

Intercultural competence in early childhood education: Insights from Greek educators working in culturally diverse kindergartens

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Abstract

In Greece, the growing diversity of society has increased the importance of intercultural education and developing educators' intercultural competencies to ensure inclusive, culturally responsive teaching. This study focused on exploring the reflections of Greek early childhood educators regarding the intercultural skills and competencies they apply in their daily practice in kindergartens. Intercultural competencies are defined as a set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enable teachers to teach effectively and interact meaningfully with students from different cultural backgrounds. The research sample consisted of twenty educators who worked in classrooms with children from diverse cultural and social backgrounds. A qualitative methodological approach was adopted, and data was collected through open-ended interviews. The thematic analysis of the interviews revealed three distinct levels of approach to intercultural practice: organizational arrangements, the pedagogical dimension, and intercultural understanding and awareness. The findings showed that educators developed a significant degree of cultural sensitivity, empathy, and a reflective attitude toward diversity, treating each child as a unique individual rather than as a representative of a specific cultural category. At the same time, the importance of creating an inclusive and sustainable learning environment was highlighted, one that promotes respect, equality, cooperation, and intercultural communication.

Keywords: Intercultural, Competencies, Early Childhood Education.

1. Introduction

In recent years, Greek society has been characterized by significant social and demographic changes, which have also had a major impact on the education system. The increase in migration and refugee flows to Greece, particularly from the 1990s onward, has contributed to the formation of multicultural classrooms and highlighted new educational needs (Martínez-Medina & Chania, 2024). In contemporary Greek schools, students with different linguistic, cultural, religious, and social characteristics coexist, a fact that makes the management of diversity a key element of the educational process. Intercultural education is directly linked to the promotion of equality, social justice, and inclusion. International organizations, such as the United Nations and UNESCO, emphasize the importance of recognizing and respecting every child's cultural identity, as well as ensuring equal opportunities for participation in education (UNESCO, 2016). Greek educational policy operates within the same framework, seeking to meet the demands of a multicultural society through the implementation of intercultural and inclusive practices (Mokias, 2019).

Despite institutional interventions and the efforts that have been made, difficulties remain regarding the effective implementation of intercultural education in everyday school practice. Research has shown that many educators recognize the importance of the intercultural approach, yet they often feel they lack sufficient training and appropriate pedagogical tools to manage culturally diverse classrooms (Karanikola et al., 2025). At the same time, students with a migrant or refugee background continue to face difficulties in their educational journey, which are related to both language barriers and socioeconomic



inequalities (Mahima,2026). According to the results of the PISA 2022 survey, students of migrant origin in Greece perform at lower levels in reading, mathematics, and science compared to native-born students (OECD, 2023). This highlights the need to strengthen educational practices that promote inclusion, collaboration, and respect for diversity within the school environment.

Particularly in early childhood education, the role of the educator is considered crucial, as preschool is often the first structured social setting in which children encounter diversity. Educators are called upon to create a safe and supportive learning environment in which all children feel accepted and treated as equals (Blewitt et al., 2021). For this reason, the development of intercultural competencies is a fundamental prerequisite for the effective performance of their educational work. Intercultural competencies include knowledge, skills, and attitudes that help educators communicate effectively with children and families from diverse cultural backgrounds, recognize and respect diversity, and adapt their teaching to the needs of all students (Wang et al., 2022; Mardones et al., 2024).

Taking all the above into account, the research question of this study is as follows: “What strategies do Greek early childhood educators use to support culturally diverse classrooms?” Based on the above question, the study explores the reflections of Greek early childhood educators regarding the intercultural competencies they utilize in their daily practice in multicultural kindergartens. Through a qualitative research approach and open-ended interviews, the study aims to highlight the experiences, perceptions, and practices that educators employ to meet the needs of a culturally diverse student population.

2. Theoretical background

Social and political developments in recent decades have had a significant impact on European societies and, by extension, on their education systems. Issues such as migration and refugee movements, social inequalities, armed conflicts, and the climate crisis are shaping a new social environment in which cultural diversity is now a fundamental characteristic of modern societies (Council of Europe, 2026). Due to its geographical location, Greece has experienced significant migration and refugee flows, particularly since the 1990s, a fact that has directly influenced the composition of the student population in Greek schools (Giannakou & Karalia, 2023). The presence of students with diverse linguistic, cultural, and religious backgrounds has contributed to the creation of multicultural classrooms and has highlighted the need for educational practices that meet the demands of today’s reality (Sakellis et al., 2016). However, diversity in the school setting is still often approached primarily through the lens of students’ ethnic or linguistic background, a fact that leads to generalizations and stereotypical perceptions (Gkovaris, 2024).

Contemporary literature points out that cultural identities are not static or homogeneous but are shaped by multiple social and personal experiences (Ozer & Schwartz, 2005). Students differ not only in terms of their background or language, but also in terms of social, economic, family, and religious factors. For this reason, in recent years there has been an increasing reference to the concept of “superdiversity”, which describes the growing complexity of contemporary societies and migration phenomena (Vertovec, 2019). This concept allows for a more nuanced understanding of diversity, as it considers multiple dimensions of individuals’ identities rather than just ethnicity or language. In this context, the role of the school -and especially that of the teacher- takes on particular significance. Education is called upon to create conditions of equal participation and acceptance for all students, regardless of their cultural or social background. Teachers need to be able to



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According to the relevant literature, intercultural competencies encompass cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions (Genkova & Schreