

INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION IN PRESCHOOL EDUCATION: A THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Intercultural education has become a vital dimension of early childhood pedagogy, as children encounter cultural, linguistic, and social diversity from their very first years in institutional settings. This paper investigates the theoretical foundations, pedagogical principles, and practical strategies required to foster intercultural learning in preschools. Grounded in a targeted review of Romanian and international policy frameworks, scholarly literature, and professional guidelines on equity and culturally responsive teaching, the study argues against reducing interculturality to sporadic cultural celebrations. Instead, it advocates for a systemic approach embedded in classroom relationships, the curriculum, play, language policies, family partnerships, and assessment. Key focus is placed on the educator's role in reflecting on implicit biases, fostering inclusive environments, valuing home languages, and utilizing cooperative learning to build empathy and perspective-taking. The proposed framework outlines how observation, dialogic storytelling, role-play, and collaborative projects can enhance children's sense of belonging, social competence, and openness toward diversity.

Keywords: intercultural education; preschool education; cultural diversity; inclusion; multilingualism; culturally responsive pedagogy.

1. Introduction

Contemporary society is shaped and characterized by an increasingly evident cultural and linguistic diversity, and this diversity, having become a tangible reality, is reflected even within early childhood education institutions, specifically in preschools. The preschool group cannot be viewed as a space characterized by cultural homogeneity, as children may come from families with different histories, languages, values, religious practices, communication styles, and social experiences.

Thus, in this context, intercultural education becomes an essential component in ensuring the quality of the educational process. It helps children build, develop, and maintain relationships based primarily on respect, teaching them to observe differences not to transform them into advantages or disadvantages, nor to establish hierarchies, but to foster their sense of belonging to the group. UNESCO (2006) notes that intercultural education aims to promote not only understanding and respect, but also interaction among individuals belonging to different cultural and social contexts.

The importance of this topic is further highlighted by the characteristics of early child development. From their early years, children form various representations of themselves and those around them, building a set of values and principles regarding what is considered normal or accepted in their social environment. Early childhood education lays the foundations for first social experiences; therefore, experiences of cooperation, as well as those of conflict or negotiation, become decisive in how the future adult will approach human differences. The OECD (2023) indicates that early childhood education settings represent the first relevant space of socialization separate from the family for children. As such, all experiences and activities carried out in these contexts contribute to the formation of identity, a sense of belonging, and perceptions of the world, oneself, and others.

In Romania, the Curriculum for Early Childhood Education (2019), approved by Order of the Minister of National Education No. 4694/2019, envisions a child-centered perspective focused on overall development and the creation of learning situations through meaningful experiences. This allows for the integration of the intercultural dimension into various fields and activities, such as language development, education for society, arts, music, play, and environmental exploration.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the role of intercultural education in preschool education and to propose a methodologically realistic framework for integrating it into classroom activities. The pursued objectives include:

- Conceptualizing key terms: culture, diversity, multiculturalism, interculturalism, and inclusion;
- Highlighting pedagogical principles relevant to preschool age;
- Outlining the roles of the educator and the family;

- Proposing practical activity examples and evaluation benchmarks;
- Emphasizing the benefits and limitations of the intercultural approach at preschool age.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Conceptual Delimitations: Culture, Multiculturalism, and Interculturalism

Culture can be understood as a dynamic set of values, meanings, practices, symbols, norms, communication channels, and relational patterns through which members of a group interpret the world and construct their identity. In education, culture should not be reduced to folkloric elements (such as traditional costumes, food, or holidays), as a child's cultural experience manifests deeply in language, family relationships, emotional expression, interactions with adults, play, and behavioral expectations. UNESCO (2006) emphasizes the complex and interdependent nature of the relationship between culture, language, and education.

Multiculturalism primarily describes a state of affairs: the coexistence of multiple cultural groups within a shared space. Interculturalism, however, involves a further step—not merely the passive recognition of differences, but the building of relationships, exchanges, and forms of mutual learning among individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. In preschool education, this distinction is essential. An activity in which each child presents an object 'specific' to their family carries predominantly explanatory or informational value; by contrast, an intercultural activity invites children to compare experiences, ask questions, discover analogies and differences, and co-construct new meaning.

Interculturalism does not imply relinquishing one's own cultural identity in favor of a uniform one. On the contrary, it supports the idea that identities can be multiple, flexible, and complementary. The Council of Europe (2018) links competencies for democratic culture to the set of values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge required to live together in culturally diverse societies. For young children, these competencies translate into observable, developmentally appropriate behaviors: active listening, expressing preferences respectfully, accepting differences, and cooperating during play.

