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Issue Article

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DYNAMICS AND SPECIFICS OF INTERCULTURAL PEDAGOGICAL INTERACTION IN THE BULGARIAN EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT: INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATIONS, EMPIRICAL FINDINGS, AND CONTEMPORARY DISCOURSE

Abstract: *This article analyzes the conceptual, institutional, empirical, and applied dimensions of intercultural interaction within the Bulgarian educational system against the backdrop of contemporary socio-cultural, academic, and demographic transformations. It investigates the dichotomy between European policies on internationalization, broader globalization processes, and the traditional multi-ethnic structure of Bulgarian society (comprising Bulgarians, Turks, Roma, as well as newly emerging migrant and refugee communities). Special emphasis is placed on the Shumen Region in Northeastern Bulgaria - a historically and socio-culturally distinct area serving as a representative "living laboratory" for inter-ethnic interactions and pedagogical practices. The study highlights the paradigm shift from traditional monocultural and assimilationist frameworks toward a culturally responsive and inclusive pedagogical model embedded in Bulgarian educational legislation. Furthermore, it examines the subject position of the Bulgarian educator as an intercultural mediator, the institutional resilience of school and university environments, and the psycho-pedagogical mechanisms (interactive technologies, constructivist design, culturally responsive teaching) required to deconstruct intergroup tensions. An empirical section presents research data on the level of intercultural competence and attitudes among teachers from two secondary schools in the city of Shumen (n1 = 15) and university students enrolled in Bachelor's and Master's degree programs in Early Childhood Education and Primary School Education (n2 = 55).*

Key words: *intercultural pedagogy, Bulgarian educational system, inclusive education, Shumen region, multi-ethnic environment, intercultural competence, empirical research, culturally responsive pedagogy, constructivism, institutional transformativity.*

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INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL GROUNDING IN THE BULGARIAN CONTEXT:

Contemporary Bulgarian society is characterized by a historically constituted multi-ethnic and socio-cultural configuration (Voenkinova & Kolev, 2004; Chavdarova-Kostova, 2012). The century-old coexistence between the majority population and historically established ethnic minority communities (predominantly Bulgarian Turks and Roma), combined with demographic shifts stemming from intensified migration and refugee flows in recent decades, presents the Bulgarian educational system with complex pedagogical, institutional, and value-based challenges (Buzov, 2008).

The traditional pedagogical paradigm inherited from past eras - primarily focused on a monocultural transfer of knowledge and a standardized cognitive absorption of curriculum content - exhibits limited

heuristic and practical efficacy under conditions of growing ethno-cultural heterogeneity (Radev, 2007). Today, the Bulgarian educational space functions as a dynamic microcosm of broader societal transformations, where two main socio-dynamic vectors intersect and collide:

1. The European and Globalization Vector: Oriented toward full integration into the European Higher Education Area, digitalization, international academic mobility, and the implementation of standards for intercultural education, global citizenship, and openness (Daskalova, 2007; Leask, 2022).

2. The Local Socio-Cultural Vector: Manifested through inter-ethnic social distances, socio-economic marginalization (characteristic of certain sub-groups within the Roma community), linguistic barriers, and the transfer of family- or media-generated prejudices and negative stereotypes directly into school and university classrooms (Makariev, 1998; Musolff, 2001).

Within the framework of contemporary global theories on multicultural education (Banks, 2021), educational institutions can no longer function merely as passive transmitters of academic content. Banks (2021) emphasizes that genuine intercultural education goes far beyond the superficial celebration of traditional holidays, requiring comprehensive curriculum reform, prejudice reduction, and the establishment of an institutional culture that empowers all learners. In alignment with this view, Gay (2020) conceptualizes "culturally responsive teaching," wherein learners' cultural backgrounds, native languages, and identities are viewed not as deficits or obstacles, but as valuable cognitive resources for effective learning.

