

Preschool and primary teachers' evaluations of their preparation, competence and experiences to teach newly arrived migrant students

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Summary

The inclusion of all students into the learning process in a multicultural classroom depends on the teachers' ability to understand and accept the cultural differences, language and interests of learners. As a historical heritage, a relatively large number of children with a home language other than the language of instruction study in Estonian schools, and with the addition of newly arrived migrant students (NAMSs), these numbers are increasing. In Estonia, although children from other cultural and linguistic backgrounds, including NAMSs, are considered children with special educational needs (KELA RÕK, 2008), less is said about NAMSs in the context of inclusive education. Due to the war in Ukraine, more than 7200 NAMSs have arrived at pre- and basic schools, making the issue of educating NAMSs even more crucial. Still, according to the TALIS survey, only 14.4% of teachers felt fully prepared to work in a multicultural classroom (Taimalu et al., 2019). Also, the lack of specific focus on cultural diversity in everyday practice in schools has resulted in a situation whereby many teachers do not feel adequately prepared to teach in a diverse classroom due to the limited awareness of issues associated with diversity (Hannigan et al., 2022).

Intercultural competence (IC) is "the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (Deardorff, 2006, pp. 247–248). The development of IC is a process where teachers' attitudes affecting the acquisition of knowledge and skills are fundamental (ibid.). Teachers' IC shows the ability to support the learning of students who are linguistically, culturally, socially, or in other ways different from the teacher (Dimitrov & Haque, 2016), and the ability to lead and support intercultural discussions and engage students in learning activities that promote multicultural learning objectives (Smits & Janssenswillen, 2020). The

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central idea of culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is that learners are sources of knowledge and skills (Ladson-Billings, 2009), making cultural diversity a valuable resource in the learning environment that, skilfully handled, can make every learner feel valued, regardless of their identity (Gay, 2000; Rääsk et al., 2020). However, minority students are often overlooked and taught in a culture-blind way (Hachfeld et al., 2011), based on the principle of “I don’t see colour, I only see students”, which has a negative impact as it does not take the minority experience into account (Taylor & Sobel, 2011). The one-size-fits-all approach does not support all students in a multicultural learning environment, favouring the dominant social, cultural and linguistic group (Russell & Russell, 2014).

The study aimed to determine Estonian preschool and primary teachers' evaluations of their preparation, competence and experiences in teaching NAMSSs. The central questions of the article are 1) What kind of NAMSSs teaching experiences do teachers have; 2) What kind of preparation do teachers have for teaching NAMSSs; 3) How do teachers describe their competence, namely intercultural attitudes, knowledge and skills to teach NAMSSs? The qualitative study sample consisted of eight preschool and six primary teachers who had agreed to participate in the follow-up study in the first stage (Timoštšuk et al., 2022). Teachers had to meet the following criteria: 1) They had to be working in institutions that have accepted NAMSSs within the last five years; 2) They had to have experience in teaching NAMSSs. Data were collected with semi-structured interviews and analysed with qualitative inductive content analysis based on the research questions. Three main categories emerged from the data: 1) experiences in a multicultural setting, 2) preparation to work in a multicultural setting, and 3) teacher's intercultural competence.

Although teachers recognised the experience of teaching NAMSSs as valuable to developing, enriching, and preparing them for successful teaching in multicultural settings, they also encountered challenges. As in other studies (cf. Eurydice, 2019), teachers pointed out the language barrier as one of the obstacles to effective teaching. Similarly to the earlier studies (Kivirand et al., 2020; Pulver & Toomela, 2012), both preschool and primary teachers stated the lack of facilities, large group sizes and the availability of teaching materials. A prerequisite for successfully including all learners is a lower number of children per teacher (Kivirand et al., 2020; Nelis & Pedaste, 2020). Also, respondents stressed the role of support from leadership and colleagues and cooperation between different parties. Though teachers felt support from the leadership, negative attitudes from colleagues caused stress, specifically when not addressed by the leaders. However, teachers' positive attitudes, collaboration, and an inclusive mindset in the institution are crucial to promoting the learning and development of all learners.

Regarding the preparation for teaching in a multicultural setting, respondents pointed out that there was no such course during their studies at university. Nevertheless, it is crucial to address the knowledge of CRT and its strategies (Spanierman et al., 2011) in teacher training, and the respondents expressed that need. Teachers pointed out that teacher training should include a specific course about teaching in multicultural settings. Participants believed that readiness and attitudes could not be taught, but learning occurs through working experience. Lacking systematic training, teachers relied heavily on personal experience as a source of knowledge. Therefore, teacher training needs to focus on teachers' various implicitly shared beliefs, norms and attitudes. There were no differences in teachers' attitudes in the first stage of the study (Timoštšuk et al., 2022). Though teachers' attitudes in this study were open and tolerant, a culture-blind attitude prevailed (Hachfeld et al., 2011; Taylor & Sobel, 2011), stressing the need for equal treatment of everyone. As a result, the participants tended to adopt a one-size-fits-all approach, disregarding students' previous experiences and cultural backgrounds (Gay, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Our results indicated that teachers are afraid of making mistakes or insulting different ethnicities, emphasising that a child is a child, and therefore, race, culture and ethnicity are not germane in their teaching process.

Despite the importance of culture specific-knowledge that goes beyond surface-level knowledge of foods, greetings and customs (Deardorff, 2011), teachers evaluated their knowledge of NAMSs culture as rather superficial. CRT was a new concept to the respondents. Although teachers felt that they did not have to do anything differently, they did perceive the need to use teaching strategies that supported both the teacher and the students in a multicultural setting. For CRT to be effective, teachers must have access to training and meaningful experiences with different cultures. Moreover, when designing the learning environment, it is crucial to draw on and incorporate learners' prior experiences and cultural backgrounds (Taylor & Sobel, 2011). However, the teachers in our study did not consider it significant. While the respondents neglected to highlight cultural diversity, they paid attention to the social atmosphere, conducting discussions with students, and creating a safe environment.

The findings of this study propose that teacher training should promote the formation of attitudes, knowledge and skills needed for successful teaching in a multicultural setting, including CRT strategies, supporting teachers' confidence to cope with diverse learning situations. Applying the Teacher's Intercultural Competences Questionnaire (Timoštšuk et al., 2022) would allow teachers to assess their competences in this area and reflect critically on the attitudes, knowledge and skills needed for teaching in a multicultural environment. Furthermore, coupled with the development of differentiation skills in teaching

methodologies, the biggest challenge for teachers is noticing and learning about the substantive differences in the cultural backgrounds of diverse learners. Teachers' culture-blind attitudes should be addressed in teacher training and developing an inclusive organisational culture.

Keywords: intercultural competence, culturally sensitive teaching, newly arrived migrant, preschool teacher, primary teacher