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University's Role in Shaping Intercultural Competence Among Students

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Abstract

Throughout university studies, students are prepared and equipped with the knowledge and skills required for entering a specific profession. However, in today's globalized and culturally diverse society, this is not enough and the need for developing intercultural competence is of great importance. In achieving this, academic courses and students' overall university experiences can contribute significantly.

From here, this paper aims to examine students' intercultural competences, through assessing the three domains: intercultural knowledge, emotions and behavior. The survey was conducted on a sample of 81 undergraduate students at the International Balkan University (IBU) in Skopje, Republic of North Macedonia, who have taken the course Multicultural Education.

Results have shown that students have moderate to high levels in the domains of knowledge and emotions and slightly lower levels in the behavior domain. Findings suggest that students show awareness and care for issues related to the use of different languages, racial and gender inequalities, financial status, and differing sexual orientation, whereas the topics of ethnicity and religious prejudices, for which scores are lower, require additional efforts and need to be addressed in a more structured and proactive manner. This paper also provides recommendations for planning more meaningful and effective teaching and learning activities for the purpose of developing intercultural competencies.

Keywords: intercultural competence, culture, knowledge.

Introduction

Diversity, with all the aspects it brings in terms of diverse cultures, languages, traditions, values, and beliefs, is one of the characteristics of today's globalized society. It enriches people's everyday experiences and offers multiple perspectives and points of view of life. Through interactions in a multicultural environment, people learn about cultures different from their own, their customs and traditions, and become aware of various behavioral expectations and communication patterns. This allows individuals to perceive and recognize the existence of frames of reference distinct from their own, which broadens an individual's understanding of the world and life. Anyhow, this interaction doesn't always go smoothly and unchallenged. What is one culture's unique trait? At the same time, it can be perceived as different, strange, and sometimes unacceptable by the representatives of other cultures, which can lead to misunderstanding, misinterpretations, and even conflicts in everyday communication. In order to ensure social co-existence and cohesion between members of different cultures, individuals, and societies need to learn how to communicate effectively and respectfully and develop an understanding of the importance of establishing open communication, in which the uniqueness of each of the sides will be recognized and cherished.

On an individual level, this helps people to understand and get to know better those which they perceive as culturally different, to understand the worldview and values that guide their behavior. This understanding is a prerequisite for co-existence in a multicultural environment and connecting on a deeper level where values and beliefs different from one's own are understood and accepted. On a broader societal level, according to Janet Bennett (2014), effective interaction across cultures is necessary when aiming toward domestic inclusion and globalization.

Anyhow, despite recognizing its importance, it is not always easy to establish and maintain effective and meaningful communication across cultures, especially considering the fact that communication is very often interfered with and burdened with the negative influence of stereotypes, prejudices, and even hatred between representatives of different cultures. This creates obstacles in daily communications and builds barriers and divisions between cultures that should co-exist in the same social context.

Overcoming these obstacles is possible through proper education for young generations, which will teach them to understand cultures, both their own and others. This can be achieved through the overall education process, and specifically

through intercultural education. Intercultural education teaches individuals how to accept and appropriately communicate with others whom they see and perceive as different. It is an important part of the curriculum, which aims to “achieve a developing and sustainable way of living together in multicultural societies through the creation of an understanding of, respect for and dialog between the different cultural groups” (UNESCO, 2006, p.18).

This definition of intercultural education underlines its complexity and emphasizes that only learning about other cultures is not enough. Rather, a stronger effort should be made to learn how to become more efficient at communicating with others, not on a superficial basis but on a deeper level, which includes an understanding of and respect for values and beliefs different from one's own. This requires individuals to have developed intercultural competencies, which will facilitate and strengthen intercultural interactions.

Therefore, this article will investigate the construct of intercultural competence and its dimensions and will examine students' intercultural competences, through assessing the domains of intercultural knowledge, emotions, and behavior.

Intercultural Competences

With the growing diversity of people from different cultural backgrounds who live and operate in the same social context, the need for the ability to adapt and successfully navigate in complex environments becomes very much emphasized. This requires an individual's ability to perform “effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself” (Fantini & Tirmizi, 2006), which refers to intercultural competence.

Developing intercultural competence and learning how to interact with culturally diverse others, can be demanding and often challenging. It requires freeing oneself from learned communication patterns that have been transmitted, internalized and strengthened through the process of upbringing and socialization in one's culture, and being able to leave the usual mode of operating by openly approaching and engaging in understanding different ones.

The topic of intercultural competence has been at the center of researchers' interest in the last decades. Starting from the 1960s and 1970s, the focus was on studying and conceptualizing the construct of intercultural competence, with emphasis on intercultural adaptation and communication, whereas in the 1980s and 1990s,

various assessment tools were developed. According to Darla Deardorff (2023), one of the most renowned researchers on this topic, there is a growing interest in intercultural competence across various disciplines, which comes from the increasing societal divides followed by the issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion. Additionally, the emerging need for an interculturally competent workforce is also emphasized.

