

EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AS A FOUNDATION OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN A MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY

Marija APOSTOLOVA NIKOLOVSKA

Advisor for Human Resources and Their Development

Government of the Republic of North Macedonia

marija.apostolova@primeminister.gov.mk

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ABSTRACT:

In the context of intensified globalization, migration processes, and increasing cultural diversity, the development of intercultural competence has emerged as one of the most significant objectives of contemporary education and upbringing. This paper examines educational development as a fundamental basis for fostering individuals capable of constructive communication, mutual respect, and active participation in multicultural communities. Through a theoretical analysis of multiculturalism, intercultural pedagogy, and contemporary educational practices, the study explores both the opportunities and challenges associated with the development of intercultural competencies in modern society.

Particular attention is devoted to the role of the family, school, and teacher as key agents in the process of educational socialization and the formation of value orientations that promote the acceptance and appreciation of cultural diversity. The paper argues that intercultural competence should not be understood merely as knowledge about other cultures, but as a complex system of attitudes, values, and skills that enable effective interaction in culturally diverse environments. Drawing upon comparative international experiences and recent research findings, the paper highlights the necessity of a systematic and long-term approach to multicultural education as a prerequisite for social cohesion, democratic culture, and sustainable societal development.

Keywords: *educational development, intercultural competence, multicultural society, multicultural education, intercultural pedagogy, social cohesion.*

Introduction

In the contemporary world, multiculturalism is not an exception but the rule. Globalization, migration and urbanization have created societies in which different ethnic, linguistic and religious groups coexist on a daily basis. In these conditions, the question of the educational development of the individual acquires new significance and a new pedagogical dimension. Education can no longer be merely the transmission of knowledge — it must be a space for forming individuals who will be able to function successfully in mosaic, plural communities.

The multiethnic character of society in the Republic of North Macedonia represents a significant contextual factor that fundamentally shapes educational policies and practices, thereby requiring a systematic approach to the development of intercultural understanding and social cohesion.

The aim of this paper is to examine the significance of educational development in multicultural conditions, to analyze the theoretical foundations of multicultural education, to investigate the roles of

different actors in the educational process — families, schools, the state — and to offer recommendations based on comparative and contemporary research findings. In this sense, the paper is structured into several thematic sections offering both a theoretical and practical perspective on multicultural education. Furthermore, the significance of multicultural education today extends beyond issues of cultural diversity and is closely linked to the need for building societies grounded in social cohesion, democratic values, and human rights. In an era characterized by increasing population mobility and intensive global communication, the ability to understand, respect, and engage constructively with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds has become an essential competence of the contemporary citizen. Consequently, educational development within multicultural contexts represents not only an individual concern but also a broader societal priority, as it directly influences the quality of interpersonal relations and the stability of democratic communities.

From a pedagogical perspective, multicultural education is increasingly recognized as a process that transcends the boundaries of formal learning and enters the sphere of value formation and personal development. Its fundamental objective is to cultivate intercultural sensitivity, critical awareness, and social responsibility, enabling younger generations to participate actively in the creation of more inclusive and equitable societies. Therefore, examining educational development in conditions of multicultural living constitutes a valuable contribution to contemporary pedagogical discourse and to the advancement of educational practice in the twenty-first century.

In contemporary multicultural societies, intercultural competence has emerged as one of the key competencies required for active and responsible citizenship. It does not develop spontaneously but rather represents the outcome of a long-term educational process through which individuals gradually internalize the values of respect, tolerance, dialogue, and cooperation. In this regard, educational development constitutes a fundamental pedagogical category that enables the formation of individuals capable of critically understanding cultural differences and constructively participating in social life.

The importance of this issue is particularly evident in the context of rapid social transformation, global interconnectedness, and increasing cultural diversity. Consequently, contemporary education is expected not only to provide academic knowledge but also to create conditions for the development of intercultural sensitivity and democratic culture as essential prerequisites for sustainable social development.

Multiculturalism as a Challenge of Contemporary Society

Multiculturalism as a phenomenon and concept in contemporary pedagogical thought represents more than the simple acknowledgment of the existence of different cultures. It implies the active valuing, respecting and cultivating of diversity as a source of enrichment for society as a whole (Banks, 2004). Academic interest in this topic grew in parallel with the increase in global migrations, especially after World War II, and continued intensively in the last three decades.

In this context, multicultural education is increasingly understood as a dynamic and continuous process that requires ongoing reflection, adaptation, and critical examination of educational practices. This implies that curricula cannot remain culturally neutral but must reflect the actual social diversity and ensure the representation of multiple cultural narratives. In this way, education becomes a space for dialogue in which students develop critical thinking skills, empathy, and intercultural sensitivity.

Furthermore, the successful implementation of multicultural education presupposes systemic support for teachers through continuous professional development and institutional mechanisms that promote inclusive pedagogical practices. Only through the coordinated action of educational policies, schools, and teaching staff can a sustainable educational model be achieved—one that effectively responds to the challenges of

The essence of multicultural education, according to Banks (2004), lies in creating equal educational opportunities for students from different racial, ethnic, social and cultural groups. The goal is not merely tolerance, but deep understanding and interaction among different groups. In this context, Drašković (2012) emphasizes that multiculturalism in education is a functional concept requiring concrete operationalization — not only a declarative acceptance of diversity, but also structural adaptation of educational content, methodologies and institutional practices.

The transformation of our society into an open democratic society must be grounded in a fundamental reform of the educational system. The modernization of teaching requires contemporary technology, appropriate spatial conditions, and above all — personnel prepared to face the challenges of a multi-ethnic environment. In this direction, Oljača (2007) emphasizes that multicultural education must not be a peripheral programmatic activity, but an integral value orientation of the entire educational system.

Relevant research shows that the approach to multicultural education in Western European countries differs significantly. Countries such as Canada and Sweden implemented systematic policies for inclusive education as early as the 1980s, with visible positive results in reducing prejudice and improving the school performance of minority students (OECD, 2023). In contrast, many countries of Central and Eastern Europe, including the Balkan states, still face institutional challenges in implementing multicultural educational policies.

In the context of increased migrations within the European Union and beyond, multiculturalism also becomes a matter of social cohesion and security. Research by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop, 2023) shows that countries that have invested in multicultural education demonstrate better indicators of social cohesion, fewer conflicts between ethnic groups and greater economic mobility for marginalized groups.

The Significance of Educational Development

Educational development represents the process of building the personality in its cognitive, emotional, moral, social and spiritual dimensions. It is not reduced to the acquisition of knowledge alone, but encompasses the formation of values, attitudes, habits and life orientations (Koprovski & Petrovski, 1999). In a multicultural environment, educational development acquires additional complexity — it must address the questions of identity, belonging, intercultural communication and the management of differences.

Moral values are not merely abstract concepts. They are closely connected to the moral qualities of the individual: kindness, tolerance, empathy, honesty, responsibility, justice and respect for others (Shirokih, 2007). Research shows that developing these values in children from early childhood creates the foundation for successful intercultural communication and for harmonious living in heterogeneous communities.

At the same time, changes in value systems in transitional societies particularly intensely affect adolescents, who are most vulnerable during periods of rapid social change. The educational process must recognize this and offer support for the building of a stable identity in young people — an identity that will be open to diversity rather than threatened by it.

A systematic literature review conducted by Agirdag, Huyst and Van Houtte (2012) for 25 European countries showed that the multicultural approach in education significantly improves the academic achievements of minority students, without negatively affecting the performance of majority population students. The findings indicate that inclusive education is mutually beneficial — it creates a better educational climate for all.

