

INITIAL TEACHER EDUCATION AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE: THE MENTORS' PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

In a dynamic, multicultural, and inclusive educational environment, the cultivation of intercultural competence within initial teacher education constitutes a central dimension of professional development. Grounded in the ITC model (Dimitrov & Haque, 2016) and Kolb's experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984), intercultural teaching competence provides a coherent theoretical framework for strengthening teacher education, particularly within programs oriented toward global engagement and social justice. This study explores mentors' perceptions of existing support, challenges, and developmental opportunities for fostering intercultural competence in initial teacher education. The research tasks were: (1) to examine mentors' experiences working with students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds; (2) to identify challenges in implementing intercultural strategies; (3) to analyze the practices mentors use to support student teachers; and (4) to propose recommendations for improving intercultural approaches in teaching practice and study programs. A qualitative design was employed, using focus group interviews with seven primary school mentors in Serbia. All sessions were audio-recorded in their entirety and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The transcripts excluded references to extra linguistic features. During the coding phase and qualitative data analysis, thematic analysis was employed. A combined abductive coding approach was applied in the process of identifying and developing themes. The findings indicate the presence of two distinct discourses. The first, a humanistic discourse, frames intercultural education primarily as the affirmation and appreciation of diversity, emphasizing the inherent value of cultural plurality. The second, a transformational discourse, rests on the assumption that a culture of coexistence constitutes a dynamic and processual construct, shaped through open dialogue among teachers, students, and parents regarding tensions, inequalities, and challenges. Within these frameworks, mentors identified both effective practices and significant barriers. Effective practices include interactive and participatory methods, group discussions, project-based activities, managing sensitive parental perceptions, and reflective analyses for student teachers during practicum. The main barriers to the implementation of intercultural strategies include the lack of systemic support, limited resources, weak integration of theory and practice, and administrative constraints. The study recommends integrating intercultural content more systematically into teacher education curricula, restructuring practicum and school-based observation, providing continuous professional development for teachers and mentors, strengthening cooperation between schools and faculties of education, and fostering professional communities of practice.

Keywords: *Intercultural education, teacher education, mentors, primary school, diversity.*

1. Introduction

In contemporary educational contexts, increasingly shaped by cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity, the development of intercultural competence has become a key priority in initial teacher education (UNESCO, 2013). This reality places important responsibilities on future teachers. They need to understand intercultural contexts, respond to the needs of students from diverse backgrounds, promote inclusion and foster intercultural dialogue. It also places responsibility on teacher educators, who design and implement intercultural content and strategies within teacher education programmes. School-based mentors play a particularly important role in this process. During practicum, they directly influence student teachers' professional development by providing support, guidance and models of professional behaviour.

The theoretical framework of this paper is based on the contemporary approach to intercultural competence, more widely known as the ITC Model (Dimitrov & Haque, 2016), and Kolb's model of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984). The ITC Model (Dimitrov & Haque, 2016) represents an important framework for reflection and the enhancement of teaching practice in intercultural university settings. The model comprises 20 competencies organised into three categories: foundational competencies, facilitation competencies and curriculum development competencies. Foundational competencies relate to teachers' self-awareness and the modelling of intercultural competence. Facilitation competencies include communication skills and the encouragement of inclusive interaction with students. Curriculum development competencies refer to adapting teaching to diversity and engaging students in global and socially relevant issues. The model is used as a tool for individual and collective reflection and contributes to the development of inclusive pedagogy, the reduction of prejudice and the strengthening of social cohesion. As a second complementary theoretical framework, Kolb's model of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) is employed. It consists of four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation. The model is cyclical and links experience, reflection, theory and practice.

The concept of the teacher as a social agent (Priestley & Drew, 2019; Priestley et al., 2015) further explains how intercultural competence is applied in practice. This is especially visible in mentoring during initial teacher education. Teachers as social agents recognise, interpret and use environmental resources in teaching. These resources include the local community, cultural and social institutions, students' experiences and the digital environment (Hrastinski, 2021). Using such resources helps make intercultural content more concrete. It also supports the global dimension of learning. This encourages student teachers to connect theory with real social contexts (Dzerviniks et al., 2024; Holubnycha et al., 2021). Interaction with people from different cultural backgrounds, as well as analysing real teaching situations, supports reflective learning with mentor guidance. However, research shows that this potential is not always fully realised. The main reasons include limited systemic support, lack of resources and underdeveloped institutional frameworks for intercultural pedagogy (Dimitrov & Haque, 2016).

