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Cross-cultural communication competence of students in the unique context of the Polish–Czech borderland

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cross-cultural communication competence; Zaolzie region; intercultural communication; bilingual education; youth cultural identity

Abstract

Research objectives (aims) and problem(s): The aim of this study was to identify differences in the level and determinants of intercultural communication competence among school pupils in the Polish–Czech border region. Specifically, we sought to determine whether statistically significant differences exist among the study groups, and which variables – such as environment, gender, faith, national identity, and community affiliation – shape intercultural communication skills.

Research methods: The study employed a diagnostic survey using a questionnaire. It involved 464 participants across three groups: pupils from bilingual schools in the Czech Republic [A], pupils from Polish schools located near the border [B], and a control group of pupils from public schools in the Silesian Voivodeship.

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Process of argumentation: Zaolzie represents a borderland with a unique cultural identity and a longstanding tradition of multiculturalism. This raises the question of whether, in such an environment, students' levels of intercultural communication competence differ from those in other regions, or whether their declared views are shaped by different variables.

Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences: The study found that the local context – the environment in which respondents were raised and educated, situated at the cultural and national border between Poland and the Czech Republic – does not significantly influence their level of intercultural communication competence or their expectations regarding intercultural education. The data indicate that students' competences are similar to those of adolescents from other regions, and that beliefs, views, and attitudes toward multiculturalism are only minimally affected by the examined variables.

Introduction

Competence is multidimensional, dynamic, and multifaceted in nature. It is a key conceptual category in pedagogy as the science of education and upbringing. Indeed, the aim of education in its broadest sense is to cultivate competences that enable the optimal development of each individual – not only in the society in which they live but also in new environments to which they may need to adapt (Świdzińska & Maliszewski, 2019, p. 162). Exploring the issue of competence is particularly relevant today, given the practical implications of education and cross-cultural communication in an era of mass migration flows and socio-political polarization.

Today, multiculturalism or cultural diversity is a widespread phenomenon, yet it remains a challenge for institutionalized education. On one hand, this is the result of increasing processes such as displacement, migration, the refugee crisis, family reunification, and travel driven by cognitive, educational, and cultural motivations, natural curiosity about other cultures, and the opening of borders. On the other hand, it demonstrates the universal values shared by Generations Y and Z, for whom – irrespective of their place of residence – multiculturalism is a self-evident,

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foundational reality (Leung, Ang, & Tan, 2014, p. 489). In addition to these contemporary processes, a historical perspective also persists, in which multiculturalism is understood through the lenses of difference, ethnicity, proximity, borderland life, direct and indirect contact, and a sense of place or geographical rootedness (Rawal & Deardorff, 2021).

The Polish–Czech border region provides a compelling case study. Zaolzie, in particular, is a model example of a borderland environment with a distinct cultural identity, shaped by the centuries-long coexistence and blending of Polish and Czech cultural elements (Zormanová, 2018). In Zaolzie, the Polish population has surpassed the 10% threshold[1] required to introduce bilingualism in 30 municipalities, including Bystrzyca, Český Těšín, Gnojník, Jablunkov, Mosty koło Jablunkova, Ropica, Stonava, Horní Suchá, and Třinec.[2] Today, bicultural schools operate in these areas – where the present study was conducted – which offer Polish as the first language of instruction and Czech as a second language. The children and youth who attend these schools most often identify as members of a national minority and describe themselves as bilingual (Hopkins et al., 2023; Hopkins et al., 2023a).

A number of classifications of borderland can be found in the literature. One such classification is the typology proposed by Jerzy Nikitorowicz (2014, pp. 180–182), which distinguishes between territorial borderlands, cultural-content borderlands, interactional borderlands, and personal–internal borderlands. This article adopts an understanding of borderland in interactional terms, which is considered the broadest of these perspectives. A defining feature of this perspective is the presence – not necessarily dependent on a shared sense of community, common language, customs, or history – of mutual understanding and dialogue, interaction, and a shared "will to know." This is seen as a continuous process of interpersonal communication that progresses from monologue to cultural dialogue, and from the dominance of stereotypes and prejudices to mutual understanding, tolerance, and recognition (Nikitorowicz, 2014, p. 181).