Particular importance in the educational process is given to the development of intercultural competence. According to Byram (2021), this competence encompasses: awareness of one's own cultural position, knowledge of other cultures, skills for intercultural interaction and critical awareness of social contexts. This framework provides concrete tools for teachers and educators in planning intercultural educational work. Educational development in multicultural settings cannot be reduced to the mere transmission of universal values; rather, it requires contextualization and continuous reflection in relation to specific cultural and societal conditions. Intercultural competence, as defined by Byram, is not simply a set of knowledge and skills but a critical framework that enables learners to understand and interrogate their own cultural assumptions. In this sense, the educational process becomes transformative — it not only shapes individual identity but also establishes a foundation for collective cultural interaction that strengthens social cohesion. Therefore, intercultural competence within the educational process constitutes a pivotal instrument for fostering societal sustainability. It not only enables learners to cultivate the capacity for dialogue across diverse cultural perspectives but also provides the conditions for critically reassessing their own value systems. When education is grounded in an intercultural framework, it becomes a process of reciprocal transformation: the individual is shaped through engagement with diversity, while the community acquires renewed cohesion by embracing pluralism as a fundamental value. This approach transcends the traditional dichotomy between majority and minority, establishing an educational environment in which differences are regarded as resources rather than obstacles.

The Family, School, and Teacher as Socialization Factors in a Multicultural Environment

➤ *The Family — the Foundation of Educational Development*

The family remains the primary factor of socialization and education. The values, attitudes and behaviors that a child acquires at home shape their relationship toward diversity even before they enter the formal educational system. Research by Verkuyten and Thijs (2013) shows that children whose parents express positive attitudes toward other cultures have significantly lower levels of prejudice and greater readiness for intercultural interaction.

In multicultural families or families with a migration background, the educational challenge is even greater. It is necessary to balance the maintenance of the native culture and identity with integration into the broader society. Institutions have an obligation to support such families through educational programs, counseling services and resources in multiple languages (UNICEF, 2022). Moreover, the family constitutes the primary social environment in which children develop their fundamental value orientations, sense of belonging, and perceptions of the “other.” The manner in which parents communicate about cultural, ethnic, and religious differences has a direct impact on the formation of children's intercultural sensitivity and social competence. Open family communication grounded in respect, dialogue, and acceptance of diversity creates favorable conditions for the development of tolerant and socially responsible individuals.

From a pedagogical perspective, the partnership between families and educational institutions represents a crucial factor in the successful implementation of multicultural education. When parents and schools share common values related to intercultural understanding and social inclusion, a coherent educational environment is established that positively influences the child's overall development. Such synergy contributes to the formation of citizens who are capable of critically understanding social differences while actively participating in the construction of cohesive and democratic communities.

➤ *The School in the Function of Intercultural Education*

The school is the place where the theory of multicultural education is transformed into concrete pedagogical practice. It is an environment in which children from different linguistic, religious and ethnic backgrounds share textbooks, playgrounds and experiences. This makes the school an irreplaceable place for building intercultural competences.

Research by Sleeter (2018), based on analysis of 150 studies of multicultural education, showed that effective multicultural schooling involves: revised curricula incorporating the perspectives of different communities, teachers trained in intercultural pedagogy, institutional policies that actively prevent discrimination, and environments that promote critical thinking about issues of justice and diversity.

The comparative analysis of educational systems shows that there are three dominant models of multicultural education: the assimilationist model (which encourages minorities to adapt to the majority culture), the pluralist model (which recognizes and cultivates differences) and the intercultural model (which actively promotes dialogue and exchange between different groups). The Council of Europe (Council of Europe, 2022) recommends the intercultural model as most effective for achieving both social cohesion and quality education for all.

In Republic of North Macedonia, the system of integrated education represents an important step toward creating conditions for the joint education of children from different ethnic communities. However, the implementation of this system still faces challenges — language barriers, segregation in some environments and insufficient training of teaching staff in multicultural pedagogy (Miskov & Nošpal, 2020). The school as an institution plays an irreplaceable role in transforming multicultural education from a theoretical framework into a practical reality. It is the arena where different models — assimilationist, pluralist, and intercultural — are articulated, and where their effects directly shape the educational development of students. Research confirms that the intercultural model is the most effective in creating an environment that not only acknowledges diversity but also transforms it into a resource for dialogue, critical thinking, and social cohesion. In the Macedonian context, despite progress through integrated education, there remains a pressing need for systemic support for teachers and institutions, as well as for overcoming linguistic and structural barriers. Only through such an approach can the school become a genuine laboratory for intercultural education and a driving force of democratic culture.

