

PROMOTING TEACHERS' INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCES FOR TEACHING IN THE DIVERSE CLASSROOM

Krista Uibu¹, & Eda Tagamets²

¹*Institute of Education, University of Tartu (Estonia)*

²*Ministry of Education and Research (Estonia)*

Abstract

Culturally inclusive education continues to be a challenge in many countries: while teachers attempt to create responsive learning environments and teaching strategies, students from migrant backgrounds still face disadvantages in education. Only 35% of teachers in OECD countries feel prepared for teaching in a multicultural setting. Teachers may lack the necessary sensitivity, knowledge and/or skills, feeling insecure about how to respond to cultural diversity in the classroom. Even if there are theoretical courses in pre-service teacher training programmes, practical training opportunities in actual diverse classrooms are lacking. Also, schools are lacking experienced mentor teachers competent in culturally responsive teaching, as in many countries the demographic situation has undergone major changes in the last decades and continues to evolve. These issues need to be better addressed. The overall aim of our study is improved intercultural preparedness of teachers, through rich and authentic learning experiences. Based on in-depth analysis of current best practices, we will create an evidence-based teacher training program. This will feature video clips of the most common challenging pedagogical situations that may arise in a culturally diverse classroom. We expect the teachers who pass this program to have better intercultural competences so that they can practice culturally responsive and inclusive teaching. In order to assess the impact of the program, we have developed an instrument to measure the teachers' self-reported intercultural competences (knowledge, attitudes and skills) prior to and after the completion of the program. The structure of the questionnaire and differences in the domains of teachers' intercultural competence according to their teaching experience is introduced in the paper.

Keywords: *Intercultural competences, training program, questionnaire, diverse classroom.*

1. Introduction

In Europe, ethnic and cultural diversity in the classrooms is increasing, as a result of globalization and migration (Catarci 2013; Cloonan et al. 2017; Coulby 2012). This poses challenges to the societies who need to create preconditions for the social cohesion. Educational institutions are particularly important actors in linguistically and culturally diverse students' successful integration. While schools attempt to create inclusive learning environments, students with migrant background still face disadvantages (Dusi et al., 2017; OECD, 2015) and this may lead to their marginalisation. Teachers' knowledge, skills and attitude are important factors in successful inclusion of diverse student populations (Arar, 2021; Kozikoğlu & Aslan, 2018; Dimitriadou & Efstathiou, 2012; Moule, 2012). Attitudes, essential for the development of knowledge and skills needed for intercultural competences (Deardorff, 2006), are formed by significant personal experiences (Vedder et al., 2006). However, only 35% of teachers in the OECD countries feel that they are prepared for teaching in a multicultural or multilingual setting (OECD, 2019). Many teachers feel unprepared to work in a classroom with high cultural diversity (Catarci, 2014), making high-quality professional development in this area crucial (Parkhouse, Yi Lu, & Massaro, 2019).

Intercultural competencies in the teaching profession are reported to prevent exclusion among children and support the development of positive student self-image (Layne & Lipponen, 2016). These competences manifest on cognitive, emotional and relational levels, enabling teachers to operate in socially, culturally and linguistically complex contexts and understand the specific needs and challenges of the children they are working with. Despite the attempts to update university programmes to prepare teachers to serve in linguistically and culturally pluralistic classrooms, it is unclear how successful these are (Sleeter, 2001), or how substantively they address the needs (Zeichner, 2003). It must also be noted

that in several countries the schools' responsibility in preparing student teachers for their future work has increased over the last decade (Sandvik, Solhaug, Lejonberg, Elstad, & Christophersen, 2019): while theoretical knowledge of pre-service teachers is constructed in university classes, the student teachers often draw their teaching model from school mentors during practical training. However, as the changes in classroom diversity have been rapid, there is a shortage of experienced mentor teachers competent in culturally responsive teaching to serve as professional role models in tacit knowledge sharing.

These issues need to be addressed by creating richer learning experiences for both pre-service and in-service teachers, addressing knowledge and skills as well as attitudes, and involving the mentor teachers with a potential to become intermediaries between the universities and the schools, connecting student teachers' theoretical concepts with practical training and setting a professional example (Clarke, Triggs, & Nielsen, 2014).

While there are educational initiatives that address the issue of teachers' intercultural competences, not many of them focus on the early years and primary education; however, this is where the foundation is often laid to successful integration and learning.

2. Design

The overall aim of our study is improved intercultural preparedness and competence of teachers. The study consists of three phases, one of which is completed and the second one is in progress. In the first phase the teachers' intercultural competence questionnaire was developed. In the second phase, a training program is being developed. In the third phase, the impact of the training program will be assessed with the instrument, compiled in the first phase. Following, the development of the instrument and its' ability to distinguish differences between teachers' groups are presented.

3. Objectives

We expect the teachers who pass the novel teacher training program to have better intercultural competences, manifesting in knowledge and skills as well as attitudes. In order to assess the impact of the program, we developed an instrument to measure the teachers' self-reported intercultural competences. The following goals have been formulated, and the hypotheses based on them established.

- (1) To compile the teachers' intercultural competence instrument and determine its structure. Based on Deardorff (2006) and Spanierman et al. (2011), the three-factor model in the questionnaire is expected to detect domains of attitudes, knowledge and skills in the teachers' intercultural competence.
- (2) To find out differences in the domains of teachers' intercultural competence according to their teaching experience. We hypothesise that mentor teachers with longer teaching experience in teaching migrant students evaluate their knowledge, attitudes and skills of intercultural competence higher, in comparison with less experienced novice teachers.

