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Standards for Intercultural Education in North Macedonia: Fostering Global Citizenship and Inclusive Societies

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Abstract

This paper discusses the creation and implementation of the first Standards for Intercultural Education in North Macedonia, which are applicable throughout the entire primary school level. Although *The National Education Program*, i.e., *The Comprehensive Strategy for Education and Action Plan 2018-2025 of North Macedonia, addresses the importance of ensuring quality control of the educational process, until 2021,* no standards existed for both primary and secondary education in the country. The existence of intercultural standards should play a crucial role in fostering inclusive societies and preparing young individuals to navigate diverse global environments.

Given that active citizenship and inclusion are the fundamental values of the EU, the drafting and ratification of these standards in the country was prioritized as the cornerstone of promoting multiculturalism and intercultural integration. The paper gives an overview of the national and international documents that have been used as the foundation in the drafting of these standards. The way in which these standards have been created, and the pedagogical and didactical principles upon which they were organized will be discussed. The paper aims to highlight the key principles and practices of intercultural education as well as the strengths and weaknesses of the approved standards in North Macedonia. Through the analysis of those standards and the practical samples provided, this paper underscores the importance of intercultural education standards in the country but also in promoting inclusive societies, enhancing cultural awareness, and preparing individuals to thrive in an interconnected world, thus hopefully reducing stereotypes, prejudices, and even radicalization.

Keywords: intercultural competencies, integration, standards, education, cohesion

Introduction

The development of standards and competencies in education is one of the goals, but also the foundations of every European education system. Without the development of educational standards, the EU's vision of a European education area[1] that will be able to use the full potential of education and culture in the European countries as generators of development, through opening up jobs, and enhancing social justice and active citizenship, is impossible. Education thus becomes an opportunity to build and experience the European identity in all its diversity. For those reasons, in 2006, the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union adopted a *Reference Framework on Competences for Lifelong Learning* (revised and supplemented several times until 2018). With this *Recommendation*, the Member States were asked to "develop the provision of key competencies for all as part of their lifelong learning strategies, including their strategies for achieving universal literacy, and use the 'Key Competences for Lifelong Learning - A European Reference Framework" (Council Recommendation, 2018).[2]

In this European document on education, a total of 8 competencies are defined as important for achieving an overall European, modern education. Among these, the active citizenship, cultural awareness, and expression competencies are directly tied to the intercultural competencies. Hence, the aspect of intercultural integration and the nurturing of an understanding of one's own developing identity and cultural heritage within a world of cultural diversity is a central priority for the EU. The development of adequate standards in the education process is a necessary foundation upon which the achievements in education can be measured and monitored. This, in turn, can aid the process of designing adequate education policies. Unfortunately, the education system in the Republic of North Macedonia still lacks a unified, standardized, and scientifically as well as methodologically adequate concept for the standardization of compulsory education.[3]

Although the document entitled National Education Program, i.e., The Comprehensive Education Strategy and Action Plan 2018-2025, addresses the importance

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1   The European Education Area fosters collaboration among European Union Member States to build more resilient and inclusive national education and training systems. The idea to create a European Education Area was first endorsed by European leaders at the 2017 Social Summit in Gothenburg, Sweden. The first packages of measures were adopted in 2018 and 2019.

2   Recommendations (2018/C 189/01). [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.C_.2018.189.01.0001.01.ENG&toc=OJ:C:2018:189:TOC]

3   In the Republic of North Macedonia, the primary school education lasting a total of 9 years is obligatory.

of ensuring quality control of the educational process, no standards have been developed for the compulsory system of education (primary and secondary). After all, the strategy itself in the section on Challenges in primary education states that lack of standards: "standards that should define learning outcomes in each cycle (I, II, III) of primary education are missing (38)." The lack of general, national educational standards is a serious deficiency of the education system in the country. Without precisely defined general standards for the system of compulsory education, developing standards in a certain and specific area, in our case, the area of intercultural education, was indeed not only a pioneering but also an extremely difficult task.

