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Multicultural attitudes and beliefs among early education teachers: A comparative study of Poland and Iceland

Submitted: 27.10.2024

Accepted: 26.05.2025

Published: 27.06.2025



Keywords:

early childhood education
teacher, multicultural
attitudes and beliefs,
research in Poland
and Iceland

Abstract

Research objectives (aims) and problem(s): The article presents the results of a study conducted in Poland and Iceland. Its aim was to compare the attitudes of early childhood education teachers toward multiculturalism. It also sought to examine the relationship between sociocultural factors and the respondents' multicultural attitudes.

Research methods: A total of 112 early childhood education teachers took part in the study: 53 from Poland and 59 from Iceland. The research was quantitative and used the diagnostic survey method. Data were collected using the International Intercultural Attitudes Scale (MASQUE).

Process of argumentation: This research is valuable because it provides educational managers with knowledge necessary for designing schools that are open to multiculturalism. Moreover, as Byram (2021) suggests, such studies motivate teachers to reflect on their own values and cultural biases, which may influence the quality and effectiveness of multicultural education.

Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences: The results showed that teachers from Iceland demonstrated stronger intercultural sensitivity in terms of knowledge, action, and overall attitude index compared to teachers from Poland.

Conclusions and/or recommendations: In a multicultural world, it is essential to develop an open identity, especially as a teacher who acts as a role model of openness to multiculturalism for their students. Teachers with greater openness to cultural diversity are significantly more involved in culturally responsive teaching and intercultural education, which translates into the educational engagement of minority students.

Introduction

Societies around the world are culturally diverse, which is often perceived in both positive and negative terms (Banks & Banks, 2010, pp. 7–15; Morrison et al., 2010, pp. 1649–1659). Although societies in Western Europe have long been multicultural, bias, xenophobia, racism, and, more broadly, negative attitudes toward ethnic minorities continue to persist (Kende et al., 2017, pp. 15–24).

The body of research on multicultural competence has grown rapidly, especially since the year 2000 (Hammer et al., 2003, pp. 423–441; Olson & Kroeger, 2001, pp. 116–134; Penbek et al., 2012, pp. 233–239; Rissanen et al., 2016, pp. 448–454). This research can be grouped into three main categories. The first group includes studies that assess the level of intercultural knowledge among teachers and pupils (Caingcoy et al., 2022, pp. 21–35; Chen & Starosta, 2000, pp. 1–15; Olson & Kroeger, 2001, pp. 116–137). The second group focuses on studies that examine the level of intercultural competence in both groups (Anderson et al., 2006, pp. 457–469; Penbek et al., 2012, pp. 233–252; Rissanen et al., 2016, pp. 448–450). The third group comprises research exploring teacher and pupil attitudes toward the competencies that teachers need to support in intercultural education (Cushner & Brennan, 2007, pp. 201–213; DeJaeghere & Cao, 2009, pp. 440–444).

In order for multiculturalism to take a safe and constructive form, visions, plans, and curricula are not enough. An essential role is played

by teachers and their attitudes toward multiculturalism. In educational contexts, this is referred to as multicultural attitudes, which are considered fundamental to high-quality teaching practices at all levels of education (Abacioglu et al., 2020, pp. 736–752). According to scholars, a multicultural attitude is key to including pupils from diverse cultural backgrounds in the classroom and school community, while also respecting their cultural differences (Peček & Lesar, 2006, pp. 170–185; Peček & Lesar, 2009, pp. 204–234; Vezzali et al., 2012, pp. 203–212; Vezzali et al., 2012a, pp. 437–440).

Teachers with positive multicultural attitudes help their pupils maintain strong connections with their own cultures and in enhancing their self-awareness, self-confidence, a sense of belonging, and building of their (ethnic) identity (Derman-Sparks & Olsen Edwards, 2010, pp. 93–127). These are essential prerequisites for experiencing comfort and joy in the presence of human diversity, encouraging open-mindedness toward others, and for forming strong, caring relationships (Derman-Sparks & Olsen Edwards, 2010, pp. 108–134).

It is, without a doubt, the teacher's responsibility to create a school environment in which students can develop positive attitudes toward diversity. However, this is only possible when teachers themselves possess and cultivate positive multicultural attitudes (Abacioglu et al., 2020, pp. 736–752). In the literature, such attitudes are defined as multicultural awareness and sensitivity, or more specifically, as "awareness of, comfort with, and sensitivity to the issues of cultural pluralism in class" (Ponterotto et al., 1998, p. 1003).

