Intercultural Learning: Teachers' Perspectives on the Influence of Intercultural Education on Students' Competence

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Abstract

Intercultural education is an important dimension for both teachers and students in their personal and professional development. This research explored the primary school teachers' views on how intercultural education shapes students' intercultural competence. A 12-item scale from Bedeković's (2011) Survey Questionnaire (SQ) was administered to 217 primary school teachers in the Republic of North Macedonia. Statistical analyses using T-tests and ANOVA revealed significant differences in teachers' perceptions based on school structure, gender, teaching experience, prior intercultural education and education level. Based on these findings, intercultural education should be further integrated into curricula to enhance students' intercultural competence and better equip teachers for diverse classrooms.

Keywords: intercultural learning, intercultural education, intercultural competence

1. Introduction

Migration and globalization have profoundly impacted European societies, increasing the need for intercultural dialogue and fostering mutual respect by recognizing diversity. Schools play a critical role in equipping students with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to build a more democratic and equitable world. Intercultural education is essential in helping students navigate cultural diversity, with teachers playing a pivotal role in guiding this process. Teachers' intercultural competence, defined as an ability to function effectively across cultures, to think and act appropriately, and to communicate and work with people from different cultural backgrounds – at home or abroad (Leung et al., 2014). Collaboration between students, teachers, families, and the community enhances these competencies and fosters inclusive learning environments that prepare students for multicultural realities (Navarro et al., 2016). Research shows that teachers with high intercultural competence are better equipped to foster student outcomes, including improved academic performance, increased cultural awareness, and a reduction in prejudice and discrimination (Golub, 2014; Deardorff, 2006). This competence is especially relevant in countries like North Macedonia, characterized by significant ethnic and cultural diversity. However, teachers in North Macedonia face challenges in developing their intercultural competence due to limited training, inadequate resources, and pervasive societal stereotypes (Adili et al., 2023). Research collectively indicates that teachers view intercultural competences as vital for effective teaching in multicultural settings (Adili et al, 2024). Integrating intercultural education within primary school curricula significantly enhances teachers' intercultural sensitivity and competence, with particular emphasis on gender differences and the overall knowledge of intercultural education (Adili et al., 2023). Addressing these barriers through professional development programs and intercultural exchange experiences is crucial for fostering inclusive education and equipping students with the skills needed for a multicultural society (Popova-Koskarova, 2015; Adili et al., 2024).

Intercultural competence, often referred to as cultural or global competence, involves not only knowledge about other cultures but also the ability to communicate effectively and empathetically across cultural boundaries (Bennett & Hammer, 2017). As Becirovic & Brdarevic-Celjo (2018) point out, teachers must go beyond simply imparting knowledge to mediate between cultures, fostering environments where students engage in meaningful dialogue and mutual respect. Effective communication is at the heart of intercultural competence, requiring empathy, adaptability, and openness to different perspectives (Collier, 2015). In classrooms, teachers must create spaces where diverse cultural identities are respected and where students can learn from each other's perspectives. By promoting these intercultural exchanges, teachers help students develop the skills needed to thrive in an increasingly interconnected world.

This research aims to examine primary school teachers' perceptions of how intercultural education influences students' intercultural competence, with a focus on

differences based on school structure, gender, teaching experience, prior intercultural education, and education level.

2. Literature Review

In today's increasingly multicultural educational settings, intercultural education has become essential for fostering students' intercultural competence and preparing them for life in diverse societies. The role of teachers is pivotal in this context, as they shape learning environments that promote cultural understanding and respect. Teachers' intercultural competence is critical, encompassing cultural awareness, empathy, and adaptability in addressing the needs of students from various backgrounds (Barili & Byram, 2021). As Ting-Toomey & Dorjee (2015) assert, effective communication, particularly adapting language use to meet the needs of students from diverse linguistic backgrounds, is a key component of intercultural competence. Furthermore, Arasaratnam (2016) emphasizes the significance of intercultural communication competence for teachers, noting that they must be proficient in both verbal and non-verbal communication styles to foster inclusive and respectful classrooms. Scholars such as Glock et al. (2019) highlight the importance of teachers developing empathy towards culturally different students and respecting their cultural identities to build strong teacher-student relationships. In addition, adaptability in teaching approaches, as argued by van Middelkoop et al. (2017), is essential for meeting diverse learning needs, with teachers required to modify materials and incorporate culturally relevant content. Xhambazi (2021) supports this view, emphasizing that adaptive problem-solving is a crucial skill in multicultural contexts.