According to Marta Milani (2024), intercultural competence has a central role in overcoming the understanding of multicultural contexts as sources of risk and discomfort rather than as a resource for both individuals and society.

Due to its importance, intercultural competence and cultural literacy in today's society are believed to represent a "new kind of literacy" that is as essential as reading, writing, and numeracy skills. These competencies can be viewed as part of a broad toolkit of worldviews, attitudes, and skills that young people develop for their lifelong journey (UNESCO, 2009). Furthermore, Bennett (2014) considers that intercultural competence is necessary in all professional contexts; it facilitates global leadership in the corporate world, culturally responsive teaching, and learning at all levels of education, provision of culturally competent and sensitive healthcare, customer, and tourism service, thus emphasizing the multiple aspects of everyday life where this competence is useful and applicable.

Many authors define intercultural competencies, but one of the most comprehensive approaches was the one where the Delphi technique was used, where through a panel of internationally known intercultural scholars, consensus on what constitutes intercultural competence and how it can be assessed was developed (Deardorff, 2006). Consequently, intercultural competence is referred to as "the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (Deardorff, 2004, p. 194). Besides the given components, through this approach, other elements were underlined, including awareness, valuing, and understanding of cultural differences; experiencing other cultures; self-awareness of one's own culture; ability to shift one's frame of reference appropriately; ability to achieve one's goals to some degree, and behaving appropriately and effectively in intercultural situations (Deardorff, 2006, pp. 247-248). The latter emphasizes that the knowledge component by itself is not enough. Based on this study, the Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence (2004) was developed. It includes requisite attitudes, knowledge and comprehension, and skills, as well as desired internal and external outcomes. (Figure 1)

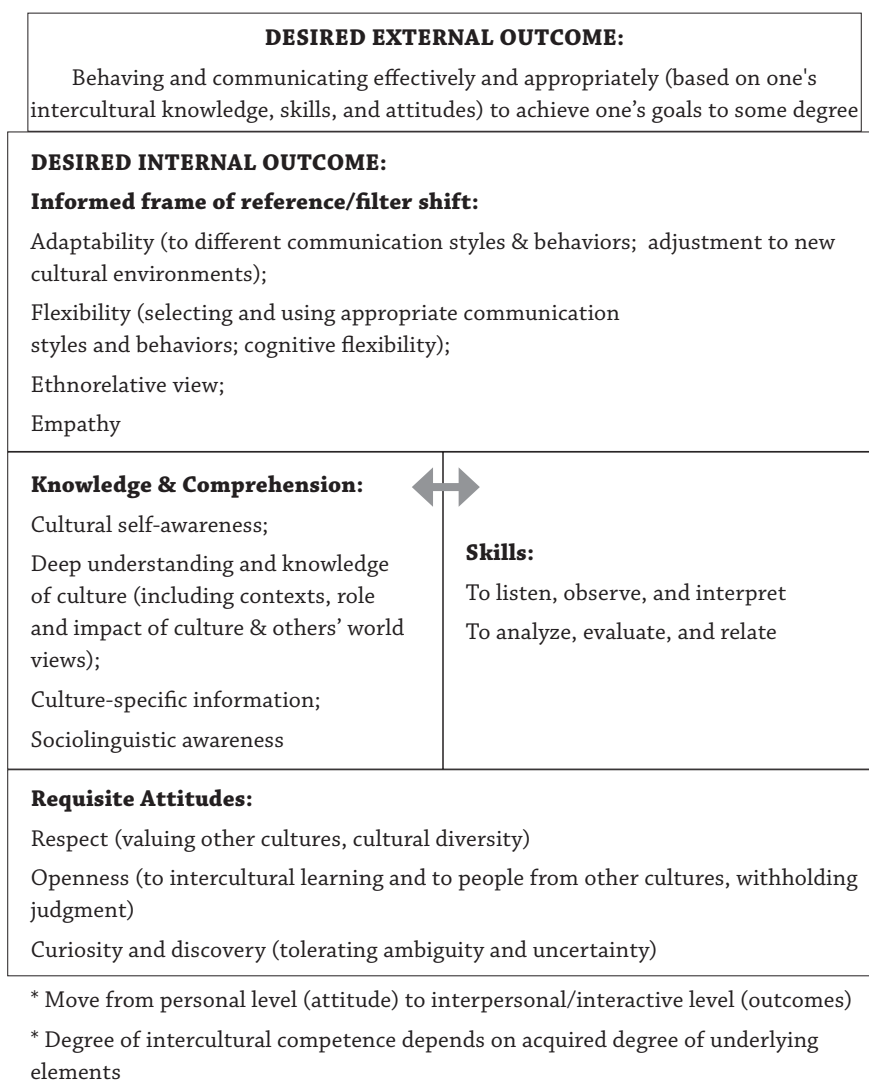


Figure 1. Deardorff's Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence.

