

Title of the symposium: MULTICULTURAL VALUES AND PRACTICES IN SCHOOLS<sup>1</sup>

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A short description of the content of the symposium:

Ensuring peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development and quality inclusive and equitable quality education for all is the ultimate goal of every educational system that aligns with the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This means that education systems need to provide equal opportunities for all students regardless of their gender, ethnic and socioeconomic background, to thrive in both academic and socioemotional spheres. Since the escalation of conflicts in the Middle East, the issues of interethnic relationships and multicultural values have been re-emphasized on the international agenda. While educational policies typically embrace these values, ensuring equal opportunities for the academic and socioemotional development of diverse groups of students, and positive interethnic relationships in practice is much more challenging.

In Serbia, the gap between educational policies and practice has already been recognized. Despite anti-discrimination policies and measures, such as teams in schools that are engaged in preventing and combating discrimination and violence, children from vulnerable and disadvantaged groups are at a higher risk of discrimination and poorer academic achievements. Among the most numerous ethnic minority groups in Serbia – Hungarian, Bosniak and Roma, Roma students are at the highest risk of being discriminated against and experiencing many negative academic and (mental) health outcomes. Despite serious professional requirements from pre-service teachers and in-service teachers in terms of continuous professional development, teachers' competencies for inclusion and multicultural education are still insufficiently developed. The poor status of teaching profession, pressures from the superiors and parents, accompanied by a lack of opportunities to get recognized and promoted, additionally hamper teachers' work engagement and motivation for professional development. Although verbal and physical bullying among peers of different ethnic backgrounds is of low intensity, scholars point to steady modest interethnic distance towards Albanians and Roma.

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Given the socio-economic instability and authoritarian political regime in Serbia, as well as burning interethnic conflicts worldwide, it seems relevant to explore in more detail multicultural values and practices in schools and their implications for students' academic and socioemotional outcomes. In this Symposium we use the notions *multicultural* and *intercultural* education as synonyms because they are based on the same values such as respect for diversity, social justice, equity, and transformation through solidarity, cooperation and participation. As suggested by Gorski, we understand it as the education that provides educational experiences in which all students reach their full potential as learners and as socially aware and active beings, locally, nationally, and globally. Embracing such multicultural values, the schools build a positive school climate nurturing a safe environment, high expectations and positive relationships between students, parents and school staff of various ethnic backgrounds.

In this Symposium we encourage an evidence-based discussion on multicultural values and practices in secondary schools in Serbia by acknowledging the perspectives of students, their parents and teachers, as well as relying on school policy documents that embrace the schools' mission and vision statements. Additionally, in the papers within this Symposium based on the large mixed-method study, we tend to hear voices of both culturally dominant (Serbian) and minority groups (Hungarian, Bosniak, and Roma), from participants living in families of diverse socioeconomic and educational backgrounds and attending schools of different ethnic structures. This enables us to define recommendations for policy makers and practitioners about ways of improving teachers' competencies, school policies and multicultural practices, as well as the ways of increasing the chances of all students to thrive in schools.

**Key words:** multiculturalism, values, schools, education, ethnic

## MULTICULTURAL VALUES IN SCHOOL POLICIES

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As schools are perceived as institutions that are highly accountable for achieving Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG4, it is important to create comprehensive school policies that would highlight multicultural, inclusive and positive humane values and then to propagate these values and principles from the policies to everyday school practice. This paper aimed at investigating school policies of schools located in multicultural environments in different parts of Serbia and determining to what extent the school development planning embraced multicultural values, that is, to what extent mission and vision statements, priorities and goals, as well as planned activities and measures acknowledge the multicultural values and the need for nurturing positive interethnic relationships. School Development Plans (SDPs) of five primary and nine secondary schools were analyzed using qualitative content analysis and by relying on Gorski's comprehensive definition of intercultural/multicultural education. Documents were firstly analyzed deductively by searching for the key words referring to some aspects of intercultural education (multicultural/ intercultural; diversity/ tolerance/ respect; inclusion/ inclusive; participation/ partner; ethnic/ minorities/ Roma; democracy/ civic; stereotypes/ prejudices/ discrimination; equity/ justice/ equality). Then we analyzed the ways and contexts (mission, school strengths, projects, goals and planned activities) in which these aspects were presented within the documents. It was determined that two primary and two secondary schools explicitly integrated multicultural values in their mission and/or vision statements. Devotion to protection from discrimination and violence is usually recognized as a schools' strength. In general, all multicultural values typically appear in descriptions of activities of the respective school teams or measures that are planned as a result of schools' self-evaluation. Modest representation of multicultural values and already implemented activities and measures that bring together individuals of diverse cultural backgrounds in strategic documents point to the insufficient acknowledgement of the relevance of this topic. This may be a result of the minimization of interethnic differences and assimilation tendencies of the school management, and even entire communities or the results of still predominant focus on academic/ professional outcomes in schools. However, it is positive that schools envisage some activities related to strengthening multiculturalism. Implications for educational policies and school development planning are further discussed.