It is well known that teachers can transmit their own prejudices to their pupils, which significantly influences the success of inclusion and the academic achievement of minority students (Mlinar & Krammer, 2021, pp. 107–118). Furthermore, teachers' attitudes toward children who do not belong to the majority population affect how they respond to these pupils and to their specific educational needs (Peček et al., 2012, pp. 332–336). Therefore, the objective of this research is to identify the attitudes and beliefs about multiculturalism held by early childhood education teachers in Poland and Iceland.

Literature review

Contemporary humanities and social sciences increasingly use the concepts of transculturality, interculturality, and multiculturalism. While often treated as synonymous, these terms describe different types of relationships between cultures coexisting in a given social reality (Byram, 2021, pp. 35–37; Epstein, 2009, pp. 327–352; Lyttle & Barker, 2011, pp. 686–694; Marotta, 2014, pp. 90–102; Sowa-Behtane, 2016). These concepts not only consider the nature and quality of cultural phenomena, but also define cross-cultural relationships as well as models of identity and personality (Guilherme & Dietz, 2015, pp. 16–18; Nikitorowicz & Guziuk-Tkacz, 2021, pp. 28–32).

Transculturality is a concept used in the humanities and social sciences to refer – also based on its etymology – to a spatial process of “extending through” the boundary/boundaries of individual cultures. It involves cross-cultural permeation, leading to the emergence of new cultural structures and formations, which are created through heterogeneous networks that include both components shared with other transcultural networks and unique components (Nikitorowicz & Guziuk-Tkacz, 2021, p. 27). The concept also describes:

- the ongoing process of crossing cultural boundaries and generating new cultural qualities with hybrid structures (Falski, 2014, pp. 11–24; Lee & Dovchin, 2019),
- the blending, hybridization, and permeation of contemporary cultures, values, and lifestyles – none of which are entirely homogeneous or easily categorized,
- dynamic interactions between two or more independent cultural poles in both micro- and macro-social contexts (Antor, 2010, pp. 193–214; Pratt, 2007, pp. 129–148), and
- the formation of cultural identities in transnational spaces, where participation “is not a direct effect of the physical presence” (Hastrup, 2008, p. 51).

Interculturality refers to a continuously evolving space “in-between cultures” encompassing elements from two or more cultural contexts. Interactions occurring in this space promote effective coexistence and communication between people from different cultures through dialogue and the exchange of norms, beliefs, and values. This process enriches the lives and cultures of those involved in the interaction (Guziuk-Tkacz & Siegień-Matyjewicz, 2015, pp. 26–76; Holliday, 2011, pp. 98–109; Johansson, 2022, pp. 75–89; Karacabey et al., 2019, pp. 383–393; Piller, 2017; Zhu, 2018, pp. 57–77). The significance of the “in-between” concept lies in raising awareness of one’s own culture by way of comparison, collaboration, and deeper insight into cultural models (Risager & Dervin, 2014, pp. 1–25).

Multiculturalism is most often understood as the distinct recognition of multiple cultures. The phenomenon of multiculturalism, typical of the twenty-first century, stems from ongoing globalization, which encompasses economic, political, social, cultural, environmental, and demographic processes and phenomena. The vast majority of contemporary societies experience multiculturalism, although its intensity and nature vary (Morris et al., 2015, pp. 631–659; Nieto & Bode, 2008, pp. 237–303; Ozdemir & Dil, 2013, pp. 215–232; Rattansi, 2011, pp. 6–28; Sowa-Behtane, 2016, pp. 45–76).

Method

This was an exploratory study (Babbie, 2004, p. 111), and its main objective was to assess the multicultural attitudes of teachers working in early school education in Poland and Iceland, and to examine their beliefs about multiculturalism. The research questions were formulated as follows:

1. What level of multicultural attitudes and beliefs is demonstrated by teachers working in early school education in Poland and Iceland?
2. Does the socio-cultural environment differentiate attitudes toward multiculturalism held by teachers working in early school education?

3. Is there a relationship between the age of the responding early school teachers and their level of multicultural attitudes? If so, what is it?
4. Is there a relationship between the number of years of teaching experience of the responding early school teachers and their level of multicultural attitudes? If so, what is it?
5. Is there a relationship between the command of English of the responding early school teachers and their level of multicultural attitudes? If so, what is it?