Source: Deardorff (2004)

According to the pyramid, having the components of the lower levels enhances the upper levels. Attitude is a fundamental starting point, and process orientation and mindfulness throughout it are key since they allow awareness of the learning that takes place at every level and the skills needed for acquiring intercultural competence. Furthermore, the internal outcome involves a shift in the

frames of reference, which happens internally, within the individual, and the external is intercultural competence, which is the observable outcome (Deardorff, 2006, p.255)

Janet Bennett (2014) underlines that intercultural competence refers to “cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills and characteristics that support appropriate and effective interaction in a variety of cultural contexts and are referred to as the “head, heart, and hand components, or as a mindset, heart set and skillset” (Bennett, 2014, p.4). Cognitive competencies include cultural self-awareness, knowledge of other cultures, culture-general frameworks, and culture-specific information. Among them, cultural self-awareness is the key one and reflects recognition of cultural patterns that influence the development of one’s identity. Affective competencies encompass curiosity as the most important, than open-mindedness, tolerance for ambiguity, adaptability, and cultural humility, whereas behavioral competencies incorporate empathy, abilities to listen, communicate, manage anxiety, resolve conflicts, and develop relationships. Empathy, as the key competence, refers to the ability to participate, intellectually and emotionally, in another person’s experience.

The complexity of intercultural competence is also notable in the definition given by King & Baxter Magolda (2005) in Odağ et al. (2015), describing it as the “Ability to shift perspectives/behaviors into an alternative cultural worldview, capacity to create an internal self that engages challenges to one’s views and beliefs and that considers social identities in a global context, capacity to engage in relationships with diverse others that are grounded in an understanding and appreciation for human differences, social systems, and rights of others” (Odağ et al, 2015, p. 03).

All of these definitions underline the complex nature of intercultural competence and the multiple skills and abilities that should be acquired to prepare individuals who will have developed cultural understanding and acceptance of differences, who will be willing to integrate the newly learned contents into their own cultural identity, will be flexible enough to make a shift in perceptions, to interact appropriately and adapt to diverse cultural contexts.

Developing Intercultural Competence

There are two main approaches to developing intercultural competencies: formal and informal/non-formal learning Deardoff (2020).

- Formal intercultural learning occurs through formal education and the curriculum at all levels of schooling, specific courses focused on learning about cultures and particular elements of intercultural competencies, and formalized experiential learning opportunities (such as through job training or studying or working abroad). At the tertiary level, the course Intercultural Education is an example of a specific course aimed at developing intercultural competence. In the publication, UNESCO Guidelines on Intercultural Education (2006) are given the basic principles in its application. They refer to:
 - Organizing intercultural education that respects the cultural identity of the learner by providing culturally responsive teaching for all. This should be founded in incorporating history, knowledge, and value systems characteristic for different cultures, developing understanding and appreciation for cultural identities, languages, and values, and using teaching and assessment methods that are culturally appropriate and provide participatory and contextualized learning);
 - Providing every learner with the cultural knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to achieve active and full participation in society. This can be achieved through provision of equal access to education and opportunities for participation in the learning process for all cultural groups, the elimination of all forms of discrimination in the education system, providing a safe and peaceful environment, and the introducing of curricula contents that involve various cultural systems and aim at eliminating prejudices, using teaching methods that promote learners' active participation opportunity for every learner to express him or herself and engage in a dialog.
 - Developing intercultural competencies in a way that will enable learners to contribute to respect, understanding, and solidarity among individuals and groups. This principle can be put into practice through using teaching and learning methods that will guide learners in discovering cultural diversity, raising awareness about and learning how to show understanding for all peoples, cultures, values, and ways of life and respecting different patterns of thinking, developing a critical attitude toward racism and discrimination, etc. (UNESCO, 2006, pp. 31-38)
- Informal and non-formal learning opportunities occur in cultural exchanges through fine arts, cultural organizations, public spaces (museums and libraries), media, etc. Some of the forms would include exhibitions, music concerts, cultural events, film and theater performances, reading groups, etc. In these

contexts, learning happens through culture as a medium and form of expression and communication and via daily lived experiences in interacting with those who differ in age, gender, religion, ethnicity, socio-economic status, or political beliefs. Additionally, with the development of information and communication technologies, individuals have on disposal many resources for learning and self-education, which can support broadening one's knowledge of other cultures and enable one to engage in intercultural communication.