➤ *The Teacher as a Carrier of Educational and Intercultural Values*

The teacher is the key actor in the implementation of multicultural education. Their role is not merely the teaching of educational content, but also the modeling of intercultural attitudes and behaviors. Research by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009, cited in Sleeter, 2018) shows that teachers who reflect on their own cultural assumptions and prejudices are significantly more effective in multicultural environments.

Contemporary pedagogical theory, especially the critical pedagogy inspired by Paulo Freire, encourages teachers to recognize and deconstruct the systems of inequality that influence the educational process. This means that multicultural education is not merely a didactic technique, but a deeply political and moral commitment (Freire, 2023 [1970]). In this context, the teacher emerges as a mediator among diverse cultural perspectives, fostering a school climate in which differences are not perceived as barriers but rather as valuable resources for learning and personal growth. Through the implementation of inclusive pedagogical strategies and reflective practice, teachers contribute to the development of empathy, mutual respect, and critical thinking among students. Such an approach facilitates the deconstruction of stereotypes and prejudices while encouraging constructive interaction among learners from diverse ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds.

Furthermore, teachers' competence in the field of intercultural education constitutes a crucial prerequisite for establishing a democratic and equitable educational environment. Educators who demonstrate intercultural sensitivity are better equipped to recognize students' diverse needs and to ensure equal access to educational opportunities. Consequently, the professional development of teachers in the domain of intercultural competencies should not be viewed as an additional qualification but rather as an essential component of contemporary pedagogical professionalism.

Theoretical Frameworks for Multicultural Education

The understanding of educational development in multicultural conditions draws on several key theoretical frameworks that offer different but complementary perspectives. Although these theoretical perspectives originate from different scholarly traditions, they are united by the assumption that education is a process of actively constructing relationships, meanings, and values within contexts of cultural diversity. A common feature of contemporary theories of multicultural education is the rejection of assimilationist models and the endorsement of principles such as equity, dialogue, and mutual recognition. In this regard, multicultural education extends beyond merely acquiring knowledge about different cultures; it involves the development of capacities for critical reflection, intercultural communication, and constructive engagement with cultural differences.

Furthermore, these theoretical frameworks emphasize the need for educational institutions to create environments in which diversity is recognized as a pedagogical asset and a valuable resource for learning. Such an approach contributes to the promotion of democratic culture, social justice, and active citizenship, all of which constitute central objectives of contemporary education. Consequently, the theoretical foundations of multicultural education should be understood not only as conceptual tools for interpreting cultural diversity but also as practical guidelines for designing inclusive and equitable educational policies and practices.

➤ Intercultural Pedagogy

Intercultural pedagogy developed as a response to the limitations of traditional multicultural education. It emphasizes the dynamism of intercultural encounters, rather than viewing cultures as static, closed systems. According to Fennes and Hapgood (1997, cited in Byram, 2021), intercultural learning is a transformative process — it does not merely inform, but changes the self-awareness and identity of participants.

➤ Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy, particularly in its Freirean roots, places questions of power, justice and liberation at the center of the educational process. In a multicultural context, this means critically examining whose knowledge, whose stories and whose values are represented — or absent — in the educational system (Freire, 2023 [1970]).

➤ The Socio-Constructivist Approach

Socio-constructivism, based on the work of Vygotsky, emphasizes the significance of the social context in the learning process. The multicultural environment, in this context, is not an obstacle but a resource — the different perspectives, languages and experiences brought by different students create a richer 'zone of proximal development' for all (Vygotsky, 1986; Moll et al., 2023).