[1] Data source: Czech Statistical Office; National Census of Population and Housing.

[2] Project website: https://zaolzieteraz.kc-cieszyn.pl/ project website: "Zaolzie teraz".

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According to Karlfried Knapp and Annelie Knapp-Potthoff, intercultural competence refers to "the competent perception of others and oneself, i.e. perceiving the connections between the way others think and behave and one's own with culturally specific cognitive constructs" (Linka, 2011, p. 88). Along similar lines, intercultural communication competence is defined as "a set of beliefs, habits, and skills that allow individuals to function effectively in a multicultural environment" (Misiejuk, 2013, p. 37). Recognizing multiculturalism as a given, intercultural communication competences are thus human predispositions that are continuously developed through interaction and socialization. They comprise a complex set of skills that condition an individual's ability to function effectively in diverse social situations shaped by cultural differences.

In investigating the cross-cultural communication competence of students in this region, we relied on classical theoretical frameworks. One of them is the classification provided by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which identifies four core areas: *Savoir-être* (social and affective skills), *Savoir-apprendre* (learning how to learn), *Savoir* (socio-cultural knowledge), and *Savoir-faire* (practical skills). The measurement tool used in this study was based on the first and third of these areas.

In addition, the study applied a second framework for cross-cultural competence, specifically the area related to social and cultural competency. This included three components: (a) positive attitudes toward different linguistic and cultural groups, (b) empathy, and (c) cultural and linguistic flexibility.

Methodology

The study was conducted as part of a collaborative project between WSB University in Dąbrowa Górnicza (Poland) and the University of California, San Diego, from October 2022 to March 2023. The project was titled "Socio-Cultural Competences and Competences in the Area of Inter-cultural Communication in the Cross-Border Environment of Bilingual Schools on

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the Polish–Czech Border." The study was explanatory in nature. Its main objective was to identify and compare the level of cross-cultural communication competence among school pupils (aged 14–18) in a specific region (Zaolzie, the Czech–Polish borderland) and in a specific institutional context (upper elementary and general-profile secondary schools). Competence was assessed by comparing three independent groups of respondents: pupils from Polish schools in the Czech Republic, referred to as "border schools" [A], pupils from Polish schools located in the border region (Cieszyn and its surroundings) [B] and a control group composed of Polish schools in towns with similar characteristics in the Silesian voivodeship [C].

Tools used to collect data on attitudes toward dilemmas, cultural problems, or differences often focus on specific characteristics that are of particular interest to the researcher. Consequently, they cannot typically claim a transcultural or supra-cultural quality, as each culture is unique and represents a complex, often poorly defined variable. Therefore, in cross-cultural research, an accurate and objective description of reality requires consideration of many contextual variables. Only by identifying and quantifying these variables can researchers statistically explain observed differences (Matsumoto & Juang, 2007, pp. 47–84).

In line with this, we also decided to examine and compare pupils' self-declared values and attitudes using a custom research instrument, developed based on well-established measurement methods in academic literature (Nikitorowicz et al., 2013; Chromiec, 2006; Nikitorowicz, 2013; Ferszt-Piłat, 2015; Hopkins et al., 2023a). The questionnaire took into account a wide range of factors influencing competence, including conditioning variables such as the respondents' socio-cultural identity (identification profile), the cultural homogeneity of their place of residence, family structure (ethnic and religious composition), and influences related to religion and education.

The study employed purposive random sampling. In the first stage, schools were selected purposively, in accordance with the theoretical assumptions and objectives of the research. The research sample consisted of two categories of schools: bilingual schools with Polish as the language of instruction operating in the Czech Republic, and Polish-language schools

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located in the Polish border area, including the Cieszyn region. The selection of schools was non-random, based on substantive and geographical criteria. In the second stage, respondents were randomly selected from among the students at the chosen schools. This means that while the student sample was randomly selected, it was drawn from a predetermined and limited population.