National and International Documents Used

The proposals of the working group in charge of writing the intercultural standards were based on several domestic national documents, as well as several international ones. The national documents were chosen on the basis of whether they have any interethnic and intercultural integration ideas embedded in their basic values, visions, and goals. Among those, we selected:

- *The National Program for Education, i.e. The Comprehensive Education Strategy and Action Plan* 2018-2025.

- *The Quality Indicators of the School Work,* prepared by the State Educational Inspectorate.

- *The Concept for Intercultural Education* prepared by the Ministry of Education in 2015, offering a conceptual framework for the intercultural education.

- The following international documents were used as the basis for drafting the intercultural competencies standards.

- *The European Reference Framework of Key Competences for Lifelong Learning*, serving as a pedagogical and formal basis

- *UNESCO Guidelines on Intercultural Education*[4],

- *UNESCO Intercultural Competences: Conceptual and Operational Framework*[5] outlining the basic concepts and terms in the field of intercultural competencies

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4   UNESCO guidelines on intercultural education https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000147878
5   UNESCO Intercultural Competences: Conceptual and Operational Framework https://en.unesco.org/interculturaldialogue/resources/132

- *Intercultural competence for all: Preparation for living in a heterogeneous world*[6] offering a detailed theoretical and practical insight into the development and cultivation of intercultural competencies as the key element in mainstream education.[7]

- *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture*[8], serving as a detailed guide to democratic education from preschool to university-level education.

Theoretical Framework and Aims of Intercultural Education

Intercultural education can be seen as a response to modern challenges, including global demographic changes and the need of developing the 21st century skills among the young learners. Its foundation can be found in the concept of human rights, outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948):

> Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance, and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace (Art. 26.2).

Following the *Rabat Commitment* document from the conference held in Morocco in 2005, there were efforts to put more of these recommendations and requirements from the Declaration into practice. What followed was a set of recommendations for the writing of, including the need to "produce guidelines on intercultural education, building on the research, publications, and practice already carried out, such as with respect to world heritage and history education" (2005, p. 4). One of the noteworthy results of this set of recommendations was the first UNESCO *Guidelines on Intercultural Education* published in 2006. This document defines multiculturalism and interculturalism in the following manner:

> The term multicultural describes the culturally diverse nature of human society. It not only refers to elements of ethnic or national culture but also includes linguistic, religious, and socio-economic diversity. Interculturality is a dynamic concept and refers to evolving relations between cultural groups (2016, p.17).

6   Intercultural competence for all: Preparation for living in a heterogeneous world, Council of Europe Pestalozzi Series, No2., Council of Europe Publishing, 2012 https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/pestalozzi/Source/Documentation/Pestalozzi2_EN.pdf

7   Intercultural competence for all: Preparation for living in a heterogeneous world, Council of Europe Pestalozzi Series, No2., Council of Europe Publishing, 2012, стр., 6

8   Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture, Vol.1-3, Council of Europe https://www.coe.int/en/web/reference-framework-of-competences-for-democratic-culture/rfcdc-volumes

This distinction points to the fact that multiculturalism is mainly a "passive" state of being, whereas interculturalism presupposes a dynamic component of cultural exchange and is a result of a dialogue that takes place at multiple levels: local, regional, national, and international. The strengthening of the democratic capacity of one society largely depends on whether multiculturalism and interculturalism are present in education and educational policies, and if so, how. In the educational context, multicultural education and intercultural education are different. Multicultural education is education about the actual cultural diversity in society. In multicultural education, the study of other cultures and knowledge about other cultures aims at nurturing, cultivating, and creating acceptance or tolerance towards these cultures. Intercultural education, on the other hand, aims beyond this concept of merely passive coexistence and instead seeks to develop a sustainable way of coexistence in a multicultural environment through understanding and respect for diversity, reducing stereotypes, developing empathy, and instigating a dialogue between different cultural groups. It should be noted, however, that intercultural education does not mean separate, different kinds of education where certain content needs to be introduced, or a separate subject needs to be taught. Instead of treating it as an additional element to the already existing curriculum, it should be seen as something that is intertwined throughout the whole educational process. In this sense, intercultural education is dominantly cross-curricular. As such, it covers the whole educational process, including the teaching methods, language(s) used, the pupils and their interaction, the learning materials, the school management, and the decision-making processes.

