

# Exploring Intercultural Communication Competence Among Primary School Teachers In North Macedonia: A Survey Analysis

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## Abstract

Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) plays a crucial role in the performance of modern teachers. The research aimed to analyze if there exists a statistically significant difference in ICC levels among teachers. Based on variables like cultural school structure, gender, seniority, prior intercultural education, and education degree, the investigation was conducted. 217 primary school teachers in the Republic of North Macedonia participated in the study. A 5-point Intercultural Communication Likert Scale of Intercultural Sensitivity Index (ISI) with 11 items was utilized. The Scale's Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient stood at  $\alpha=0.87$ . Descriptive statistics were utilized to assess the levels of teachers' intercultural communicative competence (ICC). The ICC levels were interpreted with the following intervals: 1.00–1.79 as “very low,” 1.80–2.59 as “low,” 2.60–3.39 as “middling,” 3.40–4.19 as “high,” and 4.20–5.00 as “very high.” Statistical tests, including t-tests and One Way ANOVA at  $p=.05$ , were conducted to assess differences in teachers' ICC levels. The research outcomes demonstrated significant differences in teachers' ICC levels, particularly concerning cultural school structure and teacher education degree. Teachers working in multicultural schools exhibited a higher ICC level ( $M=3.64$ ) compared to those in monocultural schools ( $M=3.39$ ). Teachers possessing a Ph.D. demonstrated a higher ICC level compared to those with bachelor's degrees ( $p=.031$ ). No statistically significant differences were detected in ICC levels with respect to gender, seniority, and prior intercultural education among teachers. The findings underline the necessity for professional development initiatives in the realm of intercultural education for teachers.

**Keywords:** intercultural education, intercultural communication competence, teacher

## Introduction

The education system of the Republic of North Macedonia faces the problem of teacher competence. The intercultural competence of teachers stands out as one of the least explored competencies. Intercultural competence encompasses a crucial aspect of teacher competence – the dimension of intercultural communicative competence. There are several synonyms for intercultural competence: cultural competence, multicultural competence,

international competence, global competence, cross-cultural adaptation, and transcultural competence. According to Bennett and Hammer (2017), intercultural competence describes the general ability to overcome ethnocentrism, respect other cultures, and embrace diversity. Byram, Nichols, and Stevens (2001) define intercultural competence as the ability to successfully communicate with members of different cultures. Piršl (2013) lists three dimensions of abilities and characteristics that

characterize individuals in the context of intercultural competence: cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. The above definitions emphasize the communicative dimension of intercultural competence.

According to Hiller and Woźniak (2009), the intercultural competent teacher should have the ability to think and act in a culturally appropriate way; cultural empathy, openness, emotional stability, and flexibility; tolerance, communication, understanding, comprehension, as well as interaction without conversation; communication skills, friendship, socially responsible behavior, and satisfaction. Ritter (2019) observes teachers as key drivers of change in education. They are expected to be actively involved in the school, but also in the wider community, thus contributing to the quality of the teaching process at all levels of education. It is important for teacher competencies to determine which of them are fundamental because they can range from very broad and general to very specific and professional. However, two dimensions of teaching competencies can be distinguished: subject competence — which includes knowledge in a certain area and didactic competence — which includes knowledge and skills of mediating scientific knowledge in teaching a particular subject (Russell, 2019). Furthermore, Byram and Wagner (2018) emphasize that the intercultural competent person is one who is able to “see” the relationship between different cultures, who has the ability to critically and analytically understand its own and other cultures, and the ability to communicate, interpret, and mediate. Finally, one of the important and frequently mentioned dimensions of intercultural competence that interculturalism theorists discuss is communication (Hammer, Bennett & Wiseman, 2003; Teven, Richmond, McCroskey & McCroskey, 2010; Spitzberg, 2000; Wiseman, 2002). Teven et al. (2010) consider that communication skills represent a person’s ability to communicate in an adequate and understandable way, while competence refers to a person’s ability to demonstrate competent knowledge of appropriate behavior in a given situation. Thus, communicative competence is

