

October, 2021

**INTERCULTURAL DIMENSIONS OF INITIAL EDUCATION OF  
CLASS TEACHERS**

Prof. Vera Stojanovska, PhD

## Introduction

The internationalization of education through the globalization processes directly effects the new image of the school, based on international documents and a large number of declarations, reports and recommendations that provide the framework, tendencies and directions in educational policies worldwide.

In the past three decades in the Republic of N. Macedonia a number of changes have been made in the legislation, and a number of strategic documents, development programs and measures have been adopted in order to improve conditions in education in general, and in that context, to strengthen the intercultural dimension in its implementation.

The current *Law on Primary Education* (2019), which regulates the upbringing and educational process and the operation of primary schools, following the latest requirements for education, regulates the right to free and quality upbringing and education of every child and defines the following basic principles to be used as the ground for developing primary education: full development of a student; equality, availability, accessibility and inclusion; general character of primary education; provision of high quality education and international comparability of students' knowledge; active participation of students in the school and the community life; preparing students for lifelong learning; promoting similarities and accepting diversity, interculturalism and multiculturalism; physical safety and health care; autonomy, competence, responsibility and partnership between the school and the parents, i.e. legal guardians and the units of local self-government. (Article 4). This Law especially emphasizes the protection against discrimination and the promotion of equality, the inclusive character of primary education and the promotion of multiculturalism/ interculturalism and interethnic integration in primary education. The new *Concept for Primary Education* (2021) was created following these guidelines, being fully based on the three key principles: inclusion, gender sensitivity/ equality and interculturalism, which clearly outlines that schools should pursue these principles in order to encourage and support diversity and develop values for living together.

The *Concept for Intercultural Education* (2015) lists the following global principles<sup>1</sup> as a platform of intercultural education in the Republic of N. Macedonia:

- respecting the cultural identity of children and students by providing quality education for all;
- acquiring knowledge and shaping attitudes and skills required for active participation in social life;
- acquiring knowledge and shaping attitudes and skills that enable development of respect, understanding and solidarity between individuals and ethnic, social, cultural and religious groups, as well as between nations.

These principles serve as guidelines that should be respected in the planning and implementation of curricular and extracurricular activities in primary education.

The indicated importance of an intercultural education and its integration at all levels of the upbringing and educational system has triggered the preparation of a document entitled *Standards for Intercultural Education* (2021). Intercultural standards are related to the more general *National Standards for Primary Education* which define the learning outcomes in each educational cycle (1st, 2nd, 3rd) of primary education. Namely, this document specifies the intercultural standards, i.e., the key intercultural competencies determined for every single upbringing and educational stage in primary education, from first to third grade, from fourth to sixth grade and from seventh to ninth grade (end of third, sixth and ninth grade).

---

<sup>1</sup> UNESCO Guidelines on Intercultural Education (2006). Paris: UNESCO, 32-38.

Teachers play a key role in promoting the intercultural upbringing and education in schools. Thus, they should be sensitized to recognize the characteristics and needs of members of various cultures. In accordance with the dynamics of a modern society, teachers and other upbringing and educational entities in schools should develop competencies both during the initial education and their further professional development, which will enable them to successfully deal with the new demands posed by the society and the modern school.

## **Competencies of teachers for intercultural education**

The quality of realization of the upbringing and educational process in schools mainly depends on competencies of the teaching staff, including the professional associates and the school principal. Teachers should be equipped with basic professional competencies for successful and effective implementation of curricular, extracurricular and other activities within the scope of their professional role in primary school.

The modern approach to education and the modern school curriculum requires teachers with a number of diverse competencies, so that in their professional engagement they will be able to successfully respond to the latest requirements and realize the defined standards, i.e., to achieve the required educational effects. European and national standards, guidelines for competencies that students and citizens have to possess in the 21st century, serve as a starting point in defining the competencies of future teachers and the conception of their vocational training. Common European principles for defining the national policies related to education of teachers contribute to the determination of key competencies that teachers should acquire during their education, including the intercultural competencies. Acquired intercultural competencies are particularly important for teachers, as they should prepare students to live and work in a modern multicultural society.