A quantitative research approach was applied, and a diagnostic survey method in the form of an online questionnaire was administered to students during class, accessible via computer, tablet, or phone. The tool consisted of modules that included multiple-choice questions (for nominal variables) and evaluation questions (see Table 1). The reliability and relevance of the instrument were verified using Cronbach's Alpha, which yielded a value of 0.75. A total of 464 pupils participated in the study, with the three study groups proportionally represented. The survey allowed us to determine whether there were statistically significant differences between the study groups and to address the stated research questions. In the survey, we limited ourselves to declared attitudes and self-reported levels of knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and expectations regarding cross-cultural communication in its broadest sense. This included perspectives on migration movements, attitudes towards minorities, intercultural exchange, religions other than Christianity, willingness to work in multicultural teams, openness to alternative narratives, and anxieties related to cultural exchange.

The research issues addressed in the study were as follows:

1. What is the correlation between students' level of cross-cultural communication competence [ZZ1] and the type of institutional environment [ZN1] as well as their sense of community affiliation [ZN2]?
2. How do factors such as type of environment (urban–multicultural vs. rural–traditional) [ZN3], gender [ZN5], religious affiliation [ZN6], religious practice [ZN7], and sense of national identity [ZN8] relate to the above correlations?
3. What is the relationship between the level of cross-cultural communication competence [ZZ1] and the students' sense of cultural identity [ZZ2]?

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The sampling method used in the study was subject to certain limitations stemming from both the research strategy and the specific context of the study site. As a result, the sample is not representative of all students in Poland or the Czech Republic. However, it may be considered partially representative of students attending Polish-language schools in the borderland region. The random selection of students within purposively selected schools helped to minimize selection bias and enhance the accuracy of conclusions for the population under investigation. It should be emphasized that all statistical inferences refer only to the specific subpopulation of students attending Polish bilingual schools in the Czech Republic and Polish-language schools in the Polish border region. Because of the purposive nature of the school selection, generalizing the results to the general population of students in Poland or the Czech Republic is not justified.

Table 1. Conceptualization of variables

Variable	Description / conceptualization / scale (only valid)		
ZZ1 - level of cross-cultural communication competence (dependent)	A synthetic indicator built on the declared attitudes and beliefs of respondents (5-point Likert scale, slider between two opposing views/statements)	Total score for answers to 19 specific questions	19–95
ZZ2 - sense of cultural identity (dependent)		Total score for answers given to 12 specific questions	12–60
ZN1 - type of institutional environment	Type of school in a specific region	– Border regions (Polish schools in Czechia; Polish schools in borderland area) – Schools in non-border regions	
ZN2 - sense of community affiliation	A synthetic indicator built similarly to ZZ1/ZZ2	Total score for answers to 7 specific questions (Likert scale selection slider)	5–33
ZN3 - type of environment	Declaration in demographic forms	Urban (multicultural) vs. rural or rural-urban	
ZN5 – gender		Girl/woman; boy/man	
ZN6 – declared belief		Believer; non-believer	
ZN7 – declared religious practice		Practicing regularly; irregularly; rarely; never	
ZN8 – declared nationality		Polish; Czech; Silesian	

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The project received approval from the departmental research committee (WSBU) and was conducted with careful adherence to ethical standards in social science research. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were free to withdraw from the survey at any point. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, and the questionnaire did not include any items that could personally identify them.

Results

The primary dependent variable used as the baseline in this study was "cross-cultural communication competence," derived as a composite measure. This variable was constructed from responses to questions addressing topics such as attitudes toward migrants and the phenomenon of migration, the level of declared openness and willingness to live, cooperate, study, and spend leisure time with individuals from other cultures, as well as general attitudes toward foreigners, cultural diversity, and other religions. The quantitative index was calculated as the total score based on the respondents' answers. The possible range of scores was from 19 to 95, with lower scores indicating various forms of aversion, fear, or prejudice toward people from other cultures, or a negative or cautious stance toward cultural exchange. Conversely, higher scores indicated approval, openness, and readiness – essentially an affirmation of cross-cultural communication.