not an individual trait or attribute but rather a feature of the connection between two or more persons. Furthermore, Byram and Wagner (2018) emphasize that the intercultural competent person is the one who is able to “see” the relationship between different cultures, who has the ability to critically and analytically understand its own and other cultures, the ability to communicate, interpret and mediate. Finally, one of the important and frequently mentioned dimension of intercultural competence that interculturalism theorists discuss is communication (Hammer, Bennett & Wiseman, 2003; Teven, Richmond, McCroskey & McCroskey, 2010; Spitzberg, 2000; Wiseman, 2002). Teven et al. (2010) consider that communication skills represent a person’s ability to communicate in an adequate and understandable way while competence refers to a person’s ability to demonstrate its competent knowledge of appropriate behavior in an appropriate situation. Thus, communicative competence is not an individual trait, an attribute of an individual, but a feature of a connection between two or more persons.

## Literature Review

### 2.1. Intercultural Communicative Competence

The Common European Framework of Reference for Language Learning, Teaching and Evaluation (2001) emphasizes in its first chapter, among the objectives of the Council of Europe’s language policy, the importance of preparing all Europeans for the challenges of increased international mobility. It encourages them to understand and tolerate each other, to respect identity and cultural diversity by developing more effective international communication, and to respond to the demands of a multilingual and multicultural Europe, insisting on training Europeans to better communicate beyond linguistic and cultural boundaries. As North Macedonia aims to integrate into the European Union, in this regard, the teachers in the Republic of North Macedonia tend to be as competent as possible in order to become part of the European educational space of intercultural communication. Gudykunst

(2003) notes that intercultural communication is a phenomenon in which participants of different cultural backgrounds come into direct or indirect contact with each other, while for Sudweeks and Herring (2001), intercultural communication means being able to roughly interpret and understand another person's thoughts. Samovar, Porter, McDaniel, and Roy (2014) posit that intercultural communication transpires whenever individuals from one cultural background create and transmit messages necessitating comprehension by members of another culture. In the intercultural context, people interact with culturally different individuals on a daily basis. Bakhov (2014) states that the development of competence for intercultural communication progresses simultaneously in two directions. The first direction involves preparing to understand and respect differences between individuals, not only based on their individual characteristics, while the second direction entails overcoming stereotypes and prejudices about oneself and others. The act of communication serves as a means to express defined identity and created authority. The communication process is particularly crucial for any community focused on survival, development, and prosperity. Bennett (2013) asserts that in this process, each individual within the community has the opportunity to make the right choices that lead to success. Particularly open, two-way, and non-directive communication within the community serves one primary purpose: to stimulate interest and receive feedback from the community in the form of opinions, suggestions, and proposals that contribute to its overall development and promotion. The term "communication competence" refers to the speaker's ability to select the most appropriate language system among several options, which best suits the situation and the speaker. This term was introduced by the American linguist Dell Hymes in the 1970s. He argues that communicative competence encompasses not only knowledge of language structure but also the principles of using those structures in different socio-cultural circumstances, implying grammatical competencies and sociolinguistic rules for the use of that grammar (Hymes, 1972 in Berns, 2019). Saville-Troike and Barto (2016) define

this term as what a speaker needs to know in order to communicate appropriately within a given language community, which includes, in addition to knowledge of vocabulary, phonology, and grammar, social and cultural knowledge such as when to speak or not to speak, what to say to whom, and how to say it appropriately in a given situation.

Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) can be seen as the ability to comprehend the thoughts of others, regardless of the degree of agreement with their way of thinking; as a different perception of social goods and events around us. To understand the world of the "other," one needs to understand its perceptual framework. ICC can be seen as an interaction between people who speak different languages. According to Piršl (2005), the person with intercultural communicative competence realizes that the usual rules of interpersonal relationships are culturally determined and cannot generally be applied to all cultures. That person is capable of adapting verbal and non-verbal communication styles in a way that recognizes and accepts different communication styles as equal. They can apply successful conflict resolution mechanisms in their culture, knowing that they cannot be universally applied to other cultures. Bennett (2013) argues that we do not have too much reason to be optimistic if we look at the history of the human species because the first human reaction to diversity is to avoid those differences. But Abdallah-Preteceille (2006) points out that other people cannot be understood outside the communication process and exchange. In fact, effective communication is not easy, and successful intercultural communication is even more difficult. Because, as Rehman (1993) states, understanding another culture requires much more than basic knowledge of a foreign language or an awareness of the differences in non-verbal communication. On the other hand, Garrido and Álvarez (2006) consider language learning and teaching as an important component of the acquisition of intercultural communication competence, emphasizing the need to redefine the role of the teacher in the process of acquiring intercultural knowledge and attitudes. They also emphasize the teacher's

readiness for active involvement in the curriculum co-construction and development, as well as the recognition and respect of the multicultural school environment.