The era in which the primary function of pedagogical activity was limited to the mechanical transmission of information has long passed (Smirnov, 1995). The contemporary educational environment is increasingly established as a space where actors learn to accept the "other," respect cultural differences, and foster empathetic understanding and mutual respect (Byram, 1998; Endres, 2002). Within this conceptual framework, intercultural pedagogy in Bulgaria transcends theoretical abstraction, becoming an imperative mechanism for ensuring equitable access to quality education, preventing school dropout, and building sustainable social cohesion (Borisova, 2003; Chavdarova-Kostova, 2012).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND RATIONALE FOR SELECTING THE SHUMEN REGION

For the international scientific community, conceptualizing intercultural dynamics in Southeastern Europe requires an in-depth understanding of specific regional micro-structures. The choice of the City of Shumen and the Shumen Region (located in Northeastern Bulgaria) as the empirical setting for this study is not accidental; it is grounded in historical, demographic, institutional, and socio-cultural rationales.

Historical and Demographic Specifics

The Shumen Region possesses a century-old tradition of intercultural, inter-ethnic, and inter-religious coexistence (Voenkinova & Kolev, 2004). Situated at the crossroads of the Balkans and the Black Sea coast, the region historically synthesizes Eastern Orthodox Christianity and Islam. According to demographic indicators, Shumen Province exhibits one of the highest concentrations of ethnic minority populations in Bulgaria:

- The Bulgarian Majority**:** Representatives of the Orthodox majority, speakers of the official state language, and bearers of national cultural traditions.
- Bulgarian Turks: The largest ethnic minority in the region, maintaining a preserved Turkish language tradition, Islamic value patterns, and strong community identity.
- The Roma Community: A highly heterogeneous group consisting of distinct sub-groups (e.g., *Musicians*, *Kopanari*, *Kaldarashi*), facing specific socio-economic and linguistic challenges (Buzov, 2008).
- Historical Micro-Communities: Smaller groups of Armenians, Jews, and Karakachans, who enrich the local socio-cultural landscape.

This demographic configuration transforms Shumen into a natural "living laboratory" for studying real-time intercultural communication, where tolerance is not an imported abstract European concept, but an everyday lived practice subjected to contemporary pressures (Makariev, 1998).

Academic and Institutional Role of Shumen

The city of Shumen is recognized as a leading university and educational hub in Bulgaria with deep traditions in teacher training. *Konstantin Preslavsky* University of Shumen has developed renowned academic schools in early childhood, primary, and intercultural education over several decades. The university educates a significant number of students from diverse ethnic backgrounds across Northeastern Bulgaria, turning its academic classrooms into multicultural micro-communities.

Consequently, Shumen presents a unique combination:

1. *School Environment:* Primary and secondary schools characterized by highly multi-ethnic student bodies.
2. *Higher Education Environment:* A university setting that actively prepares future teachers for work within these heterogeneous classrooms.

Thus, the region offers optimal conditions for empirical inquiry whose findings hold high validity for Bulgaria as a whole and for similar multi-ethnic regions across the Balkans and Southeastern Europe.

REGULATORY FRAMEWORK, INSTITUTIONAL RESILIENCE, AND THE DIALECTIC OF CHANGE

In accordance with the Pre-school and School Education Act, the State Educational Standard for Intercultural Education, and the Ordinance on Inclusive Education, intercultural policy in Bulgaria is institutionally codified as a national priority (Chavdarova-Kostova, 2012). Within this legal framework, pedagogical interaction is defined as a specialized, higher-order form of communicative integration among educational actors (Borisova, 2003).

Despite formal statutory backing, the practical implementation of intercultural policies faces a degree of institutional conservatism inherent to both school and university systems in the country (Radev, 2007). Educational systems inherently reflect societal processes while simultaneously requiring structural stability to validate innovative methodological practices (Daskalova, 2007).

