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CONTENTS

Families and Intercultural Challenges

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Abstract

Intercultural upbringing and educational initiatives are a contemporary pedagogical trend and a precondition in school contexts that reflect diverse characteristics. Encouraging intercultural education as a concept and philosophy is closely related to the value system nurtured and practiced within the family, serving as a foundation for forming, shaping, or transforming attitudes and values towards diversity and otherness. Following this premise, the active participation of families is crucial and constructive recommendation for supporting and sustaining intercultural upbringing and educational approaches. To this end, a study was conducted focusing on elucidating the following aspects of the presented issues:

• examining the role of family communities of different types and structures in embracing intercultural values and orientation;

• identifying the factors influencing families' decisions to take part in intercultural initiatives;

• determining the similarities in different family structures involved in intercultural upbringing and educational approaches.

The qualitative methodological framework of the research was designed based on participant observation, semi-structured interviews with multiple focus groups, and analysis of pedagogical documentation. The ethnic, gender, social, educational, age, cultural, linguistic, and geographic diversity of the parents' sample provided both a deep insight into obstacles they face and their motivations to take part in intercultural activities, as a prerequisite for further involving their children of early school age. Possible obstacles that parents faced included concerns about overburdening their children with additional school activities; unfamiliarity with the languages of other ethnic communities in the country; unfavourable social and political conditions in various local contexts; and fear of possible misunderstandings or conflicts. A crucial finding of this research were the universal encouraging factors among the parent's sample (regardless of diversity across various grounds) for a support of intercultural educational activities. Human values such as child well-being, quality education, and the opportunity for children to meet and interact with peers from different ethnic backgrounds were main reasons for

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the parents' positive stance, further supported by strong trust in class teachers and their intercultural competencies.

Keywords: Interculturalism, Family Values, Diversity, Participation, Intercultural Upbringing And Educational Approaches.

1. Introduction

In today's increasingly interconnected world, intercultural education has become a critical aspect of fostering understanding, tolerance, and cooperation among diverse communities. As societies grow more multicultural, schools play a pivotal role in shaping young minds to embrace diversity. However, the foundation for intercultural values and attitudes is often laid within the family. Families are essential partners in the educational process, and their active involvement can significantly enhance intercultural initiatives in schools.

The study presented in this paper explores the intersection between family involvement and intercultural educational approaches, particularly focusing on how families from different ethnic, linguistic, and social backgrounds contribute to shaping attitudes toward diversity. By examining the role of various family structures, the factors influencing family participation in intercultural activities, and the similarities in their experiences, this research provides valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities in promoting intercultural education through familial engagement.

Through a qualitative methodological framework, including participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and pedagogical documentation analysis, the study uncovers both obstacles and motivating factors that families encounter when engaging in intercultural initiatives. The findings highlight the universal human values that unite parents across diverse backgrounds, emphasizing the importance of child well-being, quality education, and opportunities for social interaction in promoting intercultural understanding.

This paper not only sheds light on the crucial role of families in intercultural education but also provides constructive recommendations for fostering sustained family involvement in educational initiatives that celebrate diversity and otherness.

2. Interculturalism: A Contemporary Pedagogical Trend and Tendency

Interculturalism should be understood and considered as a multi-layered concept, reflecting political, sociological, pedagogical, psychological, cultural, and social commitments and policies. By examining it through all these lenses, we can address the weaknesses and gaps that emerge in multicultural societies, where tension and super-

ficial, sporadic interactions between diverse groups are common. Unlike multicultural realities, where various cultural and sub-cultural influences are evident but lack continuity in interactions, interculturalism holistically unites and advocates a range of human values such as tolerance, solidarity, cooperation, equality, peace, justice, openness, non-discrimination, assistance, interaction, exchange, and impartiality. As a societal priority and framework, it facilitates the development of a dynamic process of influence among language, ethnic, culture, social status, and gender diversities. Its philosophy offers ample space for encouraging otherness as both a challenge and a benefit rather than an obstacle.

The rapid global development of intercultural engagement over the past five decades has introduced numerous approaches and solutions for strengthening intercultural practices across educational, cultural, social, and legal spheres. One effective and sustainable practice involves promoting intercultural dialogue as a dynamic and active tool that facilitates open share of viewpoints between individuals and groups with diverse backgrounds, based on mutual understanding and respect, with an ultimate goal to create a cooperative and receptive environment to overcome political and social tensions (Council of Europe, 2008). The main dimensions of intercultural dialogue include: sharing and respecting viewpoints, valuing diversity, interaction, dialogue based on equality, learning about each other, learning from each other, and social transformation (Council of Europe, 2008).