Communication, as the foundation of all mutual relations, is key to education, given that the modern school is a place of experiential learning (Byram & Wagner, 2018), but at the same time an educational-social community. Intercultural education, which starts from the premise of developing participant relationships and involvement for culturally diverse students to learn to live together (Batelaan, 2000), will be used as one of the basic tools in the process of education for intercultural relations if the attribute of interculturalism is added to communication. Therefore, intercultural communication presupposes a reality that supports the simultaneous existence of unity and diversity, cooperation and competition in today's global village, as well as consensus and creative "conflict" in intercultural societies. Piršl (2013) shares a similar perspective, emphasizing that the quality of cooperation between people also depends on the way of perceiving and understanding the feelings, thoughts, and attitudes of people who do not belong to the same culture and who therefore react differently. They think differently and form thought structures according to the patterns of their culture. Barrett and Golubeva (2022) note that "the model of intercultural communicative competence does include specifications of the locations in which learning may occur and of the roles of the teacher and the learner in those locations. The locations include the classroom, fieldwork, and independent learning, in each of which teachers and learners have differing roles and relationships. The teacher's role is, of course, most prominent in the context of the classroom" (p. 64). When there is a lack of interaction between educators and students, education is absent, and communication becomes one-sided and asymmetric.

Chen and Starosta (1996) developed a model of intercultural communication competence that integrates cross-cultural attitudes and behavioral ability models. According to the authors, ICC consists of three dimensions: intercultural

awareness, intercultural sensitivity, and intercultural skill. Samovar et al. (2014) define intercultural communication competence as the overall inner ability of an individual to manage key challenging features of intercultural communication, such as cultural differences and unknowns, attitudes that exist between certain groups, and the stress experience that accompanies such situations. Bennett (2013) notes that intercultural communication competence is a set of cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills and characteristics that enable effective and appropriate communication in different cultural contexts. Cognitive skills and characteristics mentioned include cultural self-awareness, knowledge of general culture, knowledge of different cultures, and interaction analysis. Affective skills and characteristics encompass curiosity, cognitive flexibility, motivation, and openness. Behavioral skills and characteristics include communication skills, the ability to listen and solve problems, empathy, and information gathering abilities. Lee Olson and Kroeger (2001) assert that "the components grouped under 'intercultural communication' are those skills we draw on to engage effectively with others" (p. 118). These skills include adaptability, empathy, cross-cultural awareness, intercultural relations, and cultural mediation. The increasingly intense interconnectedness and communication between citizens of different countries, nations, and cultures are removing many intellectual as well as physical boundaries. The level of intercultural communication competence is related to the level of development of society. Intercultural communication competence also entails reducing ethnocentrism and recognizing other cultures. Thus, some individuals possess a high degree of intercultural competence, enabling them to successfully communicate with people from other cultures. Therefore, intercultural communicative competence refers to the ability to communicate effectively with members of different cultures. Applied to the school context, this competence implies the teacher's ability to communicate effectively with students of different cultures, as well as with colleagues from diverse cultural backgrounds.