Intercultural competencies can be defined as the capability to interact in a quality manner and interact with individuals from different cultures, the ability to adopt intercultural attitudes, knowledge and skills to more easily and better understand and respect other cultures. Therefore, an intercultural person is capable for critical and analytical understanding of one's own and another's culture. In this regard, the intercultural competence includes three essential and interrelated dimensions: communication dimension of behavior (skills), emotional dimension (attitudes) and cognitive dimension (knowledge). An intercultural competent person is capable to live in an environment in which any individual is accepted regardless of their cultural background, lifestyle or origin.

According to the *Concept for Intercultural Education* (2015), intercultural competencies include following categories:

- ✓ *Personal and interpersonal competencies* related to developed self-awareness, self-confidence, self-esteem, determination, commitment, emotion control, flexibility, willingness to active listening, efficient and effective communication, individual and team work, resolving conflict situations, time management of activities, etc.
- ✓ *Cross-curricular competencies* that include planning, programming, integration of curricular and extracurricular contents, effective application of information and communication technology in the field of integrated education, research, etc.
- ✓ *Cognitive and creative abilities and skills* that enable problem solving, critical thinking, decision making, innovation, originality, divergent thinking, etc.

The development of intercultural competencies of the future teaching staff is especially important in order for them to be enabled to encourage and create a healthy intercultural school community. Therefore, it is necessary to provide teachers with education that will assure acquisition

of knowledge, experiences and habits for implementation of intercultural competencies. The essential features of intercultural competence of teachers can be found in the relationship between the multicultural environment and the school open to diversity, whose components are: awareness of one's own and other cultures; ability to respect, successful verbal and non-verbal communication; understanding and accepting entities that belong to other cultures; interactive relationship with the "other" and the ability to develop reasoning free of stereotypes and anti-prejudice attitude.

Teachers are expected to acquire the most of the professional competencies (including intercultural) during the initial education and to further advance them in their professional development. Competent teachers are also expected to be guided by a *system of values* in their work, characterized by the notion that every student is able to learn and develop and that the teacher is responsible to enable this, that primary education should prepare students for lifelong learning, that cooperation with students and colleagues is a prerequisite for quality teaching process, that they must strive to respect human rights and the rights of the child in and outside the school and to actively respect diversity on all grounds and in all realms of social life.

### **Legal basis of the initial education of class teachers**

The *Law on Primary Education* of R. N. Macedonia (2019) provides that the upbringing and educational work in primary school is realized by teachers and professional associates (pedagogue, psychologist, special educator and rehabilitator, sociologist, social worker, librarian, etc.). (Article 79). Whereas, the Article 3 of the *Law on Teachers and Professional Associates in Primary and Secondary Schools* (2019) provides that a teacher in primary and secondary school can be a person who has completed at least four years of appropriate higher education in accordance with the Standard for educators defined in the curriculum and has acquired at least 240 ECTS. Article 6 of the Law states that: Teaching in primary and secondary school is carried out by teachers, and that the type of professional training of teachers who carry out the upbringing and educational work in primary or secondary school is determined by the Standard for educators in the curricula for the respective subjects, adopted by the Minister, at the proposal of the Bureau or the Center. The Standard for educators stipulates that class teachers are an appropriate profile for realization of the curricula in all subjects provided for the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th grade, except for the subject of English language. In other words, the teaching can be carried out by a class teacher or a graduated pedagogue.

Initial education of class teachers in R. N. Macedonia can be acquired at the following five higher education institutions/faculties:

- The Faculty of Pedagogy "St. Kliment Ohridski", "Ss. Cyril and Methodius University" in Skopje;
- The Institute of Pedagogy, the Faculty of Philosophy in Skopje, "Ss. Cyril and Methodius University" in Skopje;
- The Faculty of Educational Sciences, "Goce Delchev" University of Shtip;
- The Faculty of Pedagogy, "St. Kliment Ohridski University" Bitola; and
- Faculty of Pedagogy, the University of Tetovo.