**Key words:** multicultural, values, school, policy, school development plan

## TEACHER INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

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Due to cultural diversity in modern societies, intercultural competences have become increasingly significant. In developing such competences schools and teachers have an important role. In order to foster intercultural competences in their students, it is necessary that teachers themselves are interculturally sensitive and competent. Therefore, the aim of this study was to explore teacher's intercultural competence in relation to some personal (gender, teaching experience, ethnic background, and intercultural experience) and contextual variables (school's ethnic structure and classroom diversity). The sample consisted of 409 teachers ( $M_{age} = 46.03$ ; 66.3% female; 74.6% self-identified as Serbian, 10.2% as ethnic minority, and 11.8% as having a mixed ethnic background) from 17 secondary schools in Serbia. The Ethno-Relative Worldview (ERW) scale (with Cronbach Alpha .97) was used to examine teachers' intercultural competence in terms of sensitivity and readiness to shift cultural perspectives and to show cultural empathy. Data about personal and contextual variables were collected by applying a questionnaire. Results show that teachers assessed their intercultural competence as high ( $M = 3.41$ ,  $SD = .59$ , on a scale 1-4). Teachers who grew up in a multi-ethnic families and who live in multi-ethnic families assessed their intercultural competences as higher ( $t(402) = -2.681$ ,  $p < .01$  and  $t(404) = -2.193$ ,  $p < .05$ ) compared to those teachers who do not have such intercultural experience. No differences were found in the self-assessment of intercultural competences related to the other personal variables such as the gender, teaching experience and teachers' ethnic background. Regarding contextual variables, teachers working in ethnically heterogeneous schools assessed their intercultural competences as higher than those working in homogeneous majority school (Tukey post hoc test,  $p < .01$ ) while there were no differences comparing teachers from those two types of schools with teachers from homogenous minority school. However, teachers working in ethnically heterogeneous classes and those working in homogeneous classes, regardless of school's ethnic structure, assessed their intercultural competence identically. The results prove the importance of intensive intercultural experience for the development of ethno-relative

worldview and indicate that teachers with monocultural experience need to be additionally supported through professional development in order to develop intercultural sensitivity and empathy.

**Key words:** teachers, intercultural competence, schools, diversity, ethnic

## ETHNIC DIVERSITY IN SCHOOLS AND MULTICULTURAL SCHOOL PRACTICES

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Schools are public institutions where young people are usually surrounded by more diversity compared to their personal networks. The way in which students respond to ethnic diversity can depend on different aspects of the educational environment, such as the school's multicultural practices. The implementation of strategies aimed at incorporating diverse cultural backgrounds and providing equal educational opportunities has been previously related to school ethnic composition (i.e. ratio between ethnic majority and minority students), but the results have been inconclusive thus far. In this paper, we investigated the relationship between ethnic composition - diversity and multicultural practices in 20 secondary schools in Serbia. Data were gathered from 1846 students ( $M_{age}=16.3$ , female 52.6%) using the Ethnic-Racial Socialization (ERS) domain of the School Climate for Diversity – Secondary (SCD-S) Scale, translated to Serbian and Hungarian. ERS consists of 16 five-point Likert-type items, organized around four dimensions: (1) Promotion of Cultural Competence; (2) Cultural Socialization; (3) Cultural Consciousness Socialization; and (4) Colorblind Socialization. Strong reliability was determined for ERS (Cronbach Alpha .88). School's ethnic composition – diversity was assessed based on the relative proportion of students coming from majority/minority groups. Schools were categorized into three groups: those in which the majority of students belonged to the majority ethnic group (Serbian), a minority (Bosniak/Hungarian) group or those with a relatively equal representation of the majority and minority groups. Results show that students generally perceived moderate levels of school's engagement in multicultural practices, with highest scores on Cultural Socialization ( $M = 3.29$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ) and Colorblind Socialization ( $M = 3.19$ ,  $SD = .92$ ). In educational settings where the majority of students were Serbian, schools were assessed as more committed to Cultural Socialization (referring to opportunities to learn about one's own culture, e.g., "In your classes you've learned new things about your culture.") than in the other two

school types ( $F_{(2, 1843)} = 3.83, p = .022$ ), with no differences between mixed and ethnic minority schools. Additionally, no other dimensions of ERS revealed any significant differences across the school types. Learning about one's cultural background was perceived as more prominent in schools with Serbian student majority, suggesting that curriculum, policies, norms and practices educational institutions adopt reflect the history, culture and perspectives of the majority ethnic group. Implications for the implementation of multicultural practices in Serbia are discussed.