Intercultural education is further framed as a key response to the social and cultural changes brought about by increased migration and globalization, which have shaped European societies. Schools play a critical role in promoting democratic citizenship and intercultural dialogue, equipping students with the skills needed to live harmoniously in diverse societies (Barrett, 2018). This requires active collaboration among educators, students, families, and communities, as intercultural competence extends beyond knowledge of other cultures to encompass attitudes of respect, empathy, and self-reflection (Jurgilė, 2019). Teachers must cultivate reflective cultural identities and engage students in meaningful intercultural exchanges that promote global citizenship (Yemini et al., 2019). In addition, the emphasis on developing intercultural competence within education systems is grounded in the belief that diverse cultural assets can enhance learning environments. As noted by Álvarez Valdivia and González Montoto (2018), intercultural competence involves knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors that enable effective cross-cultural communication, which is crucial in fostering inclusive and supportive classrooms.

The principles of interculturalism advocate for the protection and promotion of cultural diversity, emphasizing the need for interaction and mutual understanding rather than mere coexistence (Klyukanov, 2020). This relational approach is reflected in European education systems, which aim to integrate interculturalism as a framework for reducing

discrimination and fostering sensitivity to cultural differences (Portera, 2019). Schools are seen as central to intercultural education, with programs that promote cooperation, dialogue, and tolerance among students from different cultural backgrounds (Cantle, 2016). However, scholars such as Hammarén and Lunneblad (2022) caution that simply acknowledging diversity is insufficient; active efforts must be made to create opportunities for intercultural relationships and dialogue. Cummins (2017) calls for schools to redefine their role in society by promoting intercultural education as a means to build care, civic responsibility, and solidarity among students. This approach is essential for addressing the ethnic, racial, and social inequalities that persist in many educational systems.

The implementation of intercultural education must consider both the content of the curriculum and the social dynamics of the educational process, particularly the relationships between teachers, students, and peers. Zenki-Dalipi et al. (2024) argue that the quality of teacher-student interactions significantly impacts students' success and the socio-emotional climate of the school. Intercultural education fosters openness to cultural diversity and challenges ethnocentrism, racism, and discrimination (Arneback & Jämte, 2022). Scholars such as Ohi et al. (2019) advocate for the integration of intercultural education into school curricula through the development of clear goals and competencies, with teacher-principal collaboration as a key factor in promoting intercultural competence. Roiha and Sommier (2021) identify cultural diversity, civil rights, equality, and peace as central themes in intercultural education, while Casinader (2016) emphasizes the importance of collaborative curriculum design in promoting intercultural understanding and respect. Schools must provide students with opportunities to engage in intercultural dialogue and develop the knowledge and skills necessary for navigating an increasingly interconnected and diverse world (Murrell Jr, 2017).

Furthermore, there is growing recognition that teacher training programs need to address intercultural education as a core component of teacher preparation. As noted by Romijn et al. (2021), many teacher education programs fail to adequately prepare teachers for the challenges of teaching in multicultural classrooms. Pre-service teachers must not only acquire theoretical knowledge about diversity and inclusion but also engage in practical experiences that allow them to develop intercultural competence. Lehman (2017) emphasizes the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy, which encourages teachers to connect students' cultural experiences to the learning process. Such approaches enable teachers to create more inclusive learning environments that recognize and value the cultural capital that students bring to the classroom.

Moreover, professional development for in-service teachers must focus on continuous improvement of intercultural competence. Cherng and Davis (2019) argue that teachers must engage in lifelong learning to remain responsive to the changing demographics of their student populations. Collaborative learning communities, as described by Goodwin (2020), provide a platform for teachers to share experiences and strategies for promoting intercultural competence. These communities foster professional

dialogue and reflection on teaching practices, helping teachers to challenge their assumptions and develop more inclusive approaches to education.

The integration of intercultural education into school curricula is supported by various international organizations and educational frameworks. The Council of Europe (2016) emphasizes the role of intercultural education in promoting social cohesion and preventing discrimination. Its framework for intercultural competence highlights the need for schools to develop policies and practices that support diversity and inclusion. Similarly, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) underscore the importance of inclusive and equitable education for all (UN, 2015). Goal 4, which focuses on quality education, calls for the provision of inclusive, equitable, and quality education that promotes lifelong learning opportunities. Intercultural education aligns with this goal by promoting respect for diversity and preparing students to become active global citizens.