General Principles and Guidelines

The principles, on which the document on Intercultural Competencies in Education was based, were mainly derived from the UNESCO *Manual for Intercultural Education*, adapted and supplemented by the nature of the needs and the specific circumstances of the country.

1. Intercultural education respects the cultural identity of the student, by providing culturally acceptable, appropriate and quality filled education for all.

2. Intercultural education enables each student to acquire knowledge, skills and attitudes, necessary for his or her active and complete integration into a multicultural society.

3. Intercultural education allows each student to acquire knowledge, skills, and attitudes that will enable him or her to contribute to understanding, respect, tolerance, solidarity, and cooperation between individuals from different ethnic, social, cultural, and religious groups.

Pedagogical Framework

The standards are based on a certain basic number of pedagogical and didactic principles. The main aim was to make sure that they relied on the latest pedagogical and didactic knowledge. In this sense, we have singled out **five such principles** that were taken into account during the development of the standards:

1. cross-curricular (making sure that intercultural content is present in all or as many subjects as possible);

2. Transferability (a set of fundamental competencies for our educational system)

3. gradualism and cyclicality, making sure that the standards are developed in accordance with the psycho-social development of the student from easier to harder concepts

4. learning to learn, and development of critical opinion

5. individualization and differentiation (personalization), making sure that the focus is fully on each individual learner.

In preparing the standards, we defined the following domains:

1. Knowing and understanding

2. Skills and abilities

3. Values and attitudes

These could translate into "learning to know"; "learning to do", and "learning to be".

In the domain of **knowledge and understanding**, the standards should equip the student with the knowledge and understanding of: diversity, multiculturalism, interculturalism, integration, social justice and equality, peace and peaceful resolution of conflicts, globalization, ethnicity, etc.

• in the domain of **skills and abilities**, the student standards should enable the student to: critically reflect on social reality and diversity, react to injustice and inequality, be able to challenge the existing state of injustice, be able to effecti-

vely argue multicultural and intercultural ideas works on integration, resolves conflicts, independently learns about intercultural integration, etc.

• in the domain of **values and attitudes**, the standards should help the student develop: a sense of identity, possess self-confidence, respect differences, tolerate, demonstrate solidarity, possess empathy, respect others' perspective, possess multiperspective, avoid stereotyping, appreciate equality, have a positive attitude towards diversity, positively values intercultural integration, etc.

Methods for the Development of Intercultural Competencies

The following principle was followed in determining the standards: we have defined basic concepts from the corpus of multiculturalism and intercultural integration, which helped develop the appropriate standards. They represent areas that the student must adapt from this area to complete his primary education. The following seven concepts form the structure for defining Intercultural Competencies:

1. Cultural identity;

2. Multiculture;

3. Interculture;

4. Social justice and equality;

5. Stereotypes and prejudices;

6. Peace and peaceful resolution of conflicts;

7. Globalization.

For each of the concepts and every cycle of primary education, the most compatible standards for intercultural education have been developed based on the aforementioned competencies (knowledge and understanding, skills/skills/behavior, values , and attitudes).

We took the following methods as a primary framework against which to prepare the standards.

1. **Experience.** The best way to develop intercultural competencies is through direct experience, directly experiencing diversity and otherness. In particular, this refers to "experiencing someone else's experience," i.e., gaining knowledge about other cultures by directly experiencing how people behave, feel, and think from their perspective.

2. **Comparison.** Comparing one's own cultural attitudes, values, and practices with others, which are different, always allows for "decentering" from one's own worldview and the opportunity to develop pluri-perspectivism. The comparison makes it possible to overcome the irrational fear of the unknown culture, and getting to know it breaks down mutual barriers. Finally, comparison definitely breaks down stereotypes and prejudices by breaking down hardened notions of what is "normal" or "different" and "other".

3. **Analysis.** Deep, analytical insight into one's own and different cultures reveals the hidden layers of one's own and others' beliefs, attitudes and practices. This enables a critical attitude towards one's own and other cultures and a rational explanation of the underlying mechanisms of human behavior. The analysis reveals the deep layers of human attitudes, opinions, behaviors, as culturally conditioned.