Integrating intercultural principles and values into various social contexts has led to the development of numerous national strategies, concepts, curricular solutions, legal frameworks, social packages, and cultural initiatives. The analysis below will focus on comparing the Macedonian context with the intercultural advancements made in the field of education.

The adoption of the National Strategy for One Society and Interculturalism in 2019 established the foundational principles for developing an intercultural social environment in our country. The Strategy brings together seven areas that need to be addressed with an integrated and synchronized approach to support this commitment. The document outlines the contributions required in the following key areas: legal framework, education, youth, culture, media, social cohesion, and local self-government. The Strategy is developmental in nature, focusing on two periods: 2020-2022 and 2024-2026. Comparing the two

government solutions, while focusing solely on the Education pillar due to the authors' research interests, highlights the role of families in supporting intercultural influences. This is reflected in the priority given to increased collaboration between schools, parents, and students as essential to advancements in implementing numerous intercultural curricular and extracurricular activities. It also emphasizes the support for children's and students' interest in learning the languages spoken in our country, strengthening cohesion, and fostering harmony within school communities. Viewing parents and the family unit as supporters and active contributors to the process of interculturalism within the community indicates that numerous challenges arise at the micro family level, which introduces interculturalism into the upbringing and educational process enriched with intercultural values.

The National Strategy builds on previous efforts that signalled a comprehensive, socially engaged approach to promoting interculturalism. The Concept for Intercultural Education (2016) offered a range of practical approaches and protocols for schools – whether monolingual, bilingual, multilingual, monoethnic, or ethnically diverse – to develop an intercultural ethos. It also emphasized the key role of the family as a component in decision-making regarding participation in intercultural interventions, which is crucial for ensuring its long-term sustainability.

The document entitled Standards for Intercultural Education (2021) provides a clear outline of the knowledge, skills, and competencies that students can achieve in this field. While the focus is primarily on students' potential accomplishments, the role of the family in nurturing and practicing certain intercultural skills and competencies should not be overlooked. Families are also pivotal in fostering intercultural values and attitudes free from the burden of stereotypes and prejudices.

All reform-oriented documents in the field of upbringing and education since the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century have emphasized principles such as inclusiveness, gender sensitivity/equality, and interculturality, aimed at improving interethnic integration in education and social cohesion in society (Concept for Primary Education, 2021). These provisions and orientations are further supported by the defined principles and goals outlined in the Law on Primary Education (2021):

- promoting similarities and embracing differences, interculturality, multiculturality, interculturalism and multiculturalism;
- establishing partnerships between schools, parents or guardians, and local government units (Article 4, Law on Primary Education, 2021);
- educating students to respect diversity, collaboration, and fundamental human rights and freedoms;
- developing students' awareness of their belonging to the Republic of North Macedonia, and fostering national, civic, ethnic, and cultural identity;
- preparing students for responsible life in a free, civil, and democratic society (Article 7, Law on Primary Education, 2021).

The framework of these principles implies not only the indirect but also the direct involvement of both the immediate and extended family in the continuous, consistent, and unified support and implementation of the established intercultural guidelines.

3. Families and Interculturalism

The idea for this research stemmed from the awareness that over the past decade and a half, numerous project activities have been implemented in primary and secondary schools across the country, aimed at integrating intercultural and interethnic components into everyday school life. Considering the complexity and intricacy of this educationally transformative process, and drawing from the recommendations of official national documents, the need arises to highlight the role of the family as an entity that can serve as a strong support or a potential obstructive factor. This understanding is based on direct field experience dating back to 2010, when the implementation of the government's strategy for integrated education (Steps Toward Integrated Education) faced open resistance from parents. In June of the same year, the Constitutional Court overturned a decision by the Ministry of Education that required children from non-majority communities to start learning the Macedonian language from the first grade. Civil organizations and the non-governmental sector further emphasized the need for the active involvement of families, parents, and guardians in the decision-making process regarding intercultural approaches in the upbringing and educational process. The implementation of the

Nansen Dialogue Centre Skopje (NDC Skopje) project facilitated capacity-building among families through a series of programs designed to collaborate with parents. This was achieved by systematically and strategically involving families in the decision-making processes related to educational initiatives undertaken in various local contexts across the country. The 2016 Concept for Intercultural Education specifically outlined the goals for cooperation with parents:

⋆ creating a safe, intercultural, and stimulating school environment;

⋆ raising awareness of the values and principles of intercultural education;

⋆ strengthening cooperation between parents from diverse ethnic, religious, linguistic, and social backgrounds through team-based work;

⋆ developing strategies to successfully overcome the sources of stereotypes and prejudices in multicultural school and local environments;

⋆ enhancing cooperation and trust between parents and the school, as well as the teaching staff (Concept for Intercultural Education, 2016).