2.2. Intercultural Education in Early Childhood

Intercultural education in early childhood must be strictly adapted to children's cognitive, emotional, and linguistic development levels. Preschoolers learn primarily through direct experience, play, imitation, storytelling, conversation, movement, and social interaction. Therefore, abstract concepts such as discrimination or cultural pluralism must be translated into concrete life situations: a classmate speaks a different language, a family has a distinct tradition, two families organize a celebration differently, or people hold varied preferences and habits without these determining or conditioning their personal worth.

An authentic intercultural perspective simultaneously pursues two complementary directions: 1. Affirming each child's identity: the child must see themselves reflected in the educational environment and feel that their language, family, and experiences are valued. 2. Fostering openness toward others: the child is supported in observing differences, asking questions with curiosity, and avoiding generalizations or stereotypes. NAEYC (2019) recommends that the learning environment, educational materials, and daily interactions positively reflect the diversity of children and families, while educators eliminate stereotypical or exclusionary practices.

2.3. Principles of Intercultural Education in Preschool

Equality in dignity: Children must consistently receive the message that human differences do not establish a hierarchy of personal worth. Educators have a responsibility to intervene promptly when labeling, name-calling, exclusion, or derogatory comments occur. Interventions should be calm, firm, and educational: the child is guided to understand the emotional impact of their behavior and to discover appropriate communication alternatives.

Balanced representation of diversity: If learning resources present a single image of family, beauty, language, or lifestyle, children may internalize the idea that this is the only legitimate model. Books, dolls, role-play props, and examples used in conversations should offer varied representations, avoiding the exoticization of specific groups. Diversity must be organically integrated into daily classroom life, rather than isolated within a single 'cultural week.'

Family engagement: Families represent an essential educational resource. Parents can provide authentic insights into the home language, stories, songs, games, objects, and personal experiences. However, the preschool-family partnership must be built on mutual respect and voluntariness; educators should refrain from turning a family into an 'official representative' of an entire culture or assuming that all members of a group share identical practices.

An asset-based approach: The OECD (2023) recommends moving beyond deficit-based views of diversity to recognize children's cultural and linguistic backgrounds as valuable assets. For multilingual children, for instance, knowledge of the home language should not be viewed as an obstacle to acquiring the language of instruction, but as a pillar of identity and cognitive development. Educators can introduce simple words from the languages spoken in the class, invite children to compare sounds or greetings, and leverage bilingual literature.

2.4. The Role of the Educator and the Educational Environment

The educator serves as the primary role model for intercultural behavior. Children observe not only explicit instructional content, but especially the adult's implicit reactions to differences. Consequently, an educator's intercultural competence requires continuous self-reflection: identifying personal assumptions, examining stereotypes, and recognizing situations where certain children might unintentionally receive more attention, trust, or openness than others. NAEYC (2019) highlights the necessity of critical reflection on one's own values, beliefs, and cultural biases.

The physical classroom environment must reinforce these same values. An inclusive classroom integrates images of diverse children and families, books featuring characters from varied backgrounds, materials representing multiple family structures, and play areas where children can negotiate roles free from rigid stereotypes of gender, language, or origin. Furthermore, the decor should avoid displaying cultures as external 'curiosities,' encouraging instead a natural connection to shared human experiences.

2.5. Language, Play, and Storytelling as Intercultural Resources

Language is a central dimension of identity. In a linguistically diverse classroom, the educator creates contexts where every child feels that their native language is valued, while the language of instruction is systematically developed. Greeting routines, naming objects, songs, short poems, and stories can easily incorporate plurilingual elements. The goal is not for all children to master every language spoken in the group, but to foster curiosity, respect, and a willingness to communicate.

Stories serve as an exceptionally effective pedagogical tool, allowing children to explore differences within a safe, symbolic framework. During reading activities, educators can ask questions focused on emotional and reflective processing: 'How did the character feel when arriving in a new place?'; 'What things were different, and what did the characters have in common?'; 'How can we help someone who feels lonely or different?'

In this way, the focus shifts from merely accumulating information about a culture to developing empathy and the ability to take another's perspective. Role-play allows for direct practice of social scenarios. Preschoolers can act out guided scripts where a new character joins the group, a classmate misunderstands a rule, two characters have different customs, or a child is temporarily excluded from play. The educator can pause the game at key moments to invite children to analyze the situation and propose constructive solutions. This method creates valuable opportunities for social-emotional learning, allowing teachers to observe actual behaviors without the rigidity of formal evaluation.