**Key words:** ethnic diversity, ethnic minority, school, multicultural, school practices

### **Multicultural school practices - the perspective of students, teachers, and parents**

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Multicultural education exposes students to diverse cultural backgrounds, beliefs, and values. Research indicates its positive impact on inter-ethnic relationships, ethnic identity development, academic achievement, and personal well-being. This study aims to assess how individuals (students, teachers, and parents) perceive multicultural practices in secondary schools across various regions in Serbia. Additionally, it explores whether these perceptions differ based on participants' ethnic statuses (majority in Serbia - Serbian ethnicity, minority in Serbia - Bosniak, Hungarian or Roma, and mixed). The sample consisted of 1093 students ( $M_{age} = 16.26$ ; 52.6% female; 57.7% Serbian, 24.9% ethnic minority, 17.9% of mixed ethnicity) from 20 schools; 409 teachers ( $M_{age} = 46.03$ ; 66.3% female; 74.6% Serbian, 10.2% ethnic minority, and 11.8% of mixed ethnicity) from 17 schools and 617 parents ( $M_{age} = 44.84$ ; 65.2% female; 68.3% Serbian, 17% ethnic minority, and 14.7% of mixed ethnicity) from 18 schools. Participants completed the Ethnic-Racial Socialization (ERS) domain of the School Climate for Diversity – Secondary (SCD-S) scale, consisting of 16 items, organized around four dimensions: (1) Promotion of Cultural Competence; (2) Cultural Socialization; (3) Cultural Consciousness Socialization; and (4) Colorblind Socialization. ERS showed good reliability (Cronbach Alpha .883, .887 and .925 for students, teachers and parents respectively). Parents and teachers more frequently report on the promotion of multiculturalism than students do. The evaluation of multicultural practices remains consistent across students of various ethnic backgrounds, with two exceptions. In terms of the promotion of cultural competence (5 items, e.g., “At your school, they encourage you to learn about different cultures.”) ( $F(2, 1088) = 3.66; p = .026$ ), a post hoc test revealed that students from ethnic minorities scored higher than those from ethnic majority. Regarding cultural socialization support (3 items, e.g., “At your school, you have chances to learn about the history

and traditions of your culture.”) ( $F(2, 1081) = 4.79; p = .008$ ) the post hoc test indicated that students identifying as Serbian had higher scores than those with a mixed ethnic background. No differences in the perception of multicultural practices were noted among parents and teachers of different ethnic backgrounds. Given that multicultural education is foundational for a democratic society, understanding the perspectives of all participants, key actors in this process, is crucial, also the relationship between them.

**Keywords:** multicultural education, ethnicity, teachers, students, parents

## MULTICULTURAL SCHOOL PRACTICES AND STUDENT OUTCOMES

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Over the last four decades, there has been an increasing recognition of the necessity for the implementation of multicultural education. Studies have demonstrated that multicultural education enhances students' cognitive abilities, promotes critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and boosts other academic achievements. In this paper, we strived to examine how student perception of the school's use of practices that promote multiculturalism is associated with students' academic and socioemotional outcomes. The research was conducted on 1846 students from a total of 20 schools from different regions of Serbia. Multicultural school practices were assessed using the Ethnic-Racial Socialization (ERS) domain of the School Climate for Diversity - Secondary (SCD-S) scale (Cronbach's alpha for the ERS .883), which includes: (1) practices of developing intercultural competence in school, (2) practices of promoting cultural socialization and (3) awareness, and (4) practices of colorblind socialization. Student outcomes included overall life satisfaction (one item on the Personal Wellbeing Index scale), self-reported depressive mood (also one item on a 1-5 scale), academic achievement, satisfaction with academic success and class attendance (unjustified absences). The results showed that all four types of school practices examined were significantly correlated with student outcomes, with cultural socialization practices (referring to opportunities to learn about one's own culture) having the highest correlation with overall life satisfaction ( $r = .133, p < .001$ ), academic achievement satisfaction ( $r = .112, p < .001$ ), and student feelings of depression ( $r = -.104, p < .001$ ). Further analysis revealed that the perceptions of cultural socialization practices ( $F_{(5, 1840)} = 4.385, p < .001$ ) and colorblind socialization ( $F_{(5, 1840)} = 3.013, p < .005$ ) were significantly less prevalent among students with lower GPAs than among students with higher GPAs. Finally, the

perception of school colorblind socialization (teaching youth to ignore or devalue the role of race in society) was more prevalent among students who almost never missed school compared to students who missed school 3-4 times per month ( $F_{(3, 1842)} = 5.927, p < .001$ ) and even several times per week. Our results confirm that a more inclusive school environment is related to better academic performance and overall well-being among students. This finding underscores the importance of creating a welcoming and supportive school culture that values and encourages diverse perspectives.

**Key words:** multicultural education, academic achievement, life satisfaction, depression, student