Another key variable in the study, ZN2 (sense of community affiliation), was derived from questions related to declared attitudes and orientations toward local and regional traditions, history, and culture. The level of this indicator reflects respondents' pro-regional orientation and their sense of regional identity and belonging, expressed on a linear scale. The analysis highlighted an interesting trend that corresponds with findings in other research and in the broader literature on the subject: a tendency toward homogeneity and universality in the views and attitudes of contemporary youth, regardless of their place of residence or their social, microcultural, or institutional context.

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The analysis of the first research question – *What is the correlation between students' level of cross-cultural communication competence [ZZ1] and the type of institutional environment [ZN1] as well as their sense of community affiliation [ZN2]?* – already reveals that the average values of the dependent variable ZZ1 are similar across all three groups represented by the categories of the independent variable ZN1. Therefore, the hypothesis that the institutional environment (i.e., the school setting) and place of residence (as a socialization environment) significantly influence the level of cross-cultural communication competence among the students surveyed was not confirmed.

It is worth noting that the average values for ZN1 are consistent not only within the Polish and Czech border regions – both characterized by similar contextual features – but also within the control group, which consists of students from schools in the Upper Silesian and Zagłębie agglomeration, an area that does not exhibit the distinct characteristics of a borderland. At the same time, it should be noted that these similar results emerged despite the fact that the groups attended schools operating within different national education systems. The schools with Polish as the language of instruction in the Czech Republic are part of the Czech educational system, while the schools in the Polish border region and the Silesian Voivodeship are part of the Polish education system. These systems differ in structure and, most notably, in curriculum content.

The table below shows the descriptive statistics of the dependent variable ZZ1 in each category of the independent variable ZN1.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for the dependent variable ZZ1

Category Place		N	Minimum	Maximum	Average	Standard deviation
Czechia (A)	Level of cross-cultural communication competence	162	37.00	91.00	65.9321	7.45265
Poland (B)		161	37.00	92.00	66.2981	10.58232
Poland (C)		141	37.00	95.00	65.5519	9.74850

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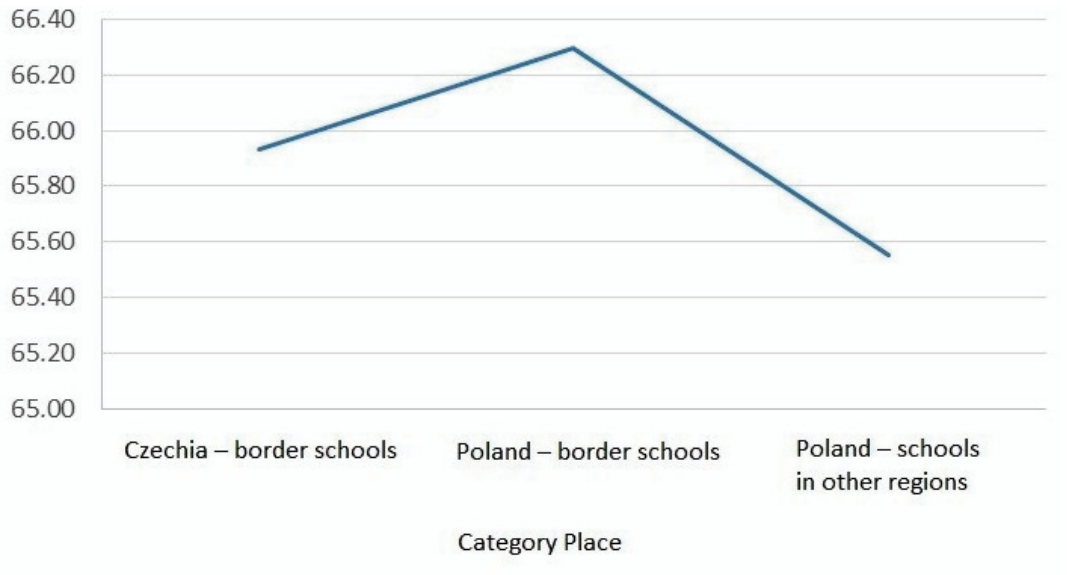
An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine the relationship between the variables ZZ1 (level of competence in multicultural communication) and ZN1 (type of institutional environment). The aim of the analysis was to determine whether the qualitative variable significantly differentiates the mean values of the quantitative dependent variable. The resulting F statistic = 0.251 (p-value = 0.778) indicates that there is no statistically significant effect of the type of institutional environment (ZN1) on the level of competence in multicultural communication (ZZ1).