In an educational setting, it could be said that this learning encompasses the hidden curriculum, where through the interaction in the school environment, students learn about different cultures, values, norms, and customs, thus providing them with experience valuable in navigating intercultural interactions and communication. The unstructured situations in everyday school life provide students with the opportunity to practice and improve their intercultural competencies.

Marta Milani (2018) underlines that educational settings, as well as extracurricular experiences, and informal learning contexts, which include leisure, travel, volunteer work, non-institutional courses, and others, give the possibility to establish connections, reinterpret experiences and thus create opportunities that allow acquired competences to be made explicit and applicable. In this regard, she speaks about the concept of educating the community, where the community is seen as a valuable resource that can influence the continuous updating of intercultural competencies, thus enabling it to be more responsive to the needs of the environment.

Intercultural Competence During University Studies

Students' transition from high school to university is a journey from a simple world to a complex one, with academic, social, ethnic, and cultural transitions simultaneously occurring. Intercultural competence plays a crucial role in facilitating these cultural transitions and learning how to navigate easily in diverse cultural contexts. Hang and Zhang (2007) believe that enhancing intercultural competence during university studies enriches social interactions and cultural understanding and helps students in their academic pursuits too.

Developing intercultural competence among students at universities requires significant effort from all included stakeholders. This implies not only adding specifically designed courses but rather broader actions that will encompass all aspects of university education, including the application of culturally responsive teaching and educational practices that foster intercultural learning, inclusion of

culturally diverse populations, student exchanges, intergroup dialogs, and inclusive extra-curricular and campus activities which engage students and staff from different cultural backgrounds. These interventions are a significant step toward creating an environment that will contribute to strengthening students' capacities for intercultural competence.

In this direction, authors King, Perez, and Shim (2013) in their study were focused on exploring another aspect of developing students' intercultural competence, which is how students learn and what are the conditions for intercultural learning and effectiveness. In the study conducted in a university setting and through a qualitative inquiry, they identified three major aspects: intercultural learning occurs through direct encounters and experiences with others (including courses, service-learning programs, club activities, and friendships); the key dimension in the learning process is the environment in which students feel safe to engage in and explore cultural differences; and students use multiple approaches for intercultural learning, varying from simple listening and observing, comparison and contrast of ideas, engaging in personal reflection, exploring one's identity, to empathizing with others. The goal of this study was to give guidelines on how educators can promote intercultural effectiveness in collegiate settings. Their research findings underlined the following practice recommendations: to provide opportunities for intercultural experiences outside of regular education hours through other extra-curricular activities, which will offer lots of opportunities for new friendships and sharing experiences; and instead of one-time campus activities, the focus should be on designing activities that will motivate students to engage in critical exploration of cultures as a way for enriching the capacities for intercultural learning.

Method

This study aimed to examine students' intercultural competencies through the cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains, or more specifically, to explore students' intercultural knowledge, emotions, and behavioral predispositions in intercultural interactions. For this purpose, the Munroe Multicultural Attitude Scale Questionnaire (MASQUE) (Munroe & Pearson, 2006)¹ was used. The questionnaire explores students' attitudes and behaviors when navigating in a multicultural

1 In this paper the term "Intercultural" is used instead of "Multicultural" due to the broader meaning of the term intercultural and its wider acceptance in the literature.

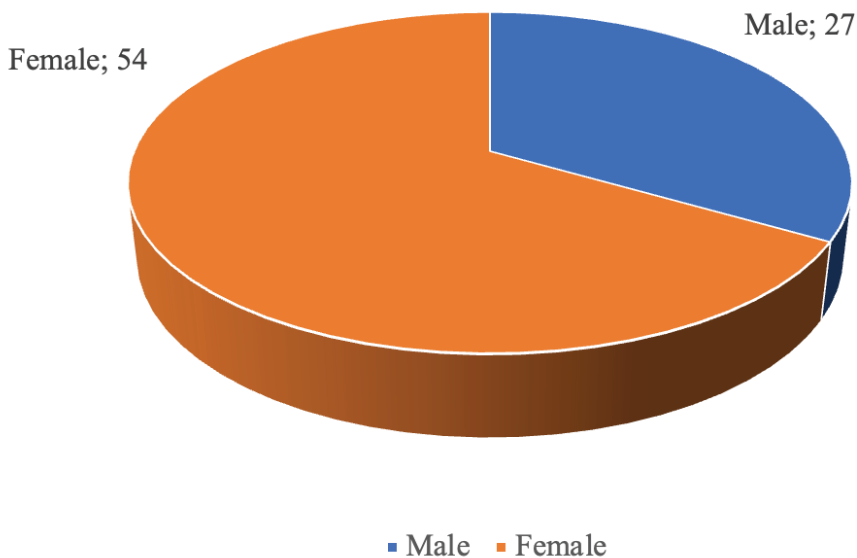
environment. It consists of 18 Items on a 6-point Likert type scale, categorized into 3 groups, referring to each of the previously mentioned domains: KNOW domain (7 items), CARE domain (6 items), and ACT domain (5 items).