The following hypotheses were proposed for Questions 2, 3, 4, and 5:

- H1 (Q2): The socio-cultural environment differentiates the attitudes toward multiculturalism held by teachers working in early school education.
- H2 (Q3): There is a relationship between the age of the responding teachers and their openness to cultural diversity.
- H3 (Q4): There is a relationship between the number of years of teaching experience of the responding teachers and openness to cultural diversity.
- H4 (Q5): There is a relationship between the command of English of the responding teachers and their openness to cultural diversity.

This was a quantitative study using the Munroe Multicultural Attitude Scale Questionnaire (MASQUE), developed by Munroe and Pearson (2006, pp. 819–834). The MASQUE is an 18-item scale designed to measure multicultural attitudes, divided into three subscales (or dimensions): (1) knowledge, (2) care, and (3) action. Respondents rated their answers using a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree).

The data obtained from the quantitative study were analyzed statistically using IBM SPSS software. The analysis included the following descriptive statistics: mean, standard deviation, and tests for statistical significance of differences. The study was conducted via an online survey using a Google Form. In Iceland, the MASQUE was administered in its orig-

inal English version; in Poland, it was translated into Polish. In both countries, the authors of the study contacted local Education Superintendent Offices to request permission to distribute the survey link to early school education teachers, asking them to complete it.

A total of 112 teachers responded to the request: 59 from Iceland and 53 from Poland. Of these, 92% were employed in urban schools, and 96.4% reported teaching students from diverse cultural backgrounds. The ages of the respondents ranged from 20 to over 61 years, and their teaching experience ranged from 0 to over 21 years. Nearly all teachers in Iceland reported proficiency in English, while 66% of the teachers in Poland stated they had a command of English. Respondents' characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of the study group

Categories	range	Poland		Iceland	
		frequency	%	frequency	%
Age	20–30 years	2	3.8	4	6.8
	31–40 years	8	15.1	6	10.2
	41–50 years	16	30.2	23	39.0
	51–60 years	22	41.5	17	28.8
	61 years and more	5	9.4	9	15.3
Years of Experience	0–5 years	5	9.4	14	23.7
	6–10 years	4	7.5	10	16.9
	11–20 years	11	20.8	14	23.7
	21 years and more	33	62.3	21	35.6
Command of English	no	18	34	1	1.7
	yes	35	66	58	98.3

The research project was carried out between September 2023 and February 2024. To ensure compliance with research ethics, the survey was conducted anonymously. Moreover, no data were collected that could allow for the identification of individual respondents.

Data analysis

(1) Attitudes toward multiculturalism among early school education teachers in Poland and Iceland

At the first stage of the analysis, the authors examined multicultural attitudes in the study group. To this end, a frequency analysis of the overall attitude score was performed, based on the standards outlined in the original publication. The analysis was conducted separately for the subgroups of Polish teachers and Icelandic teachers (Table 2).

Table 2. Score distribution for the overall indicator of multicultural attitudes among teachers in Poland and Iceland

	Frequency	Percentage	Level
Poland	4	7.5%	Low
	20	37.7%	Average
	29	54.7%	High
Iceland	0	0.0%	Low
	11	18.6%	Average
	48	81.4%	High

The analysis showed that among Polish early school education teachers, the highest percentage of respondents (54.7%) scored high on the overall indicator of multicultural attitudes. An average score was reported by 37.7% of respondents, while a low score was reported by 7.5%. In contrast, among teachers from Iceland, as many as 81.4% scored high, and 18.6% reported an average score. No respondents in this group scored low.

(2) Attitudes of early school education teachers toward multiculturalism vs. the socio-cultural environment

In the first step of the analysis, the distribution of quantitative variables was examined. Descriptive statistics were calculated using the Shapiro–Wilk normality test. The distribution analysis showed that most

variables did not significantly deviate from a normal distribution – in these cases, the Shapiro–Wilk test was statistically significant. Due to this, and the presence of outliers (above 3 standard deviations), it was appropriate to use non-parametric tests.

In the next step, the analysis assessed whether Polish teachers differed from teachers in Iceland in terms of their multicultural attitudes, specifically in the areas of knowledge, care/empathy, action, and the overall indicator of attitudes (H1). To this end, a Mann–Whitney U test was conducted (Table 3, Diagram 1).