Chart No. 1. Medium – Level of cultural communication competence, comparison of groups



Author's own research, N=464

The assumptions for conducting an ANOVA were verified by testing the normality of the distribution of the dependent variable in groups defined by levels of the qualitative variable. Both the Kolmogorov–Smirnov and Shapiro–Wilk tests were applied, along with the non-parametric Kruskal–Wallis test. The result of the Kruskal–Wallis test (H = 1.148, p-value = 0.563) also confirms that there is no significant effect of the type of institutional environment (ZN1) on the level of competence in multicultural communication (ZZ1).

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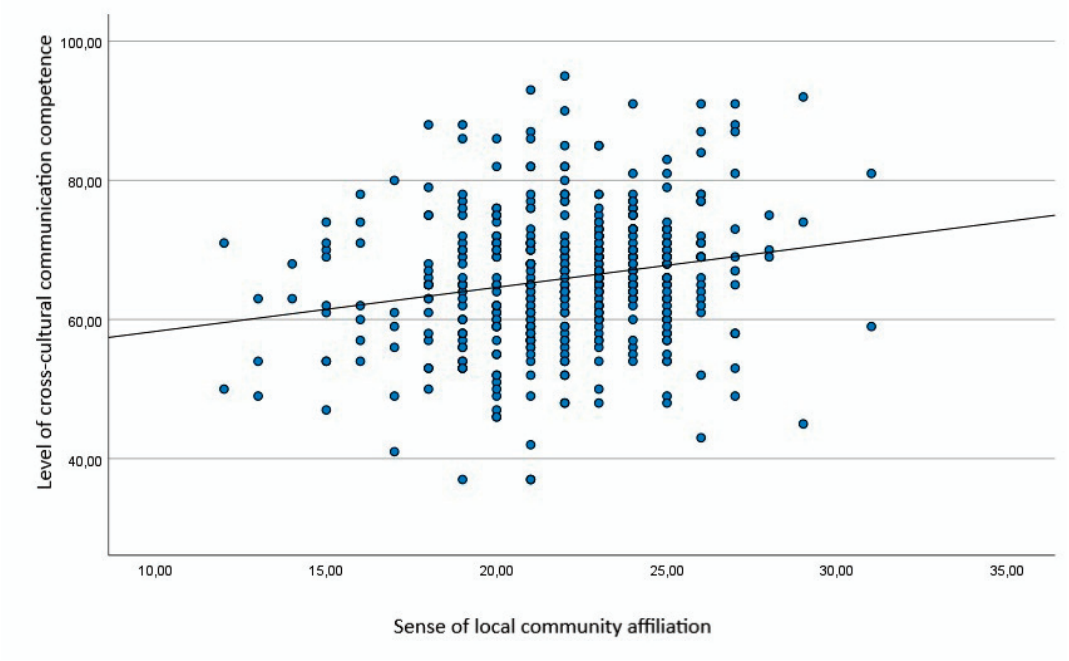
To examine the relationship between ZZ1 and ZN2 (sense of community affiliation), a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted. The results ($r = 0.199$; $p < 0.001$) indicate a statistically significant but weak positive correlation between the level of competence in multicultural communication (ZZ1) and the sense of community affiliation (ZN2).The figure below presents a visual illustration of the correlation observed.