3. Methodology

This paper is theoretical-applied in nature and employs the methods of document analysis and thematic synthesis. Reference documents in the fields of intercultural and early childhood education, scholarly works and professional position papers concerning equity, inclusion, cultural diversity, and intercultural competences, as well as relevant official policy documents for the Romanian context, were consulted.

The analysis targeted four fundamental categories of information: 1. Theoretical concepts and principles; 2. The role of the educator; 3. Pedagogical strategies and means; 4. Specific evaluation methods.

Source selection criteria included: • Direct relevance to early childhood education (preschool level); • Institutional or academic authority of the sources; • Currency of the analyzed documents; • Practical applicability of the recommendations within classroom activities.

The synthesis does not aim to measure an experimental effect nor does it present original empirical data; rather, it offers a structured integration of recommendations identified in the literature and policy documents. Based on this analysis, an orientative methodological framework for designing and conducting intercultural activities was developed.

This framework is structured around three guiding questions:

1. What must the child learn about themselves and others? (Cognitive and attitudinal dimension)
2. What concrete experience allows them to practice this? (Actionable/practical dimension)
3. What observable behaviors indicate progress? (Evaluative dimension)

This structure is fully compatible with a competence-based approach and supports the view that evaluation in early childhood should be predominantly authentic, based on systematic observation in natural contexts of play and interaction.

4. Results

4.1. *Identified Pedagogical Dimensions*

The theoretical synthesis indicates that effective intercultural education in early childhood requires a systematic and sustained character. Introducing occasional thematic activities is insufficient, as attitudes toward diversity are internalized through repeated daily experiences. Consequently, the findings of the analysis are grouped into six fundamental dimensions:

- **Socio-emotional climate:** Involves establishing clear rules based on mutual respect, ensuring equal opportunities for participation, and firm yet educational interventions in cases of exclusion.
- **Curriculum:** Integrates diverse perspectives into routine activities, moving beyond isolated themes dedicated to other cultures.
- **Language:** Simultaneously supports the development of the language of instruction and the valorization of home languages.
- **Physical environment:** Offers diverse visual representations and learning materials, avoiding stereotypes and exoticization.
- **Family partnership:** Facilitates a two-way exchange of information and the co-construction of authentic learning experiences.

- Assessment: Tracks individual progress in acquiring social and intercultural behaviors without ranking or comparing cultures against one another.

Table 1. Dimensions, Activities, and Indicators for Intercultural Education in Preschool

Dimension	Example of Activity	Observable Indicator
Identity and Belonging	“The Story of My Name” – children talk about their names and their families.	The child talks about themselves and accepts their classmates’ presentations.
Linguistic Diversity	“Greetings in Several Languages” – short greetings and expressions of thanks.	The child shows curiosity and respect towards other languages.
Empathy and Perspective-Taking	Story featuring a new character joining a group, followed by a guided discussion.	The child identifies emotions and suggests ways of offering support.
Cooperation	Team-building construction game with rotating roles.	The child negotiates roles and accepts other people’s ideas.
Family and Community	Inviting a family member to share a story, song, or game.	The child presents family experiences without devaluing other experiences.

4.2. Examples of Intercultural Activities

“Our Story Map”: Developed using short stories or books brought by children and their families. Each story is associated with a drawing, photograph, or symbol chosen by the child. The educator avoids rigid geographical approaches and emphasizes universal human experiences: family, friendship, play, celebration, mutual support, and belonging. The activity can be extended by identifying common elements and specific differences.

“The Friendly Words Box”: An activity designed for linguistically diverse classrooms. Children bring or learn simple greetings, expressions of thanks, and words of encouragement in the languages present in the group's community. Words are practiced together, and the educator facilitates discussions on scenarios where they can be used. This activity contributes to developing language awareness and creating a climate where linguistic diversity is visible and legitimized.

“What Would You Do If...?”: Utilizes role-play and problem-solving scenarios (e.g., a child is excluded from a game, someone laughs at a peer's accent or pronunciation, two children want the same role). Through guided discussion, preschoolers propose solutions and analyze their consequences. The emphasis falls on prosocial behaviors: active listening, inviting others to play, seeking help, assertively stating boundaries, and using respectful language.

4.3. The Role of the Family and Community

Partnering with families transforms intercultural education from a series of isolated instructional sequences into an integrated community experience. Educators can request information about songs, stories, games, greetings, objects, or traditions that hold meaning for the family. It is essential that this request be framed openly, without assuming that families must 'demonstrate' allegiance to a specific cultural mold. Some families may hold multiple identities or prefer to share everyday experiences rather than traditional elements.