## 2.2 Research on Teachers' Intercultural Communicative Competence

A survey finding by Lee Olson and Kroeger (2001) suggests that, with some encouragement and support, teachers who have developed their intercultural communication skills—through experiences such as living abroad (45%) or socializing with people from other cultures (57%)—would be inclined to expand into the global professional arena. However, to be most effective, they may need to push themselves to develop and make use of higher, integrative levels of intercultural communication skills. Only 22% of the respondents currently incorporate attractive aspects of other cultures into their way of doing things, and merely 29% feel confident in their abilities to act as cultural mediators. A study by Bedekovic (2011) showed that undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate students who believe that the goal of intercultural education is to develop the ability to communicate with culturally different individuals exhibit a higher degree of ethnorelativism ( $M=27.16$ ;  $SD=4.547$ ) and a higher level of intercultural sensitivity, unlike those students who do not consider the development of this ability to be the goal of intercultural education, who show a higher degree of ethnocentrism ( $M=21.38$ ;  $SD=5.352$ ) and a lower level of intercultural sensitivity. Sebnem, Dicle, and Guldem (2009) analyzed the intercultural sensitivity levels of university students and the impact of education and intercultural experience on the formation of intercultural communication competence (ICC). They found that students' respect for different cultures improves with their level of engagement in international interactions. Hao and Zhang's (2009) survey results showed that despite engaging in English learning for 12 years or more, the surveyed college students failed to cultivate their intercultural awareness and often struggled to respond appropriately in intercultural communication contexts. Marek (2009) regards the target language culture as an essential component in effective language learning, recommending that teachers incorporate more of the target language culture in the classroom. The author is confident that integrating culture into the language teaching

process can greatly enhance students' respect for cultural differences during language learning in the classroom.

## Method

### 3.1 Instrument

The Intercultural Communication Scale, a component of the Intercultural Sensitivity Index (ISI) developed by Lee Olson and Kroeger (2001), was used for this study. The scale comprises 11 items, including statements such as "I feel uncomfortable when I am with people who are speaking a language I do not know," "I feel self-confident and comfortable socializing with people from other cultures," and "I have the ability to psychologically put myself into another person's shoes" (p. 130). Participants rated each item on a 5-point scale, where 5 = "Describes Me Extremely Well," 4 = "Describes Me Well," 3 = "Describes Me Some of the Time," 2 = "Seldom Describes Me," and 1 = "Never Describes Me." The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient for the Intercultural Communication Scale was 0.87, indicating good internal consistency.

### 3.2 Participants

The survey involved 217 primary school teachers from multiethnic regions in the Republic of North Macedonia. Among them, 59 teachers were male and 158 were female. Additionally, there were 154 teachers working in monocultural schools and 63 working in multicultural schools. In terms of teaching experience, 152 teachers had less than 20 years of teaching experience, while 65 had over 20 years of teaching experience. Furthermore, 61 teachers had basic (initial) education for work in a multicultural school, 33 teachers had additional training to work with culturally diverse students during their school work, and 29 of them independently studied intercultural topics. Additionally, 51 teachers had a combination of intercultural education, consisting of elements from their studies, their school work, and independent study of intercultural topics. On the other hand, 43 teachers reported having no intercultural

education. Regarding academic qualifications, 186 teachers held bachelor's degrees, 23 held master's degrees, and eight held PhDs.

### 3.3 Data Collection and Data Analysis

The ISI's Intercultural Communication Scale was administered through the online survey platform Google Forms ([www.google.com/forms](http://www.google.com/forms)). In collaboration with school principals, a link containing a Google Form questionnaire was distributed to 281 teachers. Ultimately, 217 complete responses were received, resulting in a valid response rate of 77.22%.

The collected data were input into SPSS v. 25 software. Cronbach's Alpha was utilized to assess the reliability of the scale. Descriptive statistics were employed to list the average levels and standard deviation of the Intercultural Communication Scale of primary school teachers' ICC. Furthermore, independent sample t-tests and ANOVA were conducted to analyze the differences in primary school teachers' ICC levels based on variables such as school cultural structure, gender, seniority, prior intercultural education, and education degree.

The average scores were used to determine the primary school teachers' ICC levels overall and across different items on the scale. When interpreting the ICC level, the interval 1.00–1.79 was classified as "very low", 1.80–2.59 as "low", 2.60–3.39 as "middling", 3.40–4.19 as "high", and 4.20–5.00 as "very high" (Polat & Ogay Barka, 2014).

## Results

In the forthcoming section, we will outline the outcomes stemming from the comprehensive evaluation of primary school teachers' Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) alongside the examination of its correlation with the independent variables as aforementioned. The assessment was conducted utilizing a rating scale comprising 11 items designed to gauge competencies encompassing adaptation, empathy, and cultural mediation.