Each higher education institution has developed its own programs of study.

## **Intercultural features of the programs of study for initial education of class teachers**

The Faculty of Pedagogy "St. Kliment Ohridski" and the Institute of Pedagogy at the Faculty of Philosophy, which are part of the "Ss. Cyril and Methodius University" in Skopje, are higher education institutions with a long-lasting tradition in profiling most of the teaching staff involved in the implementation of class teaching in primary schools in Macedonia. Considering that, the emphasis here is put on presenting and analyzing exactly these two programs of study from the aspect of the intercultural varieties, i.e., the representation of intercultural contents and their intercultural orientation, with no intentions to conduct comparative analysis from any point of view.

The program of study for the first cycle of studies for Elementary education at the Faculty of Pedagogy "St. Kliment Ohridski" and the Institute of Pedagogy at the Faculty of Philosophy in Skopje, abides to the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) and lasts 4 years, i.e., 8 semesters, during which the students need to acquire 240 credits – 30 credits in each semester. Both programs of study are created in a ratio: 60% mandatory subjects and 40% elective subjects, of which 30% are electives offered within the parent faculty, whereas 10% are electives from the free list of the "Ss. Cyril and Methodius University".

Programs of study provide practical training of students through various forms: pedagogical practice, hospitations (didactic-methodical) and pedagogical internship, which allows students to successfully participate in the upbringing and educational process in the school after completion of studies. The practical training of students is carried out in a number of schools or other upbringing and educational institutions – collaborators of faculties.

An integral part of both programs of study are the general and specific descriptors, led by tendencies of integrating the intercultural education in them and promoting the intercultural competencies of students – future class teachers.

The candidate receives the title *bachelor of elementary education* after completion of studies, and *graduated pedagogue* after completion of studies at the Institute of Pedagogy. According to the Bologna Declaration, each student after completion of studies, in addition to the certificate with passed exams with grades, also receives a Diploma Supplement which specifies the expertise of the profile.

The concept of creating the latest, most current programs of study, is in line with the contemporary world trends in the area of pedagogy, as well as the reform efforts that recently have taken place in R. N. Macedonia in the field of upbringing and education.

Studies in Primary Teacher Education at the Faculty of Pedagogy in Skopje are conducted in Macedonian, Albanian and Turkish language. The program of study includes 30 mandatory courses (32 in Albanian and Turkish languages) and 15 elective courses out of 39 offered within the program of study for Primary Teacher Education, as well as 5 courses from the list of electives from the "Ss. Cyril and Methodius University". During the study, the students have to choose at least one foreign language from the free list of elective courses at the "Ss. Cyril and Methodius University", and at least one subject in the field of inclusion in education or Methodology of work with children with disabilities from the free list of elective courses at the "Ss. Cyril and Methodius University".

Within this program of study, several mandatory and elective courses are in function of the intercultural sensitization of students – future teachers. In that context, only some of them are listed here – subjects that contribute to the development of students' intercultural competencies according to the defined goals, as well as the included contents, i.e., topics within their curricula.