Chart No. 2. Relationship between sense of local community affiliation and level of cross-cultural communication competences



Author's own research, N=464

The analysis of the results reveals an important finding: a strong sense of local bonding among students is not associated with closed-mindedness or fear of multiculturalism. On the contrary, attitudes of regionalism and attachment to local and regional values and traditions positively correlate with the respondents' declared openness and willingness to communicate and collaborate with individuals from other cultures.

Problem 2: How do factors such as type of environment (urban–multicultural vs. rural–traditional) [ZN3], gender [ZN5], religious affiliation

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[ZN6], religious practice [ZN7], and sense of national identity [ZN8] relate to the above correlations?

The analysis of the relationship between ZZ1 and ZN1 indicated that the correlation is virtually non-existent. Therefore, the focus shifts to the relationship between ZZ1 and ZN2. The next step is to assess how this correlation may change under the influence of additional variables, such as place of residence (type of environment), religious beliefs and practices, and sense of national identity. To determine whether these variables have an additional impact on the relationship between ZZ1 and ZN2, a partial correlation coefficient was calculated. The results are presented in the table below.

Table 3 Partial correlation coefficient analysis

Control variables	ZZ1 and ZN2 variables	Partial correlations	ZZ1	ZN2
Place	ZZ1 (Level of cross-cultural communication competences)	Corr.	1	0.199
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	<0.001*
	ZN2 (Sense of community affiliation)	Corr.	0.199	1
		Sig. (2-tailed)	<0.001*	.
Gender	ZZ1	Corr.	1	0.199
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	<0.001*
	ZN2	Corr.	0.199	1
		Sig. (2-tailed)	<0.001*	.
Declared belief	ZZ1	Corr.	1	0.203
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	<0.001*
	ZN2	Corr.	0.203	1
		Sig. (2-tailed)	<0.001*	.
Rligious practice	ZZ1	Corr.	1	0.194
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	<0.001*
	ZN2	Corr.	0.194	1
		Sig. (2-tailed)	<0.001*	.
Nationality	ZZ1	Corr.	1	0.197
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	<0.001*
	ZN2	Corr.	0.197	1
		Sig. (2-tailed)	<0.001*	.

*** Statistical significance at the 0.05 level**

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Previous calculations show that the correlation between variables ZZ1 and ZN2 is weak, positive, and statistically significant (r = 0.199, p-value < 0.001). Analyzing the results presented in the table above, it can be seen that when the independent variables ZN3, ZN5, ZN6, ZN7, and ZN8 are taken into account, the correlation between ZZ1 and ZN2 remains statistically significant. This indicates that these independent variables do not influence the actual relationship between ZZ1 and ZN2.

We also decided to examine whether there is a correlation between cross-cultural communication competence (ZZ1) and the sense of cultural identity (ZZ2) among the young people surveyed (**Problem 3**). The sense of identity was defined as a composite variable, constructed from the sum of scores derived from responses to a set of 12 Likert-scale questions. Each question was presented in the form of a sliding scale between two polarized statements – one oriented toward a regional perspective (emphasizing the importance of traditions, regionally cultivated values, and local language or dialect, e.g., "I feel more like a citizen of the region," "regional/local traditions") and the other leaning strongly toward a global perspective (e.g., "I feel more like a citizen of the world"). To determine the correlation between ZZ1 and ZZ2, a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted.

