impact of short-term study abroad program: Inservice teachers' development of intercultural competence and pedagogical beliefs. *Teaching and teacher education*, 66, 147-157. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2017.04.012>
- Holmes, P. & O'Neill, G. (2012). Developing and evaluating intercultural competence: Ethnographies of intercultural encounters. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 36(5), 707-718. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2012.04.010>
- Hrvatić, N., & Sablić, M. (2008). Interkulturalne dimenzije nacionalnog kurikuluma. *Pedagogijska istraživanja*, 2(12), 197-206.
- Kim, H., & Connelly, J. (2019). Pre-service Teachers' Multicultural Attitudes, Intercultural Sensitivity, and their Multicultural Teaching Efficacy. *Educational Research Quarterly*, 42(4), 3-20.
- Lourenço, M. (2018). Global, international and intercultural education: three contemporary approaches to teaching and learning. *On the Horizon*, 26(2), 61-71. <https://doi.org/10.1108/OTH-06-2018-095>
- Mischka, A. (2009). *Addressing disproportionality in the schools--perceived culturally competent practices at a middle school with an ethnically diverse population*. [Doctoral dissertation, University of Wisconsin]. UW-L Theses & Dissertations. <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1793/45130>
- Mlinarević, V., & Tokić Zec, R. (2020). Intercultural Competences in Initial Teacher Education-Comparative Analysis. *Croatian Journal of Education*, 22(4), 1081-1112. <https://doi.org/10.15516/cje.v22i4.3803>
- Piršl, E. (2014). Modeli interkulturalne kompetencije. *Pedagogijska istraživanja*, 11(2), 27-39.
- Rissanen, I., Kuusisto, E., & Kuusisto, A. (2016). Developing teachers' intercultural sensitivity: Case study on a pilot course in Finnish teacher education. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 59, 446-456. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2016.07.018>
- Rodríguez-Izquierdo, R. M. (2021). Does service learning affect the development of intercultural sensitivity? A study comparing students' progress in two different methodologies. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 82, 99-108. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2021.03.005>

- Romijn, B. R., Slot, P. L., & Leleman, P. P. (2021). Increasing teachers' intercultural competences in teacher preparation programs and through professional development: A review. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 98*, 103236. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2020.103236>
- Segura-Robles, A., & Parra-González, M. E. (2019). Analysis of teachers' intercultural sensitivity levels in multicultural contexts. *Sustainability, 11*(11), 3137. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su11113137>
- Spanierman, L. B., Oh, E., Heppner, P. P., Neville, H. A., Mobley, M., Wright, C. V., ... & Navarro, R. (2011). The multicultural teaching competency scale: Development and initial validation. *Urban Education, 46*(3), 440-464. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085910377442>
- Spinthourakis, J. A., Karatzia-Stavlioti, E., & Roussakis, Y. (2009). Pre-service teacher intercultural sensitivity assessment as a basis for addressing multiculturalism. *Intercultural Education, 20*(3), 267-276. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14675980903138624>
- Tarozzi, M. (2012). Intercultural or multicultural education in Europe and the United States. I Chiesa, B. D., Scott, J., & Hinton, C. (Eds.), *Languages in a Global World: Learning for Better Cultural Understanding*. (pp. 393-406). OECD Publishing.
- Zloković, J., & Vrcelj, S. (2010). Rizična ponašanja djece i mladih. *Odgovorne znanosti 1*(12), 197-213.