4. Methods

4.1. Sample

A total of 167 pre-school teachers and 227 primary school teachers participated in the testing of the questionnaire (see also Timoštšuk, Uibu, & Vanahans, 2022, in press). Among them were 372 females and 21 males, one teacher did not specify their gender. Teachers' average age was 46.70 years (SD = 12.25, min = 21, max = 73), and their average teaching experience was 20.79 years (SD = 14.01, min < 1, max = 58). Three teachers did not specify their experience. Based on competence of teaching migrant students, teachers were divided into three experience groups: 1) teachers who had no experience in teaching migrant students (N = 140); 2) teachers with less than four years of experience (N = 180); 3) teachers who had more than five years' experience (N = 41). Many of teachers of the third group had also mentoring experience of novice teachers.

4.2. Instrument

The instrument was developed to evaluate teachers' intercultural competence across its domains of attitudes, knowledge and skills. *The Attitude scale* included items of respect, openness and curiosity towards diversity (n = 15; for example, *Intercultural classroom fosters learning between cultures*). *The Knowledge scale* involved items of teachers' knowledge of theory, culturally responsive pedagogy and strategies related to diversity (n = 6; for instance, *I am knowledgeable about the teaching strategies that affirm the ethnic identities of students*). *The Skill scale* comprised of items on teaching practices that integrate different cultures and cultural values (n = 10; for example, *When planning teaching activities, I*

consider the customs of different cultures). The agreement rate with each item was assessed on a five-point Likert scale (1 – strongly disagree ... 5 – strongly agree). The relevance of items were discussed with teacher educators, intercultural scholars and in-service teachers with experience in teaching migrant students. The questionnaire was piloted among 38 preschool and primary school teachers.

5. Results and Discussion

Estonian pre-school and primary school in-service teachers were surveyed with the aim to examine their intercultural competencies. To this purpose, the questionnaire was elaborated to evaluate teachers' competence in their intercultural attitudes, knowledge and skills. The findings supported the three-dimensional intercultural competence concept (Dearborn 2006; Spanierman, 2011), which included interactively associated domains of attitudes, knowledge and skills. Our questionnaire focused on the assessment of teachers' competence in teaching migrant students at preschool and primary school levels. Besides, the social-cultural context was considered in the formulation of items.

Next, we expected that teachers with different teaching experience evaluate their knowledge, attitudes and skills of intercultural competence differently. According to the results, experienced teachers evaluated their attitudes towards intercultural competences significantly lower than less experienced teachers, and teachers without experience in teaching migrant students evaluated their skills and knowledge lower than teachers with corresponding experience. This result is related to the idea that attitudes are directly associated with personal experiences (Guskey 2002). Previous research suggests that more multicultural education in pre-service teacher education positively affects teachers' attitudes and sense of efficacy toward helping culturally and linguistically diverse students (Bodur, 2012).

Following, we found that teachers without any experience in teaching migrant students evaluated their knowledge and skills of intercultural competence lower than teachers who had such an experience. This leads us to recognise the need for exploring the wider personal context of teachers, for instance, consider the positive effect of personal multicultural background (Gay, 2015). Thus, the follow-up study qualitative study, conducted in Estonia, showed that participants feel the need for a longer training module or professional development programme that incorporates theory and practice of teaching in heterogeneous classrooms (Vanahans, Timoštšuk, & Uibu, 2022, submitted). In this study teachers stressed the importance of such a preparation during both pre-service and in-service training to support the development of intercultural competencies required in diverse educational settings.

Based on this findings on first phase of the study and in-depth analysis of current best practices, we will design an evidence-based teacher training program featuring authentic video material with examples of the most common and challenging pedagogical situations that may arise in a culturally diverse classroom. These videos will be accompanied by texts for additional reading, assignments for reflection, self-assessment tests etc. We aim that teachers be able to create novel teaching strategies in order to boost the language acquisition and social inclusion of diverse student populations (i.e., subject-specific language training, active and contextualised teaching of academic skills, intercultural pedagogy, using process drama and digital devices, etc.). This will be a step further from the existing programs that concentrate on theoretical knowledge and lack authentic practical learning.

The training program will be launched, to be used for multi-faceted competences development, comprising knowledge, skills and attitudes of student teachers and mentor teachers. In co-operation with partner universities (e.g., from Sweden, Austria, and Latvia) we intend to implement the program in virtual collaboration of international student teams. In the third phase of the study, the trainees' intercultural competences prior and after the training program will be assessed with the designated instrument developed and validated in the first phase of the study. This feedback will be used to further develop the training program and add specific components or adjustments, if needed. The universities' and schools' networking needs to be further promoted, in order to support both novice and experienced teachers in becoming effective facilitators of intercultural competence.

6. Conclusions

Context, policies and practices regarding intercultural education vary across the countries of Europe. As the situation with migration changes, even experienced teachers who have mostly worked in ethnically and linguistically homogenous classrooms face new pedagogical challenges. The schools need to tackle these challenges in co-operation with the universities, combining theoretical approaches and critical reflection on authentic real life scenarios. We have laid down the groundworks of a training program that would address the professional development needs of both novice and experienced teachers in the domains of attitudes, knowledge and skills. We have also created and validated an instrument to

measure the program's efficiency. Based on a pilot study we will be able to estimate the efficiency of the training and get feedback for its further elaboration. Co-operation with partner universities in countries with different historical context and experience with cultural and linguistic diversity is an important added value that enables teachers and teacher educators to construct their pedagogical repertoire that will best suit the needs of the students and the society.

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