The *General Pedagogy*, as one of mandatory courses, includes topics on the relationship between the upbringing, socialization and personalization; the student – the educator and factors in the development of the personality, as well as topics directly related to the multicultural and intercultural education. Within the subject of *Sociology of Education*, students learn about the multiculturalism and education, influence of religion in education, education and culture, democratization of education, and the relationship between ethics and education. Some of the topics provided within the subject *Children's Literature* refer to: the emergence and development of children's literature (developments in the world, European, South Slavic, and Macedonian children's literature); types and genres of children's literature; folk literature through the prism of children's literature; contemporary children's literature; other literary texts as a literary opus for children and analytical processing of the most important (authors and works) representatives of the European, South Slavic, Balkan and Macedonian literature; upbringing and cognitive potentials of children's literature. On the other hand, the *Family Pedagogy* includes topics about the school, family and diversity (multiculture, inclusion), family upbringing and cultural differences; family and school as important educational means; partnership between the family and the school – notion, needs, effects, barriers, forms, principles and support, and the humanization and effectuation of the family upbringing. Intercultural orientation is also apparent in the subject *School Pedagogy*, which provides topics that address the globalization and its impact on education (multiculture and interculture), as well as the promotion of the inclusion process. The subject *Methodology of Upbringing Work* offers some topics that can contribute to building the intercultural competences of students, such as: stereotypes and prejudices in education and ways to overcome them, pedagogical orientation of teachers and the classroom ambience; methods and principles of the upbringing work (method of encouragement, method of prevention, method of role-playing and method of persuasion and assuring) and their means; contemporary models, strategies and techniques of upbringing activity and establishing control in the classroom; communication and interaction in the process of upbringing. Here we would like to emphasize the importance of the contents of the subject *Didactics*, which allow students to learn about the relevant aspects of modern teaching, get well trained for constructive application of acquired knowledge in the upbringing and educational practice, develop critical thinking and ability to deal with educational challenges and get skilled to monitor, accept and encourage innovation in education as a prerequisite for successful professional practice in a multicultural community. Other mandatory courses and their goal and content orientation also contribute to the development of intercultural competencies of students, including: *Macedonian/ Albanian/ Turkish Language with a Culture of Expression 1 and 2*, *Pedagogical Psychology*, *Developmental Psychology*, *Fundamentals of Music Education with musical instruments*, etc.

The subject *Multicultural Education* can be singled out from the group of offered elective courses in the program of study. According to its title, as well as the defined goal and specified curriculum contents, it is closely related to the development of intercultural dimension of students. The goal of this course is students to acquire knowledge, skills and competencies for multicultural and intercultural education and to be able to develop awareness of the need to overcome stereotypes

and prejudices as limiting forces in modern societies and to apply those skills in their future profession as teachers. Contents provided for realization of this subject are: culture and society; historical, philosophical and sociological bases of the idea of multicultural education; influence of other cultures; contribution of various cultures to human civilization; impact of intercultural differences in communication; multicultural education within school institutions; prejudices and stereotypes as limiting factors in multicultural education and strategies for overcoming them; intercultural education; diversity as a value; multicultural education at international and national level; education for peace and tolerance.

The list of elective courses points to a presence of a large number of subjects related to the intercultural education seen from different points of view. For example, more pronounced intercultural dimensions can be observed in the subject *Ethics*. Namely, the program of study includes topics that let students to get familiar with the basic human values (axiology); establishment of ethical norms (autonomous and heteronomous ethics); structure of morality; concept and formation of a character, practical ethics; ethics of the teaching profession; social and vocational ethics. However, some other elective courses also include topics related to certain aspects of intercultural education. In this regard, we would like to mention the following subjects: *Religious Systems, History of Pedagogical Ideas, Literary Workshop, Management in Education, Communicology, Pedagogical Communication, Media Culture, History, National History, Lexicology with Phraseology, Fundamentals of Music Education with Musical Instruments, Integrated Curriculum, Workshop on Leisure Activities in Macedonian/ Albanian/ Turkish language, Methodology of Work with Gifted Children, Psychology of Personal Development, etc.*

Given that the elective courses are variable, i.e., that not all students choose the same courses, we will not go into their individual elaboration in terms of their contribution to building intercultural competencies of students.

The current program of study in Pedagogy includes 29 mandatory and 16 elective courses - 12 are electives that students are free to choose from the offered list of subjects from the Faculty of Philosophy, and 4 are courses from the list of free electives of the "Ss. Cyril and Methodius University". The program of study is structured in such a way that students in the 8th semester have to choose one of the four offered optional-elective groups of courses (preschool, school, andragogical and social-pedagogical) which include two courses in close relation to the chosen field.