This institutional resilience exhibits a dialectical nature:

- On the one hand, it protects the system from chaotic, unexamined experimentation, preserving national academic traditions and rigorous foundational training.
- On the other hand, excessive conservatism delays institutional responsiveness to rapidly shifting socio-cultural realities (Musolff, 2001).

Contemporary societal conditions necessitate structural transformation. Systemic friction in the educational sphere is caused by the prolonged coexistence of outdated assimilationist patterns alongside new inclusive paradigms (Buzov, 2008; Gay, 2020). Successful educational reform in Bulgaria is attainable only through pedagogical practices flexibly adapted to the realities of a multicultural society.

SPECIFICS OF INTERCULTURAL PEDAGOGICAL COMMUNICATION

Intercultural interaction is increasingly becoming the norm across the Bulgarian educational landscape (Chavdarova-Kostova, 2012). The shared academic life of students and educators from diverse ethno-cultural backgrounds requires teachers to maintain a clear stance regarding the possibilities of intercultural education (Borisova, 2003; Banks, 2021). Pedagogical practice must cultivate positive, supportive relationships with all learners, fostering individual potential and a constructive socio-psychological climate (Gyurova et al., 2006).

The Subject Position and Institutional Role of the Educator

Effective pedagogical communication relies heavily on structuring learning processes that account for the cultural, ethnic, emotional, and psychological characteristics of learners (Smirnov, 1995). In this context, the educator's personality, professional sensitivity, and relational style play a decisive role (Byram, 1998).

The educator fulfills several critical functions:

- Deconstructing Cultural Opposition: Constructive interaction is achieved not by pitting cultures against one another or overemphasizing differences, but by comparatively analyzing cultural traits as shared socio-cultural capital (Makariev, 1998).
- Linguistic Support and Cognitive Equity: Implementing specialized methodologies for teaching Bulgarian as the official state language to learners for whom it is a second language, ensuring cognitive equity (Chavdarova-Kostova, 2012).
- Facilitating Autonomous Learning: Acting as a mediator and guide, the educator avoids imposing dogmatic truths, instead pointing the way forward while knowledge construction remains an active endeavor of the learners themselves (Damyanova, 2009; Deardorff, 2020).

Role Conversion and Identity Formation Among Learners

When engaging in intercultural learning, students transcend their primary background environments (ethnic, social, or domestic) through carefully structured tasks and didactic tools (Radev, 2007; Kashlev, 2004). Directing focus toward problem-solving scenarios that demand academic competence and specialized terminology fundamentally alters group dynamics.

In line with *culturally sustaining pedagogy* (Paris & Alim, 2017), supporting identity does not imply insular preservation, but enabling learners to negotiate and expand their cultural repertoires. Learners develop a heightened awareness of belonging to a shared academic community united by common learning goals (Gyurova et al., 2006). Shifting from

passive recipients to active, responsible, and creative agents, students assume new subject roles in the learning process (Kashlev, 2004). Establishing such a system based on tolerance and mutual respect requires the integration of innovative pedagogical technologies (Daskalova, 2007).

EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION OF INTERCULTURAL ATTITUDES AND COMPETENCIES (SHUMEN SETTING)

To diagnose the practical realities of intercultural pedagogical interaction at the regional level, a localized empirical study was conducted to assess the levels of intercultural competence, attitudes, and readiness among key educational actors.

Methodology and Sample Description

- Research Objective: To evaluate the intercultural competence (cognitive, affective, and behavioral components) of active educators and student teachers, identifying perceived barriers within multicultural environments.
- Theoretical Framework: The study adopts M. Bennett's *Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS)* (Bennett, 2017) and D. Deardorff's *Process Model of Intercultural Competence* (Deardorff, 2020).
- Research Instruments: An anonymous questionnaire featuring Likert-type scales (1 = "Strongly Disagree" to 5 = "Strongly Agree"), adapted items from the *Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS)* (Chen & Starosta, 2000), and qualitative follow-up discussions.
- Sample: **The study surveyed N = 70 participants categorized into two target groups:**
  1. ***Group A (In-Service Teachers):* n1 = 15 primary and secondary teachers working in two multi-ethnic schools in the city of Shumen.**
  2. ***Group B (Preservice Teachers):* n2 = 55 university students enrolled in Bachelor's and Master's degree programs in *Early Childhood and Primary School Pedagogy* (ECPSP) and *Primary School Pedagogy* (PSP) in Shumen.**