Table 4. Relationship between ZZ1 and ZN2

		ZZ1	ZN2
Level of cross-cultural communication competences	Pearson's correlation	1	0.147**
	Significance (two-tailed)		0.002
Sense of community affiliation	Pearson's correlation	0.147**	1
	Significance (two-tailed)	0.002	

****. Correlation significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed). N=464**

The results of the correlation analysis (r = 0.147, p-value = 0.002) indicate a statistically significant, positive, but weak relationship – an outcome that was somewhat unexpected. One might have anticipated

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a stronger positive correlation. Do other variables influence this relationship? To examine this, we conducted a partial correlation analysis. The results are presented in the table below.

Table 5. Results of partial correlation analysis for variables ZZ1 and ZZ2

Control variables	ZZ1 and ZZ2 variables	Partial correlations	ZZ1	ZZ2
Place	ZZ1 (Lev. of cross-cultural comm. comp.)	Correlation	1	0.145
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	0.002*
	ZZ2 (sense of cultural identity)	Correlation	0.145	1
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.002*	.
Gender	ZZ1	Correlation	1	0.145
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	0.002*
	ZZ2	Correlation	0.145	1
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.002*	.
Declared belief	ZZ1	Correlation	1	0.158
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	<0.001*
	ZZ2	Correlation	0.158	1
		Sig. (2-tailed)	<0.001*	.
Religious practice	ZZ1	Correlation	1	0.139
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	0.003*
	ZZ2	Correlation	0.139	1
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.003*	.
Nationality	ZZ1	Correlation	1	0.147
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	0.002*
	ZZ2	Correlation	0.147	1
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.002*	.

*** Statistical significance at 0.05.**

Analyzing the results presented in the table above, it can be observed that even when the independent variables are taken into account, the correlation between ZZ1 and ZZ2 is still statistically significant. This indicates that the independent variables do not influence the actual relationship between ZZ1 and ZZ2. This observation supports the conclusions drawn from the analysis of Problem 1: the beliefs and attitudes of youth in the area of intercultural communication are not significantly determined by

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the type of socialization environment, gender, religious beliefs and practices, or national identity.

Discussion

Since the emergence of intercultural communication competence as a sub-discipline, research in this area has generally gravitated towards the construction of a model based on individual characteristics related to appropriate attitudes and skills in intercultural contexts – such as adaptation, appropriateness, and the effectiveness of one's actions (Abe & Wiseman, 1983, pp. 53-67). A critique of this approach was voiced by Chen and Starosta, who proposed a model of intercultural sensitivity (Chen, 1990; Chen & Starosta, 2012). Their framework introduced three dimensions of competence and provided tools for assessing the relevant skills. The authors likened these competencies to an umbrella that brings together three interrelated capacities: cognitive, affective, and behavioral. These capacities interact as part of a continuous process.

Building on this foundation, they developed a model of intercultural communication competence that integrates three dimensions: intercultural awareness, intercultural sensitivity, and intercultural proficiency. This model captures not only the individual dimension of competence but also its social and environmental contexts, including factors shaped by the process of socialization. Comparative research on intercultural communication competence in the unique environment of bilingual schools in the Zaolzie region has not been conducted to date. As a result, the findings of the current study provide significant cognitive value but remain difficult to compare. For this reason, further research, especially using the aforementioned standardized tools, represents an important challenge for the future. Nonetheless, it is worthwhile to relate these findings to the results of other studies conducted in Poland's border regions (similar to Zaolzie): the meeting point of cultures, languages, and traditions – such as the Polish–Ukrainian, Polish–Belarusian, and Polish–Lithuanian borderlands.

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Poland's eastern and western borderlands differ in many respects due to their different historical experiences and past affiliations with different political, economic, and social systems. However, they also share important features, such as a legacy of traditional multiculturalism and religious diversity. A study on intercultural communication competence among young people living in a multicultural region of eastern Poland – inhabited by autochthonous groups of various religious and ethnic backgrounds, and shaped by both historical and ongoing migration – was conducted by a team of researchers at the University of Białystok (Nikitorowicz et al., 2013). The research covered adolescents and their families, with the goal of examining the relationship between intercultural communication competence and factors such as the type of local environment, sense of local belonging, respondents' migration experiences, and the cultural identity of the adolescents. The researchers argued that factors supporting the acquisition of higher intercultural competence include the structure and type of family bonds, which are conducive to the cognitive and emotional stimulation of young people. These include parental education, a partnership-based family dynamic, and a democratic parenting style.