The program of study in Pedagogy includes a lot of mandatory and elective courses with intercultural elements. The analysis of contents within the mandatory courses suggests presence of intercultural features in most of them. With regards to their order in the program of study, we would first point out the subjects *General Pedagogy* and *Theory of Upbringing*, which enable students for deeper understanding of general issues related to upbringing and education; relationship between the upbringing, socialization and personalization; factors in the development of personality; concepts of: morality, ethics and moral education; development of the idea of moral education; basic assumptions of moral education; dilemmas in the theory of moral education; goals and stages of the process of moral formation of a personality. Contents within the program of study of *Special Pedagogy* are aimed at acquiring basic knowledge about students with disabilities, their early detection, diagnosis and early intervention, education, care and socio-economic aspects of rehabilitation, as well as institutional care, education and rehabilitation. The subject *National History* offers topics to enable students gain knowledge about the historical development of upbringing and education in Macedonia and develop interest and abilities for its further studying and critical evaluation. The subjects *Didactics 1* and *Didactics 2* include a series of topics used to introduce students to the structural elements of teaching, traditional and modern teaching models, training for planning, organizing and evaluating the teaching, application of modern didactic approaches and innovation and individualization of teaching. The development of didactic competencies allows students to implement the acquired teaching and learning methodologies in an intercultural context. The subject *Pedagogical Communication* emphasizes the learning about communication as a pedagogical



category, the development of communication competencies, the acquisition of effective communication techniques and the development of effective communication skills in a narrower and broader context (in classroom, during teamwork and collaboration with families and the local community) and the development of critical thinking about media contents and training in analyzing (evaluating) the quality of different communication models. The contents offered within the subject *Comparative Pedagogy* are directed towards acquiring knowledge about the essence, character and methodological approaches in the comparative pedagogy and developing skills for comparative study of education and critical application of international educational experiences in a domestic context. The subject *Alternative Approaches in Pedagogy* is goal-oriented at acquiring competencies for essential scientific orientations in alternative pedagogical concepts and developing views about the impact of alternative pedagogical fields in conceptualizing the modern approaches to upbringing and education. The goals of the *Family Pedagogy* program are: acquiring knowledge about the impact of family upbringing on the child's development, developing proficiency and skills required for competent research of family upbringing, enabling to observe causes of family upbringing challenges, developing skills for professional support and assistance to families in fulfilling their upbringing role. Most of the topics covered in the subject program of the *Methodology of Educational Work* contribute to the development of intercultural competencies of students, which are related to: upbringing factors; current types of upbringing work (legal education and education for democracy, environmental education, education for human relations between genders; education for discipline); upbringing work in curricular, extracurricular, and out of school activities; pedagogical communication as a basis for shaping proper interpersonal relations between the educator and the student; planning and programming the upbringing activity; principles and methods of upbringing work. Mandatory courses also include certain contents related to the intercultural education: *Didactics in the Field of Language and Art, Andragogical Didactics, Initial Literacy, Methodology of the Pedagogue Work, Preschool Pedagogy 1 and 2*, etc.

The subject *Intercultural Education* can be singled out from the group of offered elective courses. This subject entirely deals with topics of interculturality. Its goal is aimed at sensitizing for work in an intercultural environment; introduction to the basic concepts and principles of intercultural education; acquiring skills for creating an intercultural environment curriculum. Within the implementation of this curriculum, and guided by the provided subject contents, students have the opportunity to acquire knowledge about: the social role of education, intercultural education as a global phenomenon, education in multicultural society, multiculturalism and intercultural education, education as a process of acquiring intercultural competencies, curriculum design in an intercultural context, role of the family and educational institutions. In addition, the subject *Ethno-pedagogy* is closely content-oriented towards the development of intercultural sensibility of students, by getting them to learn about the theoretical foundations and practical approaches in ethno-pedagogy, developing an interest in learning about upbringing aspects of the folklore and training in ethno-pedagogical research. The following are important elective courses for development of students' intercultural competencies: *Ethics in Education, Pedagogical Work with Vulnerable Children, Pedagogical Guidance, Media Culture, Interactive Approaches to Teaching, School Pedagogy, Teaching Strategies, Curriculum Development, Sociology, Pedagogical Psychology, Developmental Psychology*, etc.

