



Developing Intercultural Competence in Future Early Childhood Educators: The Case of Mediterranean College

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates the extent to which prospective early childhood educators are prepared during their undergraduate education to address the demands of contemporary multicultural classrooms. Focusing on graduates of the School of Education, Mediterranean College Thessaloniki, the research examines the development of intercultural competence as an essential component of professional readiness. Employing a quantitative research design, data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to thirty-five graduates of the three-year degree programme. The analysis explored four key dimensions: (a) curriculum and academic content, (b) cognitive knowledge of intercultural theory, (c) pedagogical and communicative skills, and (d) emotional and attitudinal awareness regarding cultural diversity. Findings reveal that participants exhibit a satisfactory level of intercultural competence, expressing confidence in their theoretical understanding and pedagogical approaches. Nonetheless, several gaps persist in the curriculum – particularly in the provision of mandatory modules explicitly addressing intercultural education, opportunities for practical engagement in diverse educational contexts, and participation in seminars or workshops on inclusion and diversity. The results underscore the need for a more systematic and experiential integration of intercultural learning within early childhood teacher education to strengthen graduates' readiness for pluralistic educational environments.

KEYWORDS: cultural diversity, early childhood education, higher education, intercultural competence, multicultural education.

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Introduction

The phenomenon of mass migration has profoundly reshaped the demographic composition of contemporary societies, giving rise to multicultural classrooms that challenge traditional educational structures. Greece, due to its strategic geopolitical position, has emerged as a significant host country for immigrants and refugees, necessitating an education system capable of responding to linguistic, cultural, and social diversity (Giannakou & Karalia, 2023). Traditional monocultural and monolingual approaches are increasingly inadequate, calling for inclusive and intercultural pedagogies that promote equity, understanding, and social cohesion (Drosos et al., 2024). Early Childhood Educators play a pivotal role in this transformation, as their preparedness directly influences whether education functions as a space of integration or exclusion.

Theoretical Analysis

Previous research has highlighted the importance of intercultural competence in early childhood educators' preparation, emphasising that both cognitive understanding of diversity and practical pedagogical skills are essential for effective classroom management in multicultural settings (Lang et al., 2024). Studies indicate that many education programs provide theoretical knowledge but offer limited experiential opportunities for engagement with diverse populations (e.g., multicultural modules, workshops, or field placements), leaving graduates only partially equipped to address the challenges of contemporary classrooms (Fanous, 2020; Kim, Kim, & Hwang, 2022; Lash et al., 2020). Recent research highlights the importance of experiential learning in developing intercultural competence. Initiatives such as collaborative online international learning, immersive field experiences, teaching methods courses with intercultural training, and service-learning activities all enhance early childhood educators' skills and attitudes for inclusive practice, demonstrating that theoretical knowledge alone is insufficient for preparing educators for diverse classrooms (Bennett et al., 2024; Kopish & Zayimoğlu- Öztürk, 2024). These gaps underscore a critical issue in early childhood education: the extent to which prospective educators develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for fostering inclusive learning environments.

Research Aim and Research Questions

Within this context, the present study focuses on graduates of the School of Education at Mediterranean College, Thessaloniki. It investigates the development of intercultural competence as an essential component of professional readiness in early childhood education. Specifically, the research seeks to investigate how well early childhood educator preparation programs equip students with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to operate effectively in multicultural classroom settings. The study addresses the following research questions:

1. To what extent does the curriculum of the early childhood education program facilitate the development of intercultural competence in prospective educators?

2. What levels of intercultural knowledge, pedagogical skills, and attitudinal awareness do prospective early childhood educators demonstrate?
3. What challenges and anticipatory difficulties do they perceive when engaging with culturally and linguistically diverse early childhood classrooms?

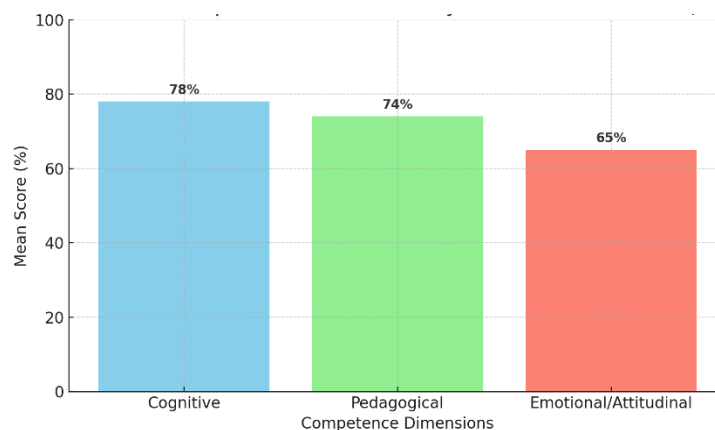
Research Results

Data collection was conducted using a structured online questionnaire, which was designed to measure four key dimensions: the participants' perception of the curriculum content and the three core dimensions of intercultural competence: cognitive knowledge (theoretical understanding), pedagogical/communicative skills (practical application), and emotional/attitudinal readiness (self-confidence and anxiety management). Statistical analysis was performed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Both descriptive statistics and inferential statistics were applied to analyse the variance and confirm the statistically significant differences ($p < 0.05$) observed among the competence dimensions, thereby highlighting existing gaps in professional preparedness.

Participants generally demonstrated a satisfactory level of intercultural competence, with the highest attainment in theoretical knowledge and the lowest in emotional readiness. The data highlights statistically significant differences between the cognitive, pedagogical, and emotional dimensions.

Figure 1

Intercultural Competence Scores of Early Childhood Graduates



While the quantitative competence scores provided a baseline, the analysis of the curriculum dimension revealed specific gaps contributing to the lower affective readiness score. These gaps concern the provision of specialised training and mandatory coursework. The majority of participants voiced a strong desire for intercultural education to be a mandatory component of their academic program. This finding directly supports the conclusion that gaps persist in the curriculum regarding

explicit mandatory modules.

Table 1

Student Opinion on Making Intercultural Education Courses Mandatory

Response	Count (N=35)	Percentage (%)
Yes	33	94.3%
No	2	5.7%

Data concerning the departmental organisation of scientific meetings and seminars on intercultural education indicated a significant lack of engagement with these experiential learning opportunities.

Table 2

Student Reports on Departmental Organisation of Intercultural Seminars

Response	Count ((N=35))	Percentage (%)
Haven't attended	14	40%
No	10	28.6%
Yes	7	20%
Don't know/Don't remember	4	11.4%

The finding that only 20% of students confirm the organisation of such events, alongside reporting non-attendance, validates the study's assertion that opportunities for practical engagement in seminars and workshops on inclusion and diversity are insufficient.

Conclusions

The study shows that future early childhood educators in Greece acquire essential intercultural skills through their academic programs, but more systematic, practice-oriented training is needed. Universities should strengthen courses in intercultural pedagogy, encourage reflection on personal cultural biases, and integrate real-world experiences in multicultural classrooms. Developing intercultural competence is crucial for promoting inclusion, equity, and respect for diversity.

Further research is recommended in three areas:

1. Intervention Effectiveness: Quasi-experimental studies to evaluate experiential interventions, such as mandatory field placements in multicultural classrooms.
2. Longitudinal Impact: Tracking graduates over time to assess the long-term effects of curricular gaps on intercultural competence and professional challenges.

3. Comparative Analysis: Examining programs across Greece or Europe to identify best practices in fostering comprehensive intercultural competence.

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