However, there are also challenges associated with the implementation of intercultural education. One significant barrier is the lack of institutional support for teachers who are working to integrate intercultural education into their classrooms. According to Deardorff (2015), teachers often face resistance from school administrators, parents, or other teachers who may not see the value of intercultural education. Additionally, some teachers may lack the confidence or skills to address sensitive issues related to race, ethnicity, and culture in the classroom (Salazar & Agüero, 2016). Providing teachers with the necessary resources, training, and support is essential for overcoming these challenges and ensuring the successful implementation of intercultural education.

The importance of evaluating the outcomes of intercultural education initiatives cannot be overstated. Assessing the impact of these programs on students' intercultural competence is crucial for understanding their effectiveness and making informed decisions about curriculum design and implementation. As Byram and Wagner (2018) point out, there is a need for more research on the long-term effects of intercultural education on students' attitudes, behaviors, and academic outcomes. Longitudinal studies that track students' development of intercultural competence over time can provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of different teaching strategies and interventions.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Participants

The survey involved 217 primary school teachers from multiethnic regions of North Macedonia, with 27.2% male and 72.8% female. Of the total, 71.0% worked in monocultural schools, while 29.0% were employed in multicultural schools. In terms of teaching experience, 70.0% had less than 20 years of experience, whereas 30.0% had over 20 years of experience. Regarding intercultural education, 28.1% of teachers had basic education for work in multicultural schools, 15.2% received additional training during their teaching careers, and 13.4% independently studied intercultural topics. A further 23.5% had a combination of intercultural education from their studies, school work, and

independent study, while 19.8% reported having no intercultural education. In terms of academic qualifications, 85.7% of the teachers held bachelor's degrees, 10.6% held master's degrees, and 3.7% had PhDs.

3.2. Instruments

Data collection was conducted using a 12-item scale adapted from Bedeković's (2011) Survey Questionnaire (SQ), administered to 217 primary school teachers in North Macedonia. The questionnaire, available in both Albanian and Macedonian, featured closed-ended questions rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The internal consistency of the questionnaire was excellent, with a reliability coefficient of 0.96 (Zeller, 2005).

3.3. Data Analysis

In collaboration with school principals, a Google form questionnaire link was distributed to 350 primary school teachers. Ultimately, 217 complete responses were obtained, resulting in a valid response rate of 62%. The collected data were then entered into SPSS v. 25 for analysis. Cronbach's Alpha was employed to assess the reliability of the scale. The SPSS operation "Recode into Different Variables" was applied to create two categories: teachers with prior intercultural education and teachers without prior intercultural education. Descriptive statistics were utilized to outline the data's characteristics, while t-tests and ANOVA were conducted to identify significant differences.