**Table 3. Results of the Mann–Whitney U test
 comparing the level of multicultural attitudes by country**

Dependent variable	Poland (<i>n</i> = 53)			Iceland (<i>n</i> = 59)			<i>Z</i> .	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>
	mean rank	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>IQR</i>	mean rank	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>IQR</i>			
Knowledge	42.71	33.00	13.00	68.89	40.00	7.00	-4.30	<0.001	0.41
Care/empathy	56.65	26.00	9.00	56.36	26.00	9.00	-0.05	0.963	<0.01
Action	45.93	21.00	6.00	65.99	25.00	6.00	-3.27	0.001	0.31
Attitudes – overall score	46.16	79.00	19.00	65.79	91.00	17.00	-3.20	0.001	0.30

*Notes: n = number of observations; Mdn = median; IQR = interquartile range; Z = test statistic;
 p = statistical significance; r = effect size.*

Verification of Hypothesis H1: The analysis revealed statistically significant differences between the groups in two subscales, i.e., knowledge and action, as well as in the overall attitude score. Teachers from Iceland demonstrated higher levels of multicultural attitudes in the areas of knowledge, action, and overall attitude score compared to teachers from Poland. The values of the effect size (*r* coefficients) indicate that the differences were moderately strong. Hypothesis H1 was partially supported.

(3) Attitudes of early school education teachers toward multiculturalism vs. age and years of teaching experience

In this part of the analysis, we examined the relationship between multicultural attitude levels and age (verification of H2), as well as years of teaching experience (verification of H3). To this end, Spearman's rho correlation was calculated, with separate analyses for the subgroups of teachers from Poland and Iceland (Table 4).

Table 4. Spearman's rho correlation between the level of multicultural attitudes and age and years of teaching experience in study subgroups

	Variable		Age	Teaching experience
Poland	Knowledge	Spearman's rho	-0.14	-0.22
		significance	0.306	0.110
	Care/empathy	Spearman's rho	-0.25	-0.40
		significance	0.074	0.003
	Act	Spearman's rho	0.05	0.06
		significance	0.727	0.676
	Attitudes – overall score	Spearman's rho	-0.15	-0.25
		significance	0.270	0.071
Iceland	Knowledge	Spearman's rho	-0.31	-0.34
		significance	0.016	0.008
	Care/empathy	Spearman's rho	-0.21	-0.15
		significance	0.115	0.258
	Action	Spearman's rho	-0.26	-0.13
		significance	0.049	0.333
	Attitudes – overall score	Spearman's rho	-0.32	-0.29
		significance	0.013	0.028

Verification of Hypotheses H2 and H3: In the subgroup of teachers from Poland, the analysis revealed one statistically significant and moderately strong correlation: between years of teaching experience and the

care/empathy dimension. The correlation was negative, which indicates that care/empathy scores decreased as years of teaching experience increased.

In the group of teachers from Iceland, statistically significant relationships were found between age and years of teaching experience and the knowledge and overall attitude scores, as well as between age and action. These correlations were also negative, which means that as age and years of experience increased, the levels of the listed dimensions of multicultural attitudes decreased. Most of these relationships were either moderately strong or weak.

This means that Hypotheses H2 and H3 were partially supported. The remaining relationships were statistically insignificant.

(4) Multicultural attitudes vs. command of English

In the next stage of the analysis, the authors examined whether command of English influenced scores in the areas of multicultural attitude, namely, knowledge, care/empathy, action, and the overall attitude score (verification of H4).¹ To do this, a Mann–Whitney U test was conducted (Table 5).

Table 5. Results of the Mann–Whitney U test comparing the level of multicultural attitudes by command of English (teachers from Poland)

Dependent variable	No (<i>n</i> = 18)			Yes (<i>n</i> = 35)			<i>Z</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>
	average rank	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>IQR</i>	average rank	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>IQR</i>			
Knowledge	22.94	30.50	11.50	29.09	33.00	14.00	-1.37	0.169	0.19
Care/empathy	21.50	23.00	8.50	29.83	28.00	9.00	-1.86	0.063	0.26
Action	26.53	21.00	6.00	27.24	21.00	6.00	-0.16	0.872	0.02
Attitudes – overall score	22.92	77.00	20.00	29.10	80.00	22.00	-1.38	0.167	0.19

Notes: n – number of observations; Mdn – median; IQR – interquartile range; Z – test statistic; p – significance level; r – effect size.