To achieve the aforementioned goals, a set of recommendations has been developed and offered for their effective operationalization through:

⋆ joint parent meetings and gatherings;
⋆ counselling sessions for parents;
⋆ joint school events and project activities involving parents;
⋆ participation of the parent council in the development of intercultural school policies and plans;
⋆ preparation of bilingual/trilingual informational materials for parents (brochures, catalogues, and manuals) (Concept for Intercultural Education, 2016).

These forms of collaboration are designed to positively influence parents in the following areas:

⋆ enhancing their sense of trust and fostering an active, participatory role in shaping the school environment;

- building a positive image of the school;

- overcoming stereotypes and prejudices related to certain aspects of school operation or specific educational entities;

- increasing awareness of various innovative initiatives undertaken by the school;

- improving skills for developing a partnership with the school in preparing students from diverse backgrounds for life in a diverse environment (Concept for Intercultural Education, 2016).

The role of the family clearly underscores its close connection to the sustainability of initiatives and advancements in local contexts, which served as the foundation for this research.

3.1. Research Methodology

The structuring of the research in the pre-pandemic period, specifically during the 2019/2020 school year, aimed to highlight the following aspects:

- examining the role of family communities of various types and structures in adopting intercultural values and orientations;

- identifying the factors influencing family decisions to participate in intercultural initiatives;

- determining the similarities between different family structures involved in intercultural educational approaches.

The research was qualitative in nature, utilizing the benefits of participant observation, conducting semi-structured interviews with multiple focus groups of parents from several municipalities in the country, and performing a detailed analysis of documentation provided by the NGO NDC Skopje. The parents' sample reflected ethnic, linguistic, cultural, social, and gender diversity and included:

- 18 Macedonian parents and 24 Albanian parents from Skopje, partners in PS Bratstvo, located in the municipality of Karposh. In this focus group, 62% were women and 38% were men. The instruction at the school is conducted in two languages, Macedonian and Albanian;

- 7 Macedonian parents, 3 Bosniak parents, and 21 Albanian parents, partners in PS Nikola Karev, located in the village of Borino, municipality of Krushevo. In this focus group, 86% were men and

14% were women. This is a regional school where instructions are held in both Macedonian and Albanian;

⋄ 16 Macedonian parents and 24 Turkish parents from Radovish, partners in PS Krste Petkov Misirkov, municipality of Radovish. In this focus group, 76% were women and 24% were men. The school conducts its educational activities in both Macedonian and Turkish.

The semi-structured interview was organized into four categories of questions:

⋄ perceptions of intercultural education;
⋄ possible challenges and concerns regarding intercultural activities;
⋄ expectations from intercultural initiatives for the child and the family;
⋄ parents' motivation to support intercultural education.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted in Macedonian, Albanian, and Turkish, respecting the language preferences of the parents participating in the focus groups. Parents in all focus groups shared their experiences, projections, and expectations regarding intercultural education in the class teaching, given that the children were of early school age, i.e., from first to fifth grade.

Participant observation was initiated to examine three aspects:

⋄ the role of class teachers in engaging families;
⋄ communication between parents of different ethnic backgrounds;
⋄ the school ambiance and didactic resources supporting intercultural upbringing and educational initiatives.

3.2 Research Findings

All focus groups were organized between September and October 2019 in the school premises of the mentioned educational institutions. This was conducted by the NDC Skopje NGO as part of its annual program for collaboration with parents, aimed at timely informing parents about possible and planned extracurricular activities (various types of school clubs), which students participated in weekly within heterogeneous ethnic groups. A key partner in presenting and showcasing intercultural efforts were the class teachers, who also had a

significant influence on the attendance and response of parents at the organized meetings. Parents from all six focus groups (two at PS Bratstvo, Karposh; two at PS Nikola Karev, Borino; and two at PS Krste Petkov Misirkov, Radovish) showed exceptionally high trust in their respective class teachers. The communication proved to be open, sincere, and constructive, with clear signs of respect and willingness for cooperation among families. The most common sentiment expressed by parents in all focus groups was based on immense trust in the teachers' choices, including their proactive involvement in project-based intercultural activities and multiple cycles of intercultural education training. The teachers were observed as key role models, which was later reflected by the parents. Some of the statements supporting this view are as follows:

"As long as the teachers are involved in these trainings and activities and believe it's good for the children, we will support them.";

"If our teacher is involved, it's not a problem for the children to be involved as well.";

"The teacher has a lot of experience; I believe that he will do everything for the benefit of the children through these activities."