4. Results

Th results shown in the graph indicate that 69.1% of teachers completely or mostly agree that intercultural education contributes to the development of "debating skills" among students. Furthermore, 65.4% believe that intercultural education aids in developing "non-violent conflict resolution skills." Additionally, 61.3% fully or mostly agree on the importance of "skills in expressing and arguing one's own views," and the same percentage (61.3%) agrees that intercultural education fosters "openness to different cultures (intercultural sensitivity)." Meanwhile, 60.8% believe that intercultural education enhances "the ability to perceive, analyze, and interpret situations and events in the environment (such as in school or the local community)."
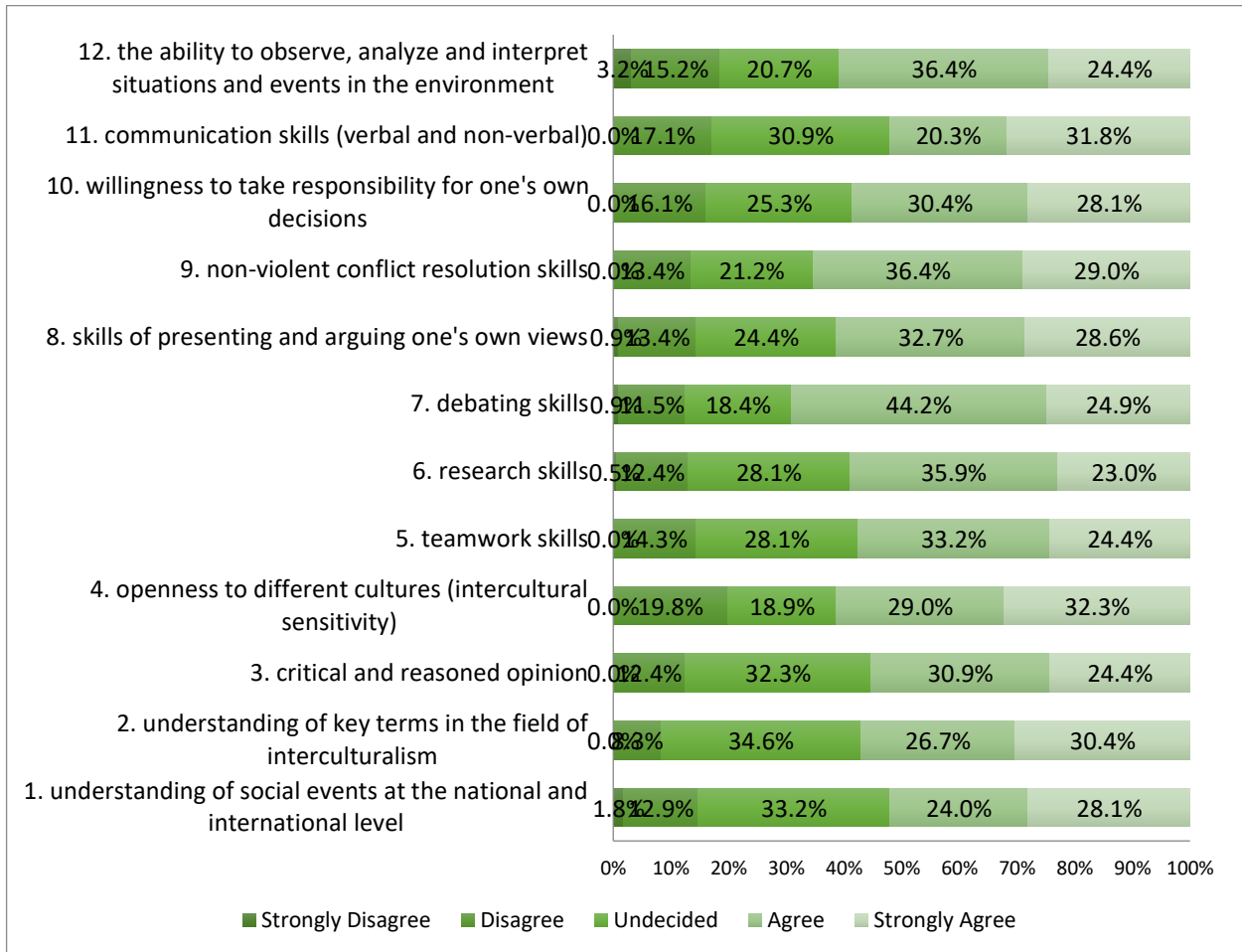
Figure 1: Teacher Perspectives on the Impact of Intercultural Education on Student Competencies

About 59% of respondents completely or mostly agree that intercultural education contributes to the development of "research skills." Additionally, 58.5% believe it fosters "willingness to take responsibility for one's own decisions," 57.6% believe it enhances "teamwork skills," and 57.1% completely or mostly agree that intercultural education promotes "understanding of key terms in the field of interculturality." A significant percentage of 55.3% of respondents also agreed that intercultural education contributes to the development of "critical and reasoned opinion." Furthermore, 52.1% indicated that it aids in developing "communication skills (both verbal and non-verbal)," while 52% of respondents believe that intercultural education enhances the "understanding of social events at the national and international level." The uncertainty among approximately 26% of teachers regarding the impact of intercultural education on students' intercultural competencies likely arises from insufficient training, varying pedagogical philosophies, and personal experiences with cultural diversity. As definitions of these skills evolve, educators may feel ill-equipped to integrate them into their curricula. Continued professional

development and collaborative dialogue are essential to bolster teachers' confidence in promoting intercultural competencies among students.

The t-test results in Table 1 reveal a significant difference between teachers' perspectives on the influence of intercultural education (IE) on students' intercultural competencies development in monocultural and multicultural schools. Teachers in monocultural schools (N=154) reported a mean score of 3.55 (SD = 0.800), while those in multicultural schools (N=63) had a higher mean score of 4.12 (SD = 0.928). The t-value of -4.540 and a p-value of .000 indicate that this difference is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), suggesting that teachers in multicultural environments perceive IE as having a more substantial impact on developing intercultural competencies among students compared to their counterparts in monocultural settings.