The three theoretical frameworks — intercultural pedagogy, critical pedagogy, and socio-constructivism — collectively emphasize the transformative nature of the educational process in multicultural contexts. Intercultural pedagogy highlights the dynamic character of cultural encounters and their potential to reshape identity; critical pedagogy foregrounds issues of power and justice within education; and socio-constructivism underscores the role of social context as a resource for learning. The synthesis of these perspectives allows education to be understood not merely as the transmission of knowledge but as the cultivation of critical awareness, intercultural competence, and social responsibility. In this way, multicultural education becomes the foundation for building a society that values diversity and transforms it into a driving force for democratic culture and social cohesion. The concluding insights into the significance of educational development in multicultural living conditions suggest that it must be conceived as a strategic process that transcends the traditional function of education. In such contexts, education is not merely a vehicle for cognitive advancement but a mechanism for cultivating critical awareness, moral responsibility, and intercultural competence.

Comparative Analysis: Experiences from Different Contexts

The comparative perspective in multicultural education offers valuable insights into which approaches work and under what conditions. In the following section we summarize the key findings from three different educational contexts.

Canada is considered a world leader in multicultural education. The official policy of multiculturalism established by the Multiculturalism Act (1988) and consistent funding of intercultural education programs resulted in a system that achieves excellent results in international assessments (PISA, TIMSS) regardless of students' ethnic or migration status (OECD, 2023). The key factor is the systemic approach — multiculturalism is not a program but a value framework for the entire educational system.

Finland, historically a relatively homogeneous country, has significantly increased immigration over the last two decades. Research (Nieto, 2022) shows that the Finnish educational system — with its emphasis on inclusion, flexible curricula and strong support for students with different linguistic backgrounds — successfully integrates migrant children without significantly reducing educational standards.

Germany employs a decentralized approach, with federal states exercising autonomy over educational policies. Gogolin (2011) emphasizes that linguistic integration through specialized programs and support is central. Although outcomes vary across regions, the system illustrates that language competence is fundamental to both academic achievement and social integration.

The Netherlands distinguishes itself through practices that actively involve parents and communities in the educational process. Driessen (2001) notes that schools promote transparency and intercultural interaction, resulting in high levels of linguistic competence and social cohesion.

Australia has developed national policies for equality and inclusion, with curricula reflecting cultural diversity. According to the Department of Education (2019), teachers receive specialized training in intercultural pedagogy, enabling stable academic outcomes and enhanced social cohesion.

In our country, strategies and pilot projects promoting multicultural education exist (Ministry of Education and Science, 2018), yet their implementation remains partial and often dependent on international support. Long-term institutional commitment, systemic curriculum revision, and continuous teacher training are required to ensure educational development that transforms diversity into a resource for social cohesion.

The comparison of these contexts points to several universal principles: successful multicultural

education requires political will, a systemic approach, investment in teaching staff and active community engagement. No single model can be directly transferred to another context without adaptation to local conditions and needs. These comparative insights underscore the necessity of perceiving multicultural education as a dynamic process rather than a static model. While Canada exemplifies an institutionalized approach grounded in legislative frameworks, and Finland illustrates adaptability in the face of new demographic realities, the common denominator lies in embedding multicultural values into the pedagogical logic itself. This implies that multiculturalism should not be treated as an ancillary program but as a foundational principle shaping teaching practices, educational policies, and school–community relations. The universal message is that each educational system must articulate its own version of multicultural inclusion, carefully tailored to its local historical, social, and political conditions.

The experiences of Canada, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, and Australia demonstrate that multicultural education is most effective when institutionally supported and embedded within national policies. Canada exemplifies a systemic approach grounded in legislative frameworks, Finland illustrates adaptability to new demographic realities, Germany emphasizes linguistic integration, the Netherlands highlights parental involvement and transparency, while Australia focuses on national programs for equality and inclusion. In comparison, North Macedonia has formulated strategies and pilot projects, yet lacks long-term institutional commitment and systemic implementation. The conclusion is that successful multicultural education requires not only political will and financial investment but also sustained support for teachers, schools, and communities, in order to transform diversity into a resource for social cohesion. A comparative table overview is presented in the appendix of the paper.