Świdzińska (2013) brought to light the problem of low intercultural competence among teachers and students in the traditionally multicultural and borderland region of Lublin. Joint school activities carried out as part of an educational project created opportunities to share knowledge about local cultural differences and experiences with project-based learning in both schools and local communities. At the same time, they revealed a noticeable lack of such content in formal education. Schools in the Lublin region – particularly in rural areas and small towns – do include topics related to regional, intercultural, and European education, but this is typically the result of individual teachers' initiatives or participation in EU-funded projects (often in cooperation with NGOs), rather than an outcome of systemic or curricular solutions (Świdzińska, 2013).

An insightful study using the Scale of Intercultural Sensitivity (Korczyński & Świdzińska, 2017) was conducted in the Polish–Ukrainian borderland in 2017. The research identified differences between Polish and

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Ukrainian students in three aspects of intercultural sensitivity: respect for cultural differences, confidence in interaction, and enjoyment of interaction. No statistically significant differences were found in engagement in interaction or attentiveness during interaction. However, statistically significant results were observed in the other three areas. The authors concluded that the Ukrainian students exhibited a significantly higher level of intercultural sensitivity than their Polish peers. This is most likely due to the fact that Ukrainian students were living in a culturally different environment. As temporary residents in another country, their determination to achieve educational goals appeared to motivate stronger efforts to develop coexistence, negotiation, and cooperation skills when interacting with culturally diverse peers (Korczyński & Świdzińska, 2017).

Similar findings emerged from a study conducted in Lublin involving Polish and Belarusian youth. The aim of the study was to identify differences in intercultural sensitivity among students living in the Polish–Belarusian borderland region. The research was based on Chen and Starosta's (2012) model of intercultural communication competence, which comprises three dimensions: intercultural awareness, intercultural sensitivity, and intercultural proficiency. The study showed that Belarusian students scored higher in several aspects of intercultural sensitivity, particularly in the confidence in interaction dimension. Across individual dimensions – except for attentiveness in interaction – Belarusian students consistently scored higher than their Polish counterparts. The overall sensitivity score for the Belarusian group was also higher. As in the earlier study, these elevated scores can likely be attributed to the students' conscious relocation to a different country for educational purposes. A similar pattern was observed in the current study conducted in Zaolzie, where students attending Polish schools in the Czech Republic – who also represent a minority group – scored slightly higher in intercultural communication competence.

The results obtained closely correspond to the conclusions drawn from a 2009 diagnostic study conducted in schools in the Polish–Ukrainian border region (Długosz, 2009). That research demonstrated that place of residence and nationality are not differentiating factors when it comes

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to intercultural communication competence. Young people, regardless of nationality, were found to share similar modern personality traits such as high educational and career aspirations, optimism, mobility, and adaptability to change. Approximately 80% of respondents expressed plans to pursue higher education, which may be indicative of strong life ambitions. One of the defining features of the youth studied was their optimism, confidence in future success, and forward-looking mindset.Based on these findings, the author concluded that multicultural border regions possess their own endogenous sources of change.

Conclusion

Developing intercultural competence is one of the key components of preparing students to live in a pluralistic, open, inclusive, and culturally diverse society. This is, of course, an important task of the modern school, which, as an institution with both educational and formative functions, should develop attitudes of openness and acceptance toward diversity. However, this task requires thoughtful planning, targeted strategies, and methodological precision – because what may seem like a challenge for the school system can often be viewed as self-evident or natural by students themselves. This point was reflected in our study, as the results show a consistently high level of intercultural competence among students, regardless of their educational context. This supports the thesis of homogeneity and the universal nature of values embraced by today's students, irrespective of their place of residence, cultural background, or historical context.

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