Results are analyzed with descriptive statistics and presented in tables and graphs.

The sample in this study was 81 students from International Balkan University (IBU) in Skopje, North Macedonia, who took the course Multicultural Education in 2023. This sample was chosen because of the structured educational experiences that students were provided within this course. Besides the course contents, teaching and learning activities in the course were designed in a way that will create situations for developing intercultural competencies by allowing the students to share the features of their culture, reflect on other cultures, compare experiences, and engage in self-reflection and exploration of one's personal identity. Additionally, it is important to emphasize that IBU is a higher education institution where almost half of the student population are international students, which makes it a multicultural environment where students have multiple possibilities to interact and engage in intercultural communication.

Graph 1.

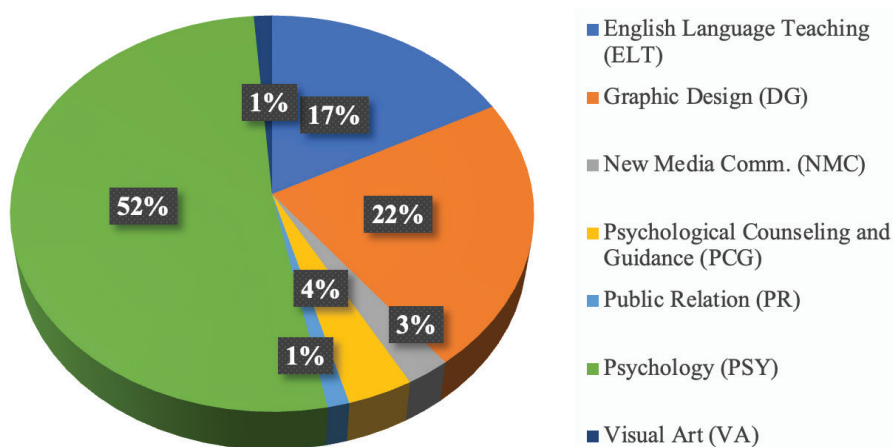
Sample by Gender



As mentioned previously, the total number of participants is N=81, where the majority were females 66.7% and 33.35% males (Graph 2). According to the study program, the biggest number of participants were from study programs in Psychology (51.9%), followed by Graphic Design (22.2%), English Language Teaching (17.3%), Psychological Counseling and Guidance (3.7%), New Media Communication (2.5%) and Visual Art and Public Relations (1.2%) (Graph 2).

Graph 2.

Sample by Study Program



Results

In the following part are presented the obtained results, organized according to the examined domain of intercultural competence.

In the knowledge domain, presented statements referred to students' knowledge related to recognizing and understanding the meaning of and reasons for racism, social barriers, different religious beliefs, language differences, sexual preferences, and gender-based issues (Table 1).

Table 1.

Results in the KNOW Domain

Statement	1-Strongly disagree	2-Disagree	3-Disagree somewhat	4-Agree somewhat	5-Agree	6-Strongly agree	Mean
I realize that racism exists	2.5%	2.5%	14.8%	8.6%	21.0%	49.4%	4.94
I know that social barriers exist	0.0%	3.7%	12.3%	23.5%	32.1%	25.9%	4.89
I understand religious beliefs differ	1.2%	3.7%	12.3%	12.3%	25.9%	42.0%	4.66
I understand sexual preferences may differ	9.9%	9.9%	14.8%	17.3%	16.0%	28.4%	4.09
I understand that gender-based inequalities exist	4.9%	8.6%	14.8%	17.3%	27.2%	21.0%	4.24
I accept that languages other than my native are spoken	1.2%	7.4%	8.6%	11.1%	18.5%	51.9%	4.96
I don't understand why people from other cultures act differently	30.9%	24.7%	19.8%	6.2%	9.9%	6.2%	2.57