Table 1. Comparative Overview

Country	Key Policies and Practices	Outcomes	Challenges
Canada	Multiculturalism Act (1988); systemic approach; consistent funding	High PISA and TIMSS results; equal opportunities for all students	Balancing national identity with cultural diversity
Finland	Flexible curricula; strong linguistic support; emphasis on inclusion	Successful integration	Rapid adaptation to new demographic realities
Germany	Decentralized system; linguistic integration through specialized programs	Variable outcomes across states; language as basis for integration	Regional disparities and unequal resources
Netherlands	Active parental involvement; transparency; intercultural interaction	High linguistic competence; social cohesion	Balancing individual and collective cultural rights
Australia	National equality policies; culturally diverse curricula; teacher training	Stable academic results; improved social cohesion	Managing extensive ethnic and cultural diversity
The Republic of North Macedonia	Strategies and pilot projects; integrated education	Partial implementation; reliance on international support	Language barriers; insufficient teacher training

Therefore, multicultural education should be understood as a long-term social and pedagogical process that requires coordinated action among all relevant stakeholders, including state institutions, educational establishments, teachers, families, and local communities. Its effectiveness depends not only on the formal adoption of policies and legislative frameworks but also on their consistent and sustainable implementation in everyday educational practice. In this regard, the development of intercultural competencies among students constitutes one of the central tasks of contemporary education, as it contributes to the formation of citizens capable of living and acting within culturally pluralistic societies.

Furthermore, the findings of this analysis indicate the need for continuous scholarly research on multicultural educational practices and their effects on students' educational and social development. Only through critical evaluation and the exchange of good practices can educational models be developed that adequately respond to the complexity of contemporary multicultural societies. Consequently, multicultural education should be regarded not merely as an educational necessity but also as a strategic investment in the construction of democratic, inclusive, and socially cohesive communities.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Multicultural living is an unavoidable reality of the contemporary world. Educational development in such conditions is not only possible — it is necessary for individuals and communities to be able to benefit from diversity rather than experiencing only its challenges.

Effective multicultural education implies an integrated, systemic approach that engages families, schools, institutions and the broader community. It requires reform of educational content, appropriate training of teaching staff, institutional commitment to inclusivity and active partnership with families and communities.

In the context of the our country, the paper proposes the following concrete recommendations:

- Systematic revision of curricula to incorporate the perspectives and contributions of all communities;
- Development of mandatory training programs for teaching staff in intercultural pedagogy;
- Support for joint activities between students from different ethnic communities through extracurricular programs, projects and exchanges;
- Strengthening collaboration between schools and families,
- Establishment of systematic research monitoring and evaluation of the effects of multicultural educational policies.

Educational development in conditions of multicultural living is not an end in itself. It is a means for building a society in which diversity is valued and shared — a society in which every child, regardless of their origin, can develop into a free, dignified and humane individual. educational development within multicultural living conditions constitutes a fundamental prerequisite for building democratic and inclusive societies. It is not merely an educational objective but a strategy for social transformation that turns diversity into a source of creativity, solidarity, and collective progress. Education grounded in intercultural principles enables young people to cultivate a stable identity that remains open to others, while communities strengthen their cohesion by embracing pluralism as a core value. In this way, multicultural education becomes a driving force for social harmony and long-term sustainability.

The analysis of the theoretical and practical dimensions of educational development in a multicultural society confirms that intercultural competence is the outcome of a systematic and continuous educational process. Its development requires the coordinated engagement of families, schools, teachers, and the broader community in order to create an environment in which cultural diversity is recognized as a value rather than a barrier.

Therefore, educational development should be regarded as a strategic resource for building democratic, inclusive, and socially cohesive societies. Only through sustained investment in intercultural education and the cultivation of values grounded in respect for human dignity and cultural diversity can future generations be prepared for responsible participation and engagement in an increasingly interconnected and globalized world.

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