Results and Discussion

Quantitative and qualitative analyses revealed several key patterns:

1. Cognitive Component (Cultural Knowledge):
   - Approximately 38.6% of surveyed teachers and students reported systematic knowledge regarding the ethno-psychological and socio-cultural characteristics of regional minority groups.
   - In-service teachers in Shumen (Group A) demonstrated higher practical awareness gained through daily classroom experience compared to university students (Group B), whose knowledge remained primarily theoretical.
2. Affective Component (Empathy and Openness):
   - High mean scores were recorded for declarative tolerance (M = 4.32; SD = 0.61). The vast majority of respondents (84.2%) strongly endorsed inclusive education and equal opportunities.
   - Based on Bennett's DMIS scale (Bennett, 2017), most participants positioned themselves in the transitional stage between *Minimization* and *Acceptance*. However, qualitative case analyses revealed latent anxieties among preservice teachers regarding communication with minority parents.
3. Behavioral Component and Didactic Readiness:
   - Only 31.4% of participants expressed high confidence in applying interactive, constructivist methodologies in multi-ethnic team settings.
   - Over 60% of school teachers emphasized challenges regarding the linguistic integration of students for whom Bulgarian is a second language, calling for specialized professional development modules.

Table 1.

Indicator / Component	Declarative / Self-Report	Didactic Level
Theoretical Knowledge	38.6%	Moderate

Indicator / Component	Declarative / Self-Report	Didactic Level
Tolerance / Openness	84.2%	High
Practical Methods/Skills	31.4%	Low

The empirical data demonstrate that despite strong declarative support and positive attitudes, there is an urgent need to enhance practical, methodology-driven training in intercultural pedagogy within degree programs and ongoing professional development (Banks, 2021; Gay, 2020).

DIDACTIC TECHNOLOGIES, CONSTRUCTIVISM, AND INTERACTIVE APPROACHES

Pedagogical work in multicultural settings requires methodological solutions tailored to the diverse capabilities of learners (Buzov, 2008). In educational literature, "pedagogical work" encompasses a coordinated system of actions that aligns closely with the concept of "educational technology" (Damyanova, 2009).

Distinguishing Between Method and Technology

In pedagogical theory, a *method* is defined as a sequence of actions designed to achieve a specific instructional goal, whereas a *technology* represents a structured, evidence-based system of methods, techniques, and tools designed to systematically ensure educational quality (Damyanova, 2009; Daskalova, 2007).

Unlike rigid rules, educational technologies allow for flexible adaptation based on social and pedagogical contexts (Daskalova, 2007). Educational modernization and innovative practices constitute the two main pathways toward achieving quality in contemporary education. Specifically, two types of innovative approaches are identified:

1. Modernizing Innovations: Focused on refining and updating traditional methods.

2. Transformative Innovations: Aimed at restructuring the learning process to be inquiry-driven and exploratory, empowering students to construct new knowledge and value orientations autonomously (Daskalova, 2007).

The Constructivist Paradigm in Intercultural Learning

Intercultural interaction relies heavily on constructivism as a contemporary educational paradigm (Damyanova, 2009). According to constructivist theory, learning is not the passive accumulation of transmitted information, but an active process wherein individuals construct internal representations of reality by linking new experiences to prior knowledge.

Constructivist design conceptualizes learning as inherently social:

- Students learn as effectively from their peers as they do from the instructor (Damyanova, 2009).
- Teamwork reduces social and ethnic isolation, building "responsible communication" and tolerance toward difference.
- Dynamic role rotation within teams fosters socialization and prosocial behavior patterns (Voenkinova & Kolev, 2004).