Contents of elective courses suggest that most of them strongly advocate the intercultural education, so that students who select those subject and participate in their realization are provided with the necessary knowledge and experience in order to strengthen their intercultural competencies.

## **General findings and recommendations**

Insight into the program of study of Primary Teacher Education at the Faculty of Pedagogy and the program of study of Pedagogy at the Institute at the Faculty of Philosophy suggests that

intercultural dimensions are present in most of the mandatory and elective courses. They are especially evident in the proposed topics in the contents of some already indicated programs of study, in the defined goals and methods and forms of teaching work. Subjects that offer introduction to the universal human values, as well as the cultural values and traditions of members of different ethnic communities are recognized.

Intercultural education and development of intercultural sensitivity among students, as future teachers, cannot be acquired only within a single subject, but through a transversal approach to the existing subjects within the programs of study.

Almost all programs of study in both curricula show presence of various methods and forms of teaching work, such as: discussions, debates, workshops, independent work, research activities, individual, group and tandem work, simulation of situations, tasks for solving problem situations, role-playing, thinking and "cognitive" simulation of problem situations; practical education based on real situations (during the pedagogical practice in schools), etc. These teaching and learning methods, among other things, advocate the cooperative learning, interaction and critical thinking, where different abilities, knowledge, and attitudes of students are expressed, using real life situations in teaching that contribute to building different points of view on certain phenomena. On the other hand, the tandem and group form of teaching enable students to develop self-confidence, sense of responsibility and social skills, such as: cooperation, mutual assistance, tolerance, active listening and communication skills. Practicing of these methods and organization forms of teaching work are crucial for acquisition of key competencies, such as: verbal and non-verbal communication competence, interactive relationship with others, greater criticism, flexibility, tolerance, intercultural understanding etc., as important skills of intercultural communication.

General conclusion is that students in both programs of study can acquire and develop intercultural competencies, including the intercultural communication and sensitivity, both through the contents, methods and forms of teaching work, and through didactic-methodical hospitations, practical teaching or the so-called pedagogical practice in schools. Taking part in the school life and activities, as well as in the teaching practice, offers a solid basis for building, i.e., developing intercultural competencies of students through experiential learning about interculturalism.

In general, based on the analysis of programs of study in Primary Teacher Education at the Faculty of Pedagogy and the Department of Pedagogy at the Faculty of Philosophy, it can be concluded that both programs of study include intercultural elements (ethnic, linguistic, social, cultural, etc.), i.e., that provided contents are important for development of the intercultural sensibility of students, providing a sound basis for development and promotion of the intercultural upbringing and educational practice. However, it is a fact that 40% of the courses out of the total number provided by the programs of study fall into the group of electives, including the *Multicultural Education* and *Intercultural Education*, which offer topics of great importance for successful understanding of intercultural education and its further promotion in school practice. Not all students choose the same electives, which suggests that they do not possess the same level of intercultural competencies after completion of the formal education.

The actuality and importance of intercultural education of students – future teachers in the context of reforms of their initial education are more emphasized due to the growing cultural differences between student population. Therefore, the upgrade of the study and subject programs with intercultural contents from faculties of teacher education is of crucial importance, as well as the continuation of the professional development in that context.

In recent decades, several non-governmental organizations give their contribution to the implementation of various approaches for promotion of the intercultural relations between all entities in the upbringing and educational system in the Republic of N. Macedonia. We welcome most of the

project activities that recently have been realized (with a lot of success and great commitment) in the field of promotion of interculture in general in our Republic. The project activities realized in school environment are especially important, as well as the trainings for professional development of the teaching staff in order to enable them for effective application of various approaches to interculturalism in curricular, extracurricular and other upbringing and educational activities in their schools. In recent years, some non-governmental organizations have taken the initiative to organize trainings for students at faculties of teacher education in order to enrich, expand and deepen their knowledge in the field of interculture, but also to transfer the positive experiences and innovations in this area. Such project activities would strongly support the current programs of study at faculties of teacher education in the process of strengthening the intercultural competencies of students as future teachers. This would be of great benefit to the students in creating their profile of an interculturally more competent future class teachers.