### 4.1 The Level of Primary School Teachers' ICC

The results, depicting both the overall level of ICC and the specific levels of ICC for each item on the scale, are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Overview of the Primary School Teachers' ICC

ICC	% "Describes Me Extremely Well"	M
1. I feel uncomfortable when I am with people who are speaking a language I do not know.	21	3.13
2. I try to learn about people from other cultures so that we can work and socialize together.	33	3.69
3. I incorporate the attractive aspects of other cultures into my on way of doing things.	21	3.43
4. I have learned how to produce work with people from other places in the globe.	33	3.76
5. I feel self-confident and comfortable socializing with people from other cultures.	29	3.77
6. I have lived abroad and experienced intense interaction with a variety of people from this other culture.	24	3.04
7. I have long-term friendships with several people from other cultures.	35	3.52
8. I am currently engaged in professional work with at least three people in other countries.	7	2.48
9. I have the ability to deal flexibly with and adjust to new people, places, and situations.	38	3.85

10. I have the ability to psychologically put myself into another person's shoes.	33	3.73
11. I can act as a cultural mediator and serve as a bridge between people of different cultures.	35	3.66
<b>Total</b>		<b>3.46</b>

The analysis from Table 1 reveals that the aggregate score for primary school teachers' Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) is notably high ( $M=3.46$ ). This mean score is slightly lower than that reported by Lee Olson and Kroeger (2001) ( $M=3.63$ ), yet marginally higher than the findings of Lei (2021) ( $M=3.20$ ). Delving into the 11 items constituting the ICC Scale, item (9) garners the highest mean score ( $M=3.85$ ), while item (8) obtains the lowest mean score ( $M=2.48$ ), indicating a variance in ICC levels across different aspects. The data further illuminate that approximately 21% of respondents express discomfort when encountering individuals speaking unfamiliar languages, and nearly one-third engage in social interactions with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. However, only 7% are currently involved in professional endeavors with international collaborators, while 33% claim to have acquired skills for collaborating with individuals from global settings. Encouragingly, those who have honed their intercultural communication skills through experiences like living abroad (24%) or socializing with individuals from diverse cultures (29%) demonstrate a readiness to expand their engagement in the global professional sphere with proper support (Lee Olson & Kroeger, 2001). Nonetheless, enhancing effectiveness in this domain necessitates the cultivation and application of more advanced levels of integrative intercultural communication skills. Merely 21% of respondents presently integrate appealing aspects of other cultures into their practices, and only 35% feel confident in their ability to serve as cultural mediators—a trend consistent with the observations of Lee Olson and Kroeger (2001). Additionally, over a third of respondents (38%) exhibit adaptability to varied contexts,

while an equal proportion (33%) possess the ability to empathize with others' perspectives.

#### 4.2 The Level of Primary School Teachers' ICC in Different Cultural School Structures, Genders and Seniorities

In this investigation, the term "monocultural school" delineates institutions where instruction occurs exclusively in one language, such as Macedonian or Albanian, while "multicultural school" denotes educational settings where teaching transpires in two or more languages, for instance, Macedonian, Albanian, and Turkish. Gender classification pertains to the binary categorization of female and male teachers. Seniority refers to the duration of a teacher's experience in the field of education. Consequently, the sample encompasses 154 instructors affiliated with monocultural schools and 63 educators embedded within multicultural educational environments. Moreover, the cohort comprises 158 female educators and 59 male counterparts, with 152 teachers possessing less than 20 years of teaching tenure and 65 instructors boasting over 20 years of instructional experience. The outcomes pertaining to primary school teachers' Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) levels, stratified by variables including Cultural School Structure, Gender, and Seniority, are detailed in Table 2.