¹ This test was conducted only with the subgroup of Polish teachers, as the number of participants in the Icelandic group without English language skills was too small to perform the test (*n* = 1).

Verification of Hypothesis H4: The analysis showed no statistically significant differences between the groups. This indicates that the level of multicultural attitudes was similar, irrespective of the respondents' command of English. Hypothesis H4 was rejected.

Discussion

Teachers are role models who influence all types of behaviors, actions, and attitudes (Rubie-Davies et al., 2014, pp. 181–191; Johnson et al., 2016, pp. 128–136), which is particularly important during the early years of children's education. Recent global migration has brought major changes to the educational experiences of pupils, parents, and teachers. This study centres on teachers working in schools in Poland and Iceland attended by culturally diverse student populations, aiming to examine their attitudes and views on multiculturalism.

Regarding the research question about openness to cultural diversity among respondents, a high overall score was observed in 81.4% of teachers from Iceland, while only 54.7% of teachers from Poland scored similarly high. An average score was reported by 37.7% of respondents from Poland and 18.6% from Iceland. It should be stressed that none of the Icelandic teachers scored low on the multicultural attitudes scale, whereas 7.5% of Polish teachers did.

The study found that the socio-cultural environment influences respondents' multicultural attitudes. This difference was mainly attributed to higher scores in the knowledge and action dimensions. A teacher's knowledge consists of both personal experience and expertise acquired during academic training (Banks & Banks, 2010, pp. 104–130). The findings correspond with research conducted in Poland by Barkowiak (2021, pp. 267–286). They also reference the study by Thomassen & Munthe (2021, pp. 234–248), which emphasized the importance of ongoing teacher training in multicultural education.

The data also suggest that openness to cultural diversity among Polish respondents depends on their command of English. Among the responding teachers from Iceland, it was found that as both age and years

of teaching experience increased, their knowledge about multiculturalism and their overall multicultural attitude decreased. Educators with more years of experience may be less inclined to update or expand their knowledge in this area. Such teachers are often convinced that it is the pupils who must adapt to the learning environment, and that educators themselves should not be expected to receive specialized training.

Among the responding teachers from Poland, the negative relationship between years of teaching experience and the care subscale may indicate symptoms of occupational burnout. The results support conclusions from the study by Perkowska-Klejman (2011, pp. 1–10), which found that the longer teachers work at a school, the less helpful, friendly, and easy-going they tend to be. More positive and supportive relationships with pupils are often built by teachers with relatively fewer years of experience. This may be due to a generation gap, as well as personality traits more commonly associated with young age, such as enthusiasm, optimism, cheerfulness, and creativity.

Conclusions

Contemporary education is constantly undergoing changes influenced by cultural, political, and social factors, which are increasingly shaped by the reality of living and growing up in multicultural contexts. For teachers, it is very important to adopt teaching methods based on acknowledgement and respect for differences and diversity, along with maintaining a positive attitude toward multiculturalism in educational settings (Chakir & Peček, 2014, pp. 19–36).

This is particularly important given that teachers with a higher level of multicultural attitudes are significantly more engaged in teaching that is sensitive to culture and intercultural education, which in turn enhances the engagement of minority students, their interest in schooling, and their academic achievement (Abacioglu et al., 2020, pp. 748–749).

In a multicultural world, it is vital to develop a new theory of acculturation that is relevant to educational practice. There is a need to shape open-ended identities – for both teachers and students – where key

elements include openness to dialogue and a disposition toward learning about others, understanding their perspectives, and appreciating their worlds and motivations (Szempruch, 2022, pp. 120–128).

The collected research data clearly indicate the need to strengthen multicultural education in the Polish education system. It is crucial to implement systemic solutions that support the development of multicultural attitudes among teachers. The most important actions include:

- (a) Mandatory training on cultural diversity – enabling teachers to deepen their understanding of the cultures, customs, and needs of students from diverse backgrounds;
- (b) Incorporation of intercultural content into teacher education programs – to ensure that future teachers are better prepared to work in diverse school environments;
- (c) Provision of institutional support for working with children who have migration experience – including, among other things, access to specialist assistance, educational materials, and platforms for the exchange of best practices.

Implementing these measures can contribute to the creation of a more open, inclusive, and effective educational environment in Polish schools, which is necessary in today's increasingly diverse society.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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