2. Methods

Although the importance of intercultural competence in teacher education is increasingly recognised in international theoretical and strategic documents (Dimitrov & Haque, 2016; Dzerviniks et al., 2024; UNESCO, 2009, 2013), how this competence is developed in practice—particularly through mentoring—remains insufficiently explored. Questions remain about the extent to which mentors have the capacity to support students in developing intercultural competence, the challenges they encounter, and the strategies they employ when working with students.

This study explores mentors' perceptions of existing support, challenges, and developmental opportunities for fostering intercultural competence in initial teacher education. The research tasks were: (1) to examine mentors' experiences working with students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds; (2) to identify challenges in implementing intercultural strategies; (3) to analyze the practices mentors use to support student teachers; and (4) to propose recommendations for improving intercultural approaches in teaching practice and study programs.

This study was conducted using a qualitative research approach, aiming to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences, perceptions and professional practices of mentors in the context of developing intercultural competence in initial teacher education.

2.1. Participants

Using purposive sampling, the study involved seven teachers from two primary schools in the Zlatibor District of Serbia, all of whom had relevant professional experience working with students from diverse cultural, linguistic and religious backgrounds (Table 1). The selection criteria included: (a) Work experience – both less experienced teachers (up to 5 years) and highly experienced practitioners (over 20 years) were included; (b) Professional status – all participants were actively engaged in mentoring within the teaching bases of the Faculty of Education in Užice; and (c) Diversity of teaching context – they taught in different classes within the first cycle of primary education.

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the participants (N = 7).

Socio-demographic characteristics	Category	f	%
Gender	Male	2	28,57
	Female	5	71,43
Age	25 – 30	3	42,86
	31– 40	3	42,86
	> 40	1	14,29
Work experience	< 5	2	28,57
	5 –20	2	28,57
	> 20	3	42,86
Grade taught	1st grade	3	42,86
	2nd grade	1	14,29
	3rd grade	1	14,29
	4th grade	2	28,57

2.2. Data collection procedure

Data were collected through focus group interviews. This method allows for the analysis of both individual mentors' perspectives and how these perspectives are shaped through interaction and the collective construction of meaning within a professional community. The focus group interview was conducted as a thematically guided discussion, with four key thematic areas defined in advance in the interview protocol. The discussion covered: (1) mentors' experiences working with students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, (2) challenges and barriers in implementing intercultural approaches, (3) strategies and forms of support provided to students during teaching practice, and (4) recommendations for improving teaching practice and teacher education programmes. The focus group interview took place in January 2026 and lasted approximately 90 minutes. Two researchers acted as moderators: one primarily guided the discussion, while the other recorded key insights and asked follow-up questions to deepen the responses.

2.3. Data analysis

All data were audio-recorded with participants' prior consent and subsequently transcribed in full. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A combined approach to coding was applied: deductive, guided by the research questions and the initial theoretical framework, and inductive, open to patterns emerging from the data. In the initial phase, key segments of text were identified and assigned codes reflecting their meaning. In the next phase, codes were grouped into broader thematic categories that captured the main patterns in mentors' experiences and perceptions. Themes were developed through continuous comparison of data, codes and preliminary interpretations, with ongoing refinement and redefinition of meaning. The analysis considered not only the content of individual statements but also the collective construction of meaning among participants. The final phase involved interpreting the identified themes in relation to the research questions and situating them within relevant literature on intercultural education.

2.4. Research ethics

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education in Užice (Decision no. 2941/1, 29 August 2025). All participants provided informed consent, with a clear explanation of the study's aims, the data collection procedure, and how the data would be used. Participation was voluntary, with the option to withdraw at any time without consequence. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured, and the data were accessible only to the research team.

3. Results and discussion

The findings reveal two dominant discourses in mentors' understanding of intercultural education, reflecting their prior experiences with students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds: humanistic and transformative (Table 2). The humanistic discourse was represented by 57.14% of teachers, while 42.86% adopted a transformative discourse. Both reflect different levels of conceptualising interculturality. The humanistic discourse focuses on accepting diversity, affirming cultural pluralism, and recognising identity as central to working with students. Mentors often describe everyday situations in which it is necessary to "calm tensions among students from different backgrounds and explain that everyone is equally valued," or note that "in practice, they most often work to teach children not to make distinctions and to respect one another regardless of their background." Their role is oriented towards fostering tolerance among students and parents and raising awareness among peers. The transformative discourse views

interculturality as a dynamic process developed through dialogue, reflection, and co-construction of meaning. Teachers describe situations where “misunderstandings arise due to differing family value systems, which are not ignored but addressed through discussion with students and parents,” or highlight that “the greatest learning occurs when conflicts of opinion are not avoided but explored through guided dialogue to understand why participants interpret the same behaviour differently.” This discourse involves actively engaging with tensions and misunderstandings and includes students, parents, and teachers in a shared process of understanding, giving intercultural education a broader social dimension.