Table 2 Levels of Teachers' ICC by Cultural School Structure, Gender and Seniority

Variable	M	t	p
Cultural School Structure	Monocultural School	3.39	-2.033 .043*
	Multicultural School	3.64	
Gender	Female	3.45	-.411 .682
	Male	3.50	
Seniority	Less than 20 years	3.45	-.230 .818
	More than 20 years	3.48	
	More than 20 years	3.48	

The data presented in Table 2 illustrates that primary school teachers working in multicultural schools exhibited higher overall ICC levels compared to their counterparts in monocultural schools. Furthermore, male teachers demonstrated higher ICC scores than female teachers, while more experienced teachers scored higher than those with less experience. Statistical analysis using t-tests indicated a significant difference in ICC levels between teachers in multicultural and monocultural schools ( $p=.043$ ). Specifically, teachers in multicultural schools scored significantly higher than those in monocultural schools in several ICC Scale items, including feeling uncomfortable with unfamiliar languages ( $p=.00$ ), acquiring skills to work with global partners ( $p=.039$ ), and feeling confident socializing with individuals from diverse cultures ( $p=.002$ ). However, no statistically significant differences were found between male and female teachers' ICC levels, nor between teachers with less than 20 years of experience and those with over 20 years. Nonetheless, male teachers scored significantly higher than female teachers in feeling confident in cross-cultural socialization ( $p=.43$ ) and having experienced living abroad with interactions with diverse cultures ( $p=.00$ ). Conversely, experienced teachers scored notably higher than less experienced ones in the ability to serve as cultural mediators ( $p=.012$ ). In conclusion, these findings underscore the impact of the cultural school structure on teachers' ICC levels, with teachers in multicultural schools exhibiting higher competencies compared to those in monocultural settings.

#### 4.3 The Level of Primary School Teachers' ICC and prior intercultural education, and education degree

Table 3 presents the primary school teachers' ICC levels based on their prior intercultural education and education degree. Specifically, among the participants, 61 teachers had basic (initial) education for working in multicultural schools, while 33 received additional training to work with culturally diverse students during their tenure. Additionally, 29 teachers pursued independent studies in intercultural education, while 51 had a

combination of intercultural education experiences during their studies, professional practice, and independent study. Notably, 43 teachers reported no prior intercultural education. With regard to education degree, the distribution was as follows: 186 participants held a bachelor's degree, 23 held a master's degree, and 8 held a PhD. These variables were analyzed to assess their influence on the primary school teachers' ICC levels.

Table 3 Levels of Teachers' ICC by Prior Intercultural Education, and Education Degree

Variable	M	F	p
Prior Intercultural Education	basic (initial) education	3.3 8	.866 .485
	additional training	3.5 7	
	studied the intercultural on its own	3.6 8	
	combined intercultural education	3.3 9	
Education Degree	do not have any intercultural education	3.3 3	.031 *
	Bachelor	3.4 2	
	Master	3.6 4	
	PhD	4.1 4	

\* $p<.05$

Table 3 presents the primary school teachers' ICC levels based on their prior intercultural education and education degree. Analysis reveals interesting trends regarding ICC levels in relation to different educational backgrounds. Overall, teachers who pursued independent studies in intercultural education or received additional training exhibited higher ICC scores compared to those with combined intercultural education experiences, basic (initial) education, or no intercultural education. Furthermore,



teachers holding a Ph.D. demonstrated higher ICC levels than those with master's and bachelor's degrees. ANOVA testing indicated a statistically significant difference between the ICC levels of teachers with a Ph.D. and those with master's and bachelor's degrees ( $p=.031$ ). Subsequent Tukey testing revealed that this difference specifically pertained to teachers with a Ph.D. and those with a bachelor's degree ( $p=.042$ ). In summary, these findings suggest that primary school teachers with higher levels of education tend to exhibit higher ICC levels. Thus, education degree appears to significantly influence teachers' ICC proficiency.

## Discussion

The present survey aimed to investigate the overall ICC level among primary school teachers. The research findings indicate that the primary school teachers' overall ICC was high ( $M=3.46$ ). This aligns with previous research by Lee Olson and Kroeger (2014), who found high ICC levels among university teaching staff ( $M=3.63$ ), and Gao (2014), who reported satisfactory ICC levels among English major undergraduates ( $M=3.73$ ). Similarly, Sevime-Sahin (2020) found high ICC levels among ELT undergraduate students ( $M=3.88$ ). However, the ICC levels reported by Lei (2021) for pre-service English teachers were middling ( $M=3.20$ ). Discrepancies in the results may be attributed to differences in participant demographics, including pre-service teachers, in-service teachers (primary school teachers), and university teachers, as well as variations in the instruments used in each study. A Summary-Independent Samples *t*-test revealed a statistically significant difference between the present study and Lei's (2021) study ( $t=3.383$ ,  $p=.001$ ), with our participants scoring slightly higher on the ICC scale (3.46) compared to Lei's (2021) findings (3.20)