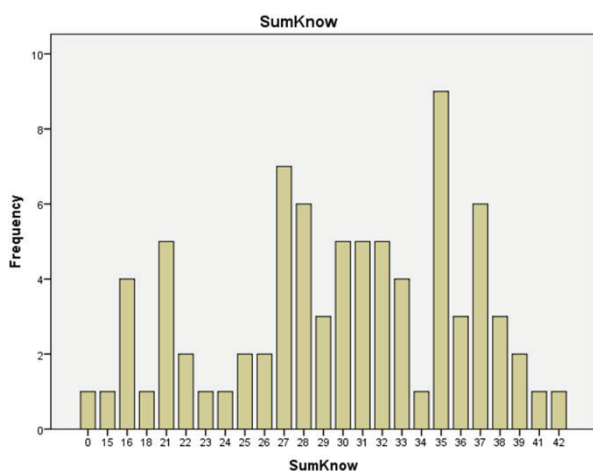
As the results suggest the high mean score of 4.94 on the first statement indicate that our participants recognize the existence of racism, with a strong consensus in agreement. With a mean of 4.89, participants respectively 32.1% agree and 25.9% strongly agree, also show a high level of awareness of social barriers. Most agree that these barriers exist, with few expressing strong disagreement. The mean score of 4.66 suggests a strong understanding and acceptance of differing religious beliefs. Most participants (25.9%) agree or strongly agree (42%) with this statement. A mean of 4.09 indicates a moderate (17.3%) to strong understanding (28.4%) of differing sexual preferences, although there is a broader range of responses (14.8%) compared to the issues of racism and social barriers. With a mean of 4.24, (27.2% of them agree and 21% strongly agree) participants show a significant understanding of gender-based inequalities. While the recognition is high, it is slightly lower than for racism and social barriers. The highest mean score of 4.96 reflects a strong

acceptance of languages other than one's native language with 51.9% of our participants reporting strong agreement. The vast majority of respondents (18.5%) agree with this statement, indicating a high level of openness to linguistic diversity, while just a few (1.2%) of participants do not agree and accept language diversity. The lowest mean score of 2.57 is obtained on the last statement, which is formulated in a reversed manner, indicating no understanding of why people from other cultures act differently. Here, more than half of the participants don't agree (of which 30.9% strongly disagree and 24.7% disagree) meaning that participants show high understanding in this regard.

Besides descriptive statistics performed for each of the statements, a mean value was calculated for the overall Know domain. The score for this scale ranges between 7-42, and our sample's score ranges between 15-42, with a mean value of 29.87, meaning that our participants have a high level of knowledge or awareness in this domain (Graph 3).

Graph 3.

Scores in the Know Domain



Scale range score: 7-42

Sample range score: 15-42

Mean: 29.87

This suggests that participants score high above the lower bound of the range score and are near the upper end of the scale. This indicates a high level of knowledge or awareness among respondents. The high mean score implies that participants generally have a good grasp or high level of awareness regarding the KNOW domain and the aspects assessed in this domain are well understood and highly acknowledged by the majority of the respondents.

Table 2.

Results in the CARE Domain

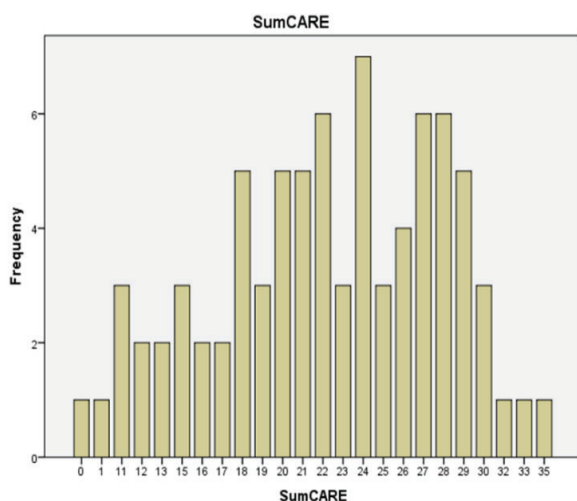
Statement	1-Strongly disagree	2-Disagree	3-Disagree somewhat	4-Agree somewhat	5-Agree	6-Strongly agree	Mean
I am sensitive to respecting religious differences	12.3%	8.6%	17.3%	18.5%	17.3%	22.2%	3.90
I am sensitive to differing expressions of ethnicity	4.9%	17.3%	18.5%	17.3%	21.0%	11.1%	3.73
I am emotionally concerned about racial inequality	6.2%	7.4%	16.0%	21.0%	23.5%	18.5%	4.12
I am sensitive toward people of every financial status	6.2%	9.9%	17.3%	22.2%	16.0%	23.5%	4.08
I am not sensitive to language uses other than my own language	23.5%	12.3%	22.2%	14.8%	12.3%	11.1%	3.14
People's social status does not affect how I care about them	4.9%	6.2%	13.6%	14.8%	16.0%	38.3%	4.55