4. **Reflection.** All three, above mentioned methods, must be accompanied by reflection, that is, put through the critical lens of self-reflection, in order for the students to develop awareness and understanding.

5. **Action.** Finally, all the above methods lead to the last one – motivating and initiating action. They are the basis for purpose - the ability to take action "toward the other", "to lend a hand", the willingness to be tolerant, cooperative, empathetic and responsible in concrete situations. Encouraging student action means involving them in activities, environments, and situations that put all the previous steps to the test. It is the practice of intercultural integration in action.

The following are examples of some of the standards created:

Cultural Identity (First Cycle, 1-3 grade)

Domain	Results from the Learning	Activities for achieving the results
Knowledge and Understanding	Describes Characteristics of different cultural Groups	Describes, draws diagrams, and connects characteristics of different groups to which he belongs
Skills and Abilities	able to present themselves as a unique cultural group	Able to present verbally, through text or drawing themselves and the qualities that make them a member of a certain group

Values and attitudes	Believes it is important to belong to different cultural groups	Engages in the activities of diverse peer groups and explains in their own words why do they want to be a part of the group

Activities suited for each level:

Students make a list of traits (or mind map) on the topic "Who am I". In small groups, they explain to each other what is important for others to know about them and why.

They identify which traits and habits share and in which ones they differ. Each group says their common things, and the teacher writes them on the board. The teacher summarizes what is common for the majority of pupils in the class.

Each student is given the task of finding five students in the class who belong to different groups (eg. they practice a sport, play an instrument, like to draw, write songs, etc.). When they find such a student, they write their name on a sheet. When they find 5 students sharing the same things, they shout, "Bingo." They put the sheets on the board and discuss to which groups students belong and how this can further contribute to the quality of the class.

Concluding Remarks

Interculturality in education should be ensured in different ways. One way can be by introducing multicultural content (verbal, visual, and/or auditory), which promotes the cultural characteristics of all ethnic/religious communities living in the country and the interaction between the members of these communities. Such contents should be present in the curricula for all subjects, whenever possible, and reflected in the textbooks and teaching materials for these subjects. In the Republic of North Macedonia, within the framework of the elective subjects, there are courses that are fully or partially dedicated to gaining knowledge about the cultural/ethnic characteristics of all those living in the country, as well as to emphasizing the common interests and values of all citizens of the country who are members of different ethnic communities. Additionally, the Albanian language course is included among the optional subjects, and it is intended for all interested students who follow the classes in Macedonian, Turkish, Serbian, or Bosnian. Interculturality can also be strengthened by organizing activities for interethnic integration. These can be joint curricular and extracurricular activities with "mixed" groups of students

learning in different languages of instruction. Such activities are very important for ensuring interaction between students who otherwise do not have opportunities to contact and collaborate in the course of formal education. The possibility of realizing such activities is greater in schools with two/three teaching languages than in monolingual schools. Within the framework of bilingual/trilingual schools, joint projects and research are carried out as part of the teaching of compulsory subjects, and joint classes are held in optional subjects (for all or most of them).

In order to improve the interaction between students from different languages of instruction, monolingual schools should be encouraged to form partnerships with schools of another language of instruction and jointly plan, organize, and implement mutual visits or online meetings in which "mixed" groups of students from different languages participate. Interculturality should also be developed through the organization of the overall work of bilingual and trilingual schools, which can create conditions for formal and informal communication between teachers and students from different ethnicities. This should be done through a mandatory representation of all languages of instruction in the same teaching shift, through joint professional activities with teachers from teaching in all the languages of instruction, and through joint bodies in which parents from all languages of instruction are involved.

The above-mentioned ways of ensuring interculturalism in primary education, from the perspective of this document, imply the functioning of schools in the spirit of interculturalism and orientation towards achieving national standards, which also includes the development of the students' necessary competencies for interculturalism. This arrangement of primary education provides a sound basis and a necessary prerequisite for the development of intercultural competencies among students. The cultivation of these competencies can greatly contribute to social cohesion, reduce prejudices and stereotypes, and enhance communication and collaboration across cultures in the culturally diverse milieu of the country.

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