The research findings revealed significant insights into the intercultural communication competence (ICC) levels among primary school teachers in North Macedonia. A notable proportion, 21%, expressed discomfort in situations where individuals speak an unfamiliar

language, while approximately one-third engage in social interactions with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Surprisingly, only 7% reported current professional collaborations with individuals from other countries; however, 33% acknowledged acquiring the skills necessary for working effectively with individuals from various global locales. Lee Olson and Kroeger (2001) propose that with adequate encouragement and support, educators who have honed their intercultural communication skills may be motivated to extend their professional reach globally. Nevertheless, enhancing effectiveness in this domain requires the development and utilization of higher levels of integrative intercultural communication skills. Of particular significance is the finding that 35% of North Macedonian primary school teachers expressed confidence in their ability to serve as cultural mediators, consistent with the observations of Lee Olson and Kroeger (2001). Additionally, more than a third of respondents demonstrated adaptability to diverse people, situations, and environments, with a similar proportion expressing the development of empathy. These findings underscore the importance of nurturing and advancing intercultural communication competencies among primary school teachers in North Macedonia.

In addressing the research question regarding whether there exists a statistically significant difference in the levels of ICC among teachers based on variables such as school cultural structure, gender, seniority, prior intercultural education, and education degree, the study yielded insightful findings. Specifically, it was observed that teachers in multicultural schools exhibited significantly higher ICC levels compared to their counterparts in monocultural schools. Additionally, teachers holding a doctorate demonstrated significantly higher ICC levels than those with a bachelor's degree. Conversely, no statistically significant differences were identified in ICC levels among teachers based on gender, seniority, or prior intercultural education. Interestingly, Lei (2021) reported that "in terms of the overall ICC levels, female students scored higher than male students" (p. 42). This discrepancy in findings

may warrant further investigation, particularly regarding the potential overrepresentation of female teachers in the sample. Future studies could explore this aspect in greater depth to provide a comprehensive understanding of ICC levels among teachers.

## Conclusion

In this research, a self-rating scale was utilized to assess the ICC levels of primary school teachers and explore the influence of variables such as cultural school structure, gender, seniority, education degree, and prior intercultural education on their ICC levels. The research findings revealed that the average overall ICC of North Macedonian primary school teachers was high ( $M=3.64$ ). They displayed self-confidence and comfort in socializing with individuals from other cultures ( $M=3.77$ ) and demonstrated a sense of empathy ( $M=3.73$ ). However, they exhibited lower scores in terms of international mobility ( $M=3.04$ ) and collaboration with individuals in other countries ( $M=2.48$ ). Regarding the cultural school structure, teachers in multicultural schools exhibited higher overall ICC levels compared to those in monocultural schools. There is a need to reevaluate the functional structure of schools with a focus on bilingualism and trilingualism. In terms of education degree, primary school teachers with a doctorate or master's degree scored higher than those with a bachelor's degree. It is recommended that teachers pursue advanced degrees. Regarding gender, no significant difference in overall ICC levels was observed between female and male primary school teachers, although females scored slightly higher in six out of 11 ICC Scale items. However, the overall average score of males was higher. While no significant difference in overall ICC levels was found based on seniority, more experienced teachers scored slightly higher than less experienced ones. In terms of prior intercultural education, although no statistically significant differences were identified, teachers who pursued intercultural education independently or through additional training scored higher than those without any intercultural education. The results suggest that

schools should offer training programs and enhance opportunities for intercultural communication, particularly for female teachers and those lacking prior intercultural education. Future studies could explore the impact of additional variables, such as the Internet, on teachers' ICC levels. However, this study has some limitations. Including other instruments such as focus groups and interviews could have provided deeper insights. Additionally, the sample only included primary school teachers from specific multi-ethnic regions, suggesting the need for broader participation from across all regions of the Republic of North Macedonia in future studies.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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