In the Care domain, the mean score of 3.90 on the first statement suggests a general sensitivity towards respecting religious differences, with a notable proportion of respondents strongly agreeing (22.2%), 17.3% agree, and 8.5% agree somewhat and just a few (12.3%) strongly disagree. With a mean of 3.73, there is a moderate sensitivity towards differing expressions of ethnicity. The distribution indicates some agreement (11.1% strongly agree, 21.0% agree, 17.3% agree somewhat), but also a significant number of respondents who are less sensitive or disagree, respectively 18.5% disagree somewhat, 17.3% disagree, 4.9% strongly disagree. The high mean score of 4.12 reflects a strong emotional concern about racial inequality (23.5% agree, 21.0% agree somewhat, and 8.5% strongly agree), with more respondents in agreement compared to disagreement. A mean of 4.08 indicates a high level of sensitivity toward people of varying financial statuses (23.5% strongly

agree, 16.0% agree, 22.2% agree somewhat), similar to the concern about racial inequality, while just a few (6.2%) report strongly disagreement and do not have sensitivity. The fifth statement in this domain is in reversed form and indicated generally disagreement with not using languages different than one's own (23.5% Strongly disagree, 22.2% disagree somewhat, 12.3% disagree), and a certain level of agreement (14.8% agree somewhat, 12.3% agree, 11.1% strongly agree). Accordingly, the mean is 3.14, suggesting that there is less sensitivity towards language uses other than one's own. The highest mean score of 4.55 on the last statement suggests a strong belief that social status does not affect how respondents care about others, with a substantial majority strongly agreeing (38.3%), followed by agreeing 16% and somewhat agreeing 14.8%.

Graph 4.

Scores in the Care domain



Scale range score: 6-36;

Sample range score: 11-35;

Mean: 22.55

The score in the Care domain ranges from 6-36, and our respondents' score is in the range from 11-35, showing distribution in the middle to high values. The mean score of 22.55 is situated closer to the middle of the scale range, which indicates that, on average, participants' scores are significantly above the lower end of the scale but not approaching the maximum score, but rather it can be said that are slightly above the middle. This distribution indicates a moderate level of engagement or concern, related to the CARE domain.

Table 3.

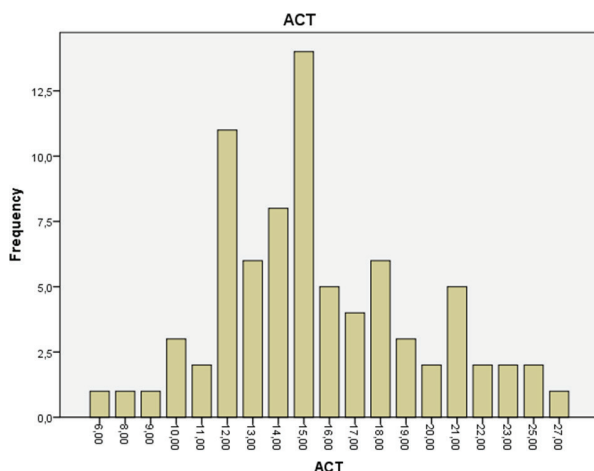
Results in the ACT Domain

Item	1-Strongly disagree	2-Disagree	3-Disagree somewhat	4-Agree somewhat	5-Agree	6-Strongly agree	Mean
I do not act to stop racism	27.2%	19.8%	21.0%	13.6%	7.4%	6.2%	2.71
I actively challenge gender inequities	16.0%	21.0%	18.5%	13.6%	13.6%	4.9%	3.03
I do not actively respond to confront religious prejudice	12.3%	12.3%	33.3%	11.1%	14.8%	4.9%	3.21
I respectfully help others to offset language barriers that prevent communication	1.2%	3.7%	18.5%	17.3%	27.2%	25.9%	4.53
I do not act when witnessing bias based on people's preferred sexual orientation	16.0%	21.0%	19.8%	16.0%	12.3%	7.4%	3.11

In the statement referring to racism, which is in negative form, majority of the participants disagree (27.2% strongly disagree, 19.8% disagree and 21.0% somewhat disagree), whereas on the other side of the scale the answers are less frequent. The mean score of 2.71 indicates a strong tendency among participants to claim that they act to stop racism. In challenging gender inequities, the mean of 3.03 reflects a moderate engagement. Here the majority of the participants 21% disagree and 18.5% disagree somewhat, while just a few (4.9%), strongly agree with engagement in challenging gender inequities. With a mean of 3.21, participants respectively 33.3% show a moderate tendency to disagree with the idea of not actively responding to religious prejudice, and the distribution is almost equal on both sides in categories strongly agree and disagree. The high mean score of 4.53 suggests a strong commitment to helping others overcome language barriers. Our participants generally agree (27.2%) and strongly agree (25.9%) that they respectfully assist with communication challenges related to language, while just 1.2% reported strongly disagreement related to this issue. The mean of 3.11 indicates a moderate stance on responding to bias based on sexual orientation. Similar to the other areas, there's a mix of engagement levels, but a significant percentage of participants reported moderate engagement (16%) or disengagement (19.8%), or do not feel that they fully act against such bias.

Graph 5.

Scores in the Act Domain



Scale range score: 5-30

Sample range score: 6-27

Mean: 15.59

As results presented in Graph 5 suggest, the range score on the act scale is from 5 – 30, and participants' score is between 6-27, meaning that this is the full range of possible scores on the act scale. The mean value is 15.59 which is somewhere in the middle of the range.