Table 1. T-Test of Teachers' Perspectives on Intercultural Education's Impact on Student Competencies by School Type

	Monocultural School (N=154)		Multicultural School (N=63)		t	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
Teachers' Perspectives	3.55	.800	4.12	.928	-4.540	.000*

*p<0.05

Table 2 presents the results of a t-test comparing teachers' perspectives on the impact of intercultural education on students' competencies, segmented by gender. The mean score for female teachers (M = 3.58, SD = 0.924) is lower than that of male teachers (M = 4.07, SD = 0.610), with a statistically significant difference indicated by the t-value of -3.798 and a p-value of 0.000 ($p < 0.05$). This suggests that male teachers perceive a stronger influence of intercultural education on student competencies than their female counterparts, highlighting a potential area for further investigation into gender-based differences in educational perspectives. One possible reason for this gap could be differences in teaching styles or experiences, where male teachers may emphasize the role of intercultural education more strongly or perceive its effects differently due to their own backgrounds or training. Additionally, societal and cultural factors might influence how each gender views the relevance of intercultural education in fostering student competencies.

Table 2. T-Test of Teachers' Perspectives on Intercultural Education's Impact on Student Competencies by Gender

	Female (N=158)		Male (N=59)		t	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
Teachers' Perspectives	3.58	.924	4.07	.610	-3.798	.000*

*p<0.05

Table 3 displays the results of a t-test comparing teachers' perspectives on the impact of intercultural education on students' competencies, categorized by teaching experience. Teachers with less than 20 years of experience (M = 3.58, SD = 0.875) report a lower mean

score compared to those with 20 or more years of experience (M = 4.03, SD = 0.803). The difference is statistically significant, with a t-value of -3.522 and a p-value of 0.001 (p < 0.05). This suggests that more experienced teachers perceive a greater impact of intercultural education on student competencies, possibly due to their longer exposure to diverse student populations, broader professional development opportunities, or a deeper understanding of intercultural dynamics in the classroom gained over time.

Table 3. T-Test of Teachers' Perspectives on Intercultural Education's Impact on Student Competencies by Teaching Experience

	Less Than 20 Years (N=152)		20 Years or More (N=65)		t	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
Teachers' Perspectives	3.58	.875	4.03	.803	-3.522	.001*

*p<0.05

Table 4 presents the results of a one-way ANOVA test, comparing teachers' perspectives on the impact of intercultural education on student competencies based on their education level (BA, MA, PhD). The ANOVA reveals a statistically significant difference in perspectives across the three groups, with F = 4.400 and p = 0.013 (p < 0.05). The Tukey test further indicates that the significant difference lies between teachers with a BA and those with a PhD, as shown by the mean difference of -0.907 (p = 0.011). Teachers with a PhD (M = 4.57, SD = 0.269) reported the highest perceived impact of intercultural education on student competencies compared to those with a BA (M = 3.67, SD = 0.876). However, there was no significant difference between teachers with an MA and those with either a BA or PhD. This suggests that higher education levels, particularly a PhD, may contribute to a stronger recognition of the influence of intercultural education on students' competencies.

Table 4. One Way ANOVA Test of Teachers' Perspectives on Intercultural Education's Impact on Student Competencies by Education Level

	BA (N=186)		MA (N=23)		PhD (N=8)		F	p
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Teachers' Perspectives	3.67	.876	3.81	.873	4.57	.269	4.400	.013

*p<0.05

Table 5 presents the results of a t-test comparing teachers' perspectives on the impact of intercultural education on student competencies, based on whether they have had prior intercultural education (IE). Teachers with prior IE (M = 3.81, SD = 0.813) reported significantly higher mean scores compared to those without prior IE (M = 3.32, SD = 1.014), as indicated by a t-value of 3.361 and a p-value of 0.001 (p < 0.05). This suggests that teachers who have undergone intercultural education perceive a stronger positive impact on student competencies, possibly due to a greater understanding of intercultural dynamics and pedagogical approaches that foster such competencies. These findings

highlight the importance of prior training in shaping teachers' views on the effectiveness of intercultural education.