Even in cases where there was hesitation or uncertainty among a small portion of the parents, the awareness that the class teachers would regularly pay attention to all children and that they recommended the intercultural activities always resulted in affirmative decisions from the families. The participant observation revealed that initially (before the parents of students from the same grade but of different ethnic backgrounds had the chance to meet) they even hesitated to get involved in communication. This hesitation reflected common cultural and social norms during such occasional meetings. However, once families had the opportunity to meet the teachers who provide instruction in different languages (as members of bilingual tandems) and the families of students from those classes, the communication became more content-rich and multi-directional. In fact, such presentations and meetings served as an initial catalyst for further interaction and communication among families, which proved to be significant stakeholders in the local community contexts.

It was also evident that an important incentive for families was the enhanced pedagogical design of classrooms and school corridors. They perceived this as a benefit for the children, who had the opportunity to use a variety of intercultural didactic resources such as flashcards,

maps, posters, photographs, toys, audiovisual materials, traditional costumes, instruments, multilingual children's literature, messages in multiple languages, symbols, flags, and more.

Some of the commonly expressed statements in all focus groups were: "If we are happy, the children are surely even happier", "I'm glad that efforts were made for better education through intercultural activities, bringing novelties to the children", and "This should be available for all children in the school, so they are educated this way from a young age".

The semi-structured interviews showed almost uniform responses of parents across all four areas of questioning, regardless of their ethnic background and social status, or whether they lived in urban or rural areas.

The first topic addressed in the interviews focused on the parents' perceptions of intercultural education, i.e., how they perceive and define it. Most commonly, their views were that intercultural education involves informing children about other cultures, both locally and globally. Generally, parents were not familiar with the broader aspects of intercultural education as a concept that embraces all kinds of diversity, not only ethnic background or language but also other differences. It was observed that parents often correlated their experiences with intercultural upbringing and educational influences to initiatives for ethnic integration within the school. However, it was encouraging to see their openness to supporting other approaches as well. Parents expressed interest in participating in future activities that would be part of an intercultural curriculum, and they particularly emphasized the importance of an open approach from teachers, the school, and the NGO. This synergy among all stakeholders, which does not ignore parents' opinions and allows them to make decisions about planned activities for students, was recognized as a new and positive experience. All focus groups confirmed that they had not previously had such positive experiences.

The second topic addressed was the reasons for concerns and possible challenges in implementing intercultural activities. Again, a nearly identical line of thinking was observed across all focus groups. Parents openly expressed their concerns about possible conflicts between some students due to potential provocations. However, the understanding that the class teachers would be responsible for implementing these activities had a decisive impact, leading all parent groups to minimize

this as a threatening factor. Another notable challenge mentioned was the lack of proficiency in the non-native languages. However, parents constructively accepted the bilingual approach of the teacher tandem and the full freedom to use native languages during the planned activities. Another common concern identified by all focus groups was the negative influence during pre-election periods, when heightened political rhetoric often spills over into local contexts and sometimes, regrettably, into the educational institutions. Parents were aware of their significant role in harmonizing relationships under such threatening circumstances.

The third topic highlighted the expectations from intercultural initiatives, particularly the benefits these initiatives would bring to the children. Parents from all focus groups presented very similar and related ideas and projections: the opportunity for children to get to know peers who are learning in a different language; establishing trust and building friendships; developing relationships with teachers who speak another language; opportunities for socializing in local communities; learning a non-native language through play; and expanding the knowledge. The welfare of the child was the leading motive for all parents in the six focus groups, and this was further emphasized in the discussion of the fourth category of questions. Furthermore, parents emphasized the importance of upbringing activities that would not burden them with additional responsibilities and tasks, would not strain the family budget, and would take place within the school premises. They also noted that intercultural activities are planned to be implemented throughout the entire class teaching process.

The analysis of the pedagogical documentation archived at NDC Skopje confirmed yet another significant process and major benefit: the intercultural transformation of the parents and families themselves. In the subsequent school years (2020/21, 2021/22, 2022/23), all these groups of parents remained cohesive parent communities that enhanced their communication and took part in a series of activities, such as open days, performances, exhibitions, birthday celebrations, participation in other research, media products, charitable actions, and more.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

Human values, such as the child's well-being, quality education, and the opportunity to meet and interact with children from different

ethnic backgrounds, were the main reasons for the parents' positive stance, further reinforced by strong trust in the class teachers and their intercultural competencies.

Another crucial aspect in this complex process was the equitable and timely involvement of parents in decision-making regarding their children's education. The authors of this work argue for the mandatory involvement of parents in similar project-based activities, emphasizing timely familiarization with all aspects of the planned and possible activities, and enabling each parent or family to independently decide on their child's participation.

The sustainability of many such initiatives depends on the support of families, as the "extended arm" of schools in developing and nurturing intercultural skills and competencies.

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