Table 2. Identified themes on mentors' experiences working with students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Themes	Category	Codes	Typical Answers
The Humanistic Discourse (N = 4)	Understanding intercultural education	Valuing diversity; affirmation of cultural pluralism; recognition of different identities	“...teaching should be adapted but treat everyone equally.” “...it's a constant struggle with others' beliefs; the goal is to reach attitudes of acceptance.”
	Pedagogical practices focused on acceptance	Highlighting cultural and other differences; promoting tolerance; sensitisation; supporting students	“...to develop students' awareness of the importance of understanding other cultures.” “We talked about holidays; one girl mentioned she celebrates Bajram, so we observed it together and even visited her celebration.”
The Transformative Discourse (N = 3)	Interculturality as a process	dijalog; konstrukcija značenja; suočavanje sa izazovima; konfliktne interpretacije situacija	“Parents sometimes create additional problems, as they see everything through the lens of being a minority and feeling disadvantaged. This is a challenge and requires compromise.”
	Culture of togetherness	Participation; open communication; reflection	“It is important to involve both parents and students in discussions about differences and challenges.”

Regarding barriers to implementing intercultural education, mentors' statements suggest three key obstacles. Most teachers emphasised the structural nature of these limitations. A lack of institutional support was reported by 85.71% of participants, with one noting that “everything depends on the teacher's personal motivation, without systemic support.” Administrative constraints and limited time (57.14%) further hinder implementation, with mentors commenting that “there is no space for deeper intercultural discussions because programmes and obligations do not allow it.” Limited resources (42.86%) and a weak connection between theory and practice (42.86%) were also highlighted as significant challenges. Mentors observed that “what is learned at university often cannot be applied in the real classroom.”

In terms of effective practices and strategies, three main approaches were identified. Teachers indicated that the most effective strategies are those that shift teaching towards participatory and experiential learning models. This view was shared by 85.71% of participants, who emphasised interactive methods, discussions, and project-based learning as key approaches. Mentoring practices, recognised by 71.43% of teachers, focus on reflection and guided analysis during teaching practice. Mentors explained that “it is only through joint analysis of concrete situations that students begin to understand what interculturality means in the classroom.” Collaboration with parents (57.14%) was identified as a sensitive but important aspect of preparing future teachers. Mentors highlighted the need for careful communication: “The greatest challenge is when parents hold prejudices that affect the child – we must open the conversation carefully.”

Finally, four recommendations were identified to improve both teaching practice and initial teacher education. These emphasise the need for systemic transformation across all stages of teachers' professional development. Integrating intercultural content into curricula was supported by 85.71% of mentors, with the view that “interculturality should not be an add-on but part of every lesson.” Restructuring student teaching to focus on experiential learning was suggested by 71.43%, highlighting that “students need to spend more time in the classroom than in theory about the classroom,” moving away from the assumption that lesson delivery alone defines practice. Continuous professional development through communities of practice was supported by 57.14%, with mentors noting that “we learn the most from each other when we share real school experiences.” Strengthening collaboration between schools, faculties, and local communities was recognised by 28.71% as an important improvement, as without institutional connections, intercultural education remains fragmented and dependent on individual enthusiasm.

4. Conclusions

In the context of the theoretical framework based on the ITC Model (Dimitrov & Haque, 2016) and Kolb's model of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), the findings indicate that the development of future teachers' intercultural competence occurs through a cyclical interaction of experience, reflection, and pedagogical action. The transformative discourse aligns particularly well with Kolb's learning cycle, as it illustrates how intercultural competence develops through concrete experiences, their reflection, and application in new situations. At the same time, the ITC Model highlights the professional role of mentors as key actors who, through their foundational, facilitation, and curriculum development competencies, shape an intercultural learning environment. These findings confirm that integrating theoretical models with experiential practice is crucial for the sustainable development of intercultural education in higher education.

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