Table 5. T-Test of Teachers' Perspectives on Intercultural Education's Impact on Student Competencies by Prior IE

	With Prior IE (N=174)		No Prior IE (N=43)		t	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
Teachers' Perspectives	3.81	.813	3.32	1.014	3.361	.001*

*p<0.05

5. Discussion

The findings of this study, which explores teachers' perspectives on the influence of intercultural education on students' intercultural competence development, provide important insights into how educators view the role of intercultural education (IE) in shaping students' abilities to navigate diverse social and cultural environments. These insights, grounded in the context of North Macedonian primary schools, reveal clear differences based on teachers' gender, teaching experience, educational level, and prior exposure to intercultural education. The statistically significant results from the t-tests and ANOVA analyses demonstrate that teachers' perceptions of IE's impact on students are shaped by various factors. For instance, Table 5 shows that teachers with prior intercultural education perceive a stronger positive influence of IE on student competencies (M = 3.81, SD = 0.813) compared to those without prior experience (M = 3.32, SD = 1.014). This finding aligns with research suggesting that teachers who have undergone intercultural training are more likely to recognize and implement intercultural competencies in their teaching practices. Studies by Agirdag et al. (2016) also underscore the significance of teacher training in fostering positive attitudes towards cultural diversity, which in turn influences students' intercultural competence. Similarly, the results of Table 3, which show that teachers with more than 20 years of experience report a stronger belief in the positive impact of IE on student competencies compared to less experienced teachers, echo findings from global research. Experienced teachers may have more exposure to diverse student populations and more opportunities for professional development, which likely enhances their understanding of intercultural education's role. According to Deardorff (2015), intercultural competence in students is best cultivated through the sustained and intentional efforts of experienced educators who are well-versed in intercultural dynamics. Teachers with more years of experience may be better equipped to engage students in meaningful intercultural learning due to their accumulated teaching strategies and deeper reflections on cultural diversity.

Another noteworthy finding is the difference in perceptions by gender, where male teachers (M = 4.07, SD = 0.610) report a higher perceived impact of IE on students compared to female teachers (M = 3.58, SD = 0.924) (Table 1). Although this result contrasts with some studies that suggest female teachers are often more attuned to issues

of diversity and inclusion (e.g., Gay, 2018), it may reflect context-specific attitudes or varying approaches to teaching intercultural education. Gender-based differences in perception might be influenced by societal expectations, teaching styles, or personal experiences with cultural diversity. Educational level also plays a significant role in shaping teachers' views, as seen in Table 4, where teachers with a PhD reported the highest mean scores (M = 4.57, SD = 0.269) for the impact of IE on student competencies. This finding is consistent with research suggesting that teachers with higher levels of education often possess more knowledge and a deeper understanding of intercultural education frameworks (Banks, 2015). Their advanced education may provide them with a broader perspective on the importance of intercultural competencies in preparing students for a globalized world. In contrast, teachers with a BA or MA may still be developing this perspective or may lack the same depth of theoretical understanding of intercultural education's broader societal implications.

Taken together, these results point to the significant role that intercultural education plays in developing students' intercultural competencies, but they also highlight the need for targeted professional development. Prior IE experience, more years of teaching, and higher education levels contribute to stronger teacher perceptions of IE's impact on students, suggesting that training and education can be key levers in enhancing the effectiveness of intercultural education. The findings align with broader research indicating that intercultural education positively influences students' abilities to navigate cultural differences, develop empathy, and enhance communication across diverse groups (Holm & Zilliacus, 2009; Barrett, 2021). Moreover, they reflect the importance of equipping teachers with the necessary skills to teach intercultural competencies effectively, as emphasized by Deardorff's (2006) process model of intercultural competence. This model underscores that intercultural competence is not only developed through knowledge but also through attitudes, skills, and internal outcomes that teachers can help students cultivate through intercultural education. In contrast, research by Gorski (2009) warns against the risk of superficial multicultural education approaches that fail to challenge deeper social inequalities. While the results of this study show positive teacher perceptions of IE's impact on students, it is critical to ensure that intercultural education is implemented in a way that goes beyond surface-level celebration of cultural diversity and fosters critical thinking and equity in the classroom.

6. Conclusion

This study contributes to the understanding of how teachers perceive the influence of intercultural education on students' intercultural competence development. The findings highlight the importance of teacher training, experience, and education level in shaping these perspectives. To maximize the potential of intercultural education, it is essential to continue developing teachers' intercultural competence through comprehensive training programs that address both the knowledge and skills required to foster students' intercultural development. Future research could further explore the long-term impact of

intercultural education on students' social and academic outcomes across different educational contexts.

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