GROUP DYNAMICS AND PRINCIPLES OF COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

In intercultural settings, group-based learning is methodologically optimal (Kegan & Lahey, 2001). Group members experience positive interdependence, which accelerates the acquisition of essential social skills.

Principles of Cooperative Learning

Effective group work rests upon four core principles (Kegan & Lahey, 2001; Gyurova et al., 2006):

1. Parallel Interaction: Facilitating multi-directional, polyphonic communication among students rather than relying solely on teacher-led discourse.
2. Individual Accountability: Ensuring that each team member is responsible for a specific component of the shared task.
3. Constructive Interdependence: Structuring tasks such that group success depends on the contribution and progress of every individual.
4. Equal Participation: Distributing roles and tasks according to individual capabilities and growth potential.

Socio-Psychological Dimensions of Group Processes

A learning group is not merely an assembly of individuals, but an emotional and communicative community (Voenkinova & Kolev, 2004). Cohesion

among students from diverse ethno-cultural backgrounds develops through joint activity and shared value alignment.

Behavioral change within group settings unfolds across three main dimensions (Radev, 2007):

- Compliance (Agreement): Mutual influence and testing of new, tolerant behavior patterns.
- Identification: The empathetic capacity to view scenarios from a peer's perspective.
- Internalization: The long-term adoption of cooperative social models that persist beyond the classroom environment.

The transformative application of interactive methods (discussions, case studies, role-playing, brainstorming, project work) fosters dialogue, cognitive engagement, autonomy, and systematic reflection (Kashlev, 2004).

EDUCATIONAL QUALITY, SOCIAL INDICATORS, AND LANGUAGE POLICY

Under conditions of globalization and European integration, educational quality serves as a primary indicator of social and cultural cohesion (Daskalova, 2007; Leask, 2022). Quality is a measurable category encompassing social, pedagogical, and economic parameters.

Social Indicators and System Monitoring

Pedagogical quality is evaluated through diagnostic indicators (social indicators) that facilitate system monitoring (Daskalova, 2007). These indicators reflect ethno-sociolinguistic characteristics, cultural status, and individual socialization, helping align formal organizational structures with informal group dynamics. Minimizing discrepancies between official rules and personal peer preferences yields a healthier socio-psychological climate.

Language Competence as an Integrative Factor

Intercultural competence is intrinsically linked to linguistic diversity (Byram, 1998; Chavdarova-Kostova, 2012). While key competence frameworks often emphasize native and foreign languages, proficiency in the official state language remains crucial for national unity and institutional equity (Chavdarova-Kostova, 2012). The official language fulfills an integrative function across all citizens, while respecting and preserving native languages safeguards minority heritage cultures.

CONCLUSION

Intercultural pedagogical interaction within the Bulgarian educational system is not an auxiliary methodological trend, but a strategic priority for ensuring social stability, democratic development, and humanistic progress. The empirical findings from the Shumen region underscore the urgent necessity of strengthening practical, application-oriented methodologies in intercultural training.

Achieving full institutionalization requires coordinated efforts across multiple levels:

- Systematically updating teacher qualification programs and university curricula in early childhood and primary pedagogy (Banks, 2021; Gay, 2020).
- Modernizing didactic resources and incorporating constructivist, interactive learning technologies (Damyanova, 2009; Kashlev, 2004).
- Critically reviewing humanities curricula to incorporate multi-perspective interpretations of historical and cultural processes (Leask, 2022; Paris & Alim, 2017).
- Building genuine partnerships between educational institutions, families, and civil society organizations (Voenkinova & Kolev, 2004).

Only through sustained dialogue, reciprocal respect, empathy, and recognition of cultural identity can the educational system guarantee equity, social cohesion, and quality learning for future generations.

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