Further analysis was focused on comparing the results between the three domains (Table 4). Since the scales for each domain have different minimum and maximum values, range, median, and mean were calculated. As results show, in the know and care scales the mean value is moderate, whereas in the act scale is significantly lower. These results indicate that participants have a moderate level of knowledge/awareness and care, but are less engaged when it comes to taking real action.

Table 4

Comparison of Results of Know, Care, and Act Domain

	N		Mean	Median	Range	Minimum	Maximum
	Valid	Missing					
KNOW	80	1	29,8750	30,5000	27,00	15,00	42,00
CARE	78	3	22,5513	23,0000	24,00	11,00	35,00
ACT	79	2	15,5949	15,0000	21,00	6,00	27,00

Discussion

As reported by our participants we may conclude that our participants generally show moderate to high level of knowledge and awareness of issues related to racism, social barriers, religious differences, gender inequalities, sexual preferences and languages other than their native one, with highest values for different languages, racism and religious differences. This shows that students perceive these aspects as most important. On the other side, the results suggest a moderate understanding of differences related to gender-based inequalities and sexual preferences. Overall, the data highlights a strong recognition and acceptance of various forms of diversity. For the domain of Care, the data suggests that participants generally express high sensitivity towards racial inequality, financial status, and religious differences. Also is notable to mention that the belief that social status does not affect how one cares about others is notably strong among participants. On the other side, should be underlined that participants have lower sensitivity towards differing expressions of ethnicity, which should be concerning in intercultural interactions. In conclusion, the care domain scores indicate that participants in our study are somewhat concerned but are not reaching very high levels on the scale, which implies a moderate level in the care domain. Regarding the act domain, results suggest high engagement in overcoming language barriers and moderate engagement in other areas such racism, gender inequities, and sexual orientation biases, with a tendency towards moderate responses indicating some action but, which should be interpreted as a need for greater involvement. Another notable indicator from obtained results is the low engagement in actively responding to various forms of religious prejudice, which can be interpreted as inactivity in this regard. This actually highlights a potential area for increased action. Concluding with the third domain, the results in the act domain suggest that while participants are somewhat active, their average engagement is on the lower side of the scale, indicating a potential area for improvement or further investigation into barriers to higher levels of activity.

When comparing the scores in all three domains, participants have moderate results, with the notion that in the act domain, the result is closer to a lower level. As progressing through the complexity of the domains, the mean score decreases, which shows that engagement in the care, and especially in the act domain is on a lower level. This should be specifically underlined and considered with attentiveness, especially when it comes to the expression of ethnicity and religious prejudices. These results should also be seen from the perspective of the context in the

Macedonian society, where these two aspects are especially pronounced and should be properly addressed in the education context.

Conclusion

The findings from this survey suggest that the participants in this study scored at a high to moderate level in the domains of know and care, which specifically refers to showing awareness and care for issues related to use of different language, racial and gender inequalities, financial status and differing sexual orientation. Still, scores in the act domain are lower and this mainly relates to expression of ethnicity and religious prejudices. These findings suggest that more dedication and stronger involvement from the side of all involved parties, as well as education institutions, is needed.

Recommendations in this regard are in direction of providing the students with teaching and learning experiences that will not only broaden their knowledge, but will also encourage, and sometimes even ‘push” them to explore their perceptions of culture and relationship with individuals from different background. More case studies, debates, analysis of real-life scenarios and role play will provide the students with actual hands-on experience and allow them to delve into exploring unfamiliar and sometimes uncomfortable issues. Furthermore, reflection and self-reflection is much needed, since it will give the students opportunity for deeper analysis of the influence of culture in shaping one’s identity.

These proactive approaches should be based on the transformative pedagogies, the border pedagogy and critical pedagogy. Border pedagogy, according to Henry Giroux (1991) emphasizes the importance of understanding and navigating cultural, social, and political boundaries. It encourages students to recognize and critically engage with the cultural and political contexts that shape their identities and experience and promotes a democratic philosophy that values diversity and difference. Moving “between borders” i.e. different cultural, social, and political spaces, allows the students to gain a deeper understanding of various perspectives. Its goal is to create an emancipatory educational experience that empowers students to become active, critical participants in the society.

Critical pedagogy, which in the current social circumstances marked with diversity, globalization, and emerged need for inclusivity and equity, is very much needed. Critical pedagogy, according to Paolo Freire (2017) teaches students how to approach social issues and circumstances mindfully and critically, by analyzing and

critically evaluating the processes, relations, and events in the social, and intercultural context. It aims to teach the students how to think with their heads, to look carefully for what is oppressive in society, and finally, to be the drivers of emancipation. Critical pedagogy, as a transformative approach to education, emphasizes that the role of education is fostering critical consciousness and social change.

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