Collaboration with the local community can include partnerships with libraries, cultural centers, non-governmental organizations, and resource persons. The primary selection criterion should not be the spectacularity of an activity, but its pedagogical relevance to children's developmental goals. A meeting with a guest is valuable when it stimulates curiosity, dialogue, and cooperation, moving beyond a mere 'cultural show.'

4.4. Evaluating Intercultural Progress

Assessment in early intercultural education is exclusively formative and authentic. Educators track behaviors through direct observation, such as: • Initiating interactions with peers from varied backgrounds; • Listening to others without frequent interruptions; • Accepting that multiple valid ways to complete a task can coexist; • Using respectful and inclusive language; • Spontaneously inviting other children to play; • Accurately recognizing and naming others' emotions; • Asking questions about differences out of curiosity, without intent to mock; • Seeking adult guidance in resolving conflicts.

These observations are recorded in qualitative observation sheets or collected within the child's individual portfolio. It is fundamental that assessment does not rank children by a hypothetical 'intercultural level.' The objective is identifying individual progress and adapting pedagogical interventions.

For multilingual children, assessment must consider the child's entire linguistic repertoire (a holistic approach); performance in a single language (e.g., the language of instruction) does not faithfully reflect overall cognitive or social development. The OECD (2023) and NAEYC (2019) strongly advocate for asset-based approaches and assessments sensitive to the child's socio-cultural context.

4.5. Implementation Conditions

Consistent implementation directly depends on the professional development of educators. The Council of Europe (2021) provides specific descriptors for democratic and intercultural competences applicable to children under 10, confirming the feasibility of operationalizing values and attitudes into age-appropriate behaviors.

For teachers, training programs should target: • Critical reflection on personal beliefs and implicit biases; • Empathetic communication and collaboration with diverse families; •

Constructive conflict management in the classroom; • Critical selection and adaptation of learning resources.

Another essential condition is adopting a whole-school approach. If an educator promotes respect in the classroom while organizational rules, materials, or general practices convey contradictory messages, the impact will be minimal. Intercultural education must be supported through institutional policy, collegial collaboration among teaching staff, parent relations, and equitable access to resources. As highlighted by the OECD (2023), real inclusion is built systemically: through curriculum, continuous professional development, organizational practices, and quality monitoring.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The analysis demonstrates that intercultural education in preschool should not be confused with teaching theoretical facts about 'other peoples' or 'other cultures.' Such a superficial approach risks maintaining—even unintentionally—a rift between 'us' and 'them.' The intercultural perspective proposed in this paper is relational and process-oriented: children become aware of their own identity, encounter different identities, discover similarities and differences, and learn to negotiate meaning and behavior within the group. In this process, diversity is leveraged as a pedagogical resource rather than managed as a problem.

A major advantage of early intercultural education is its preventive nature. Stereotypical attitudes and exclusionary behaviors do not emerge in a vacuum; they are absorbed from the family environment, media, or broader social interactions. While preschool cannot control all sources of influence in a child's life, it possesses the capacity to offer corrective and alternative experiences: opportunities for cooperation, positive intergroup contact, respectful language modeling, stories from multiple perspectives, and equal chances for self-expression. NAEYC (2019) reaffirms the importance of educational environments where every child sees themselves represented positively and where human differences do not become grounds for exclusion.

At the same time, the limitations of this approach must be acknowledged. An isolated activity cannot deconstruct stereotypes, and superficial or touristy presentations of traditions can even reinforce rigid categorizations. Consequently, educators must avoid generalizations such as 'all members of group X do...', opting instead for nuanced phrasing ('some families choose...') and guiding children to observe that variation exists both between cultures and within the same community.

The central conclusion of this paper is that quality intercultural education is constructed through everyday classroom practices: how the teacher greets children, distributes attention, selects stories, organizes play, mediates conflicts, values home languages, and collaborates with parents. From this viewpoint, intercultural competences do not represent a curricular addition or an optional 'supplement,' but develop transversally across all learning and social experiences.

For educational practice, it is recommended that every preschool unit or classroom establish a concise annual intercultural plan adapted to the local context. This plan should include clear goals regarding belonging, respectful communication, cooperation, valuing diversity, and family engagement. Proposed activities must be continuously evaluated through observation and pedagogical reflection, with the plan dynamically adjusted based on children's real needs. In this way, intercultural education becomes a continuous, coherent process appropriate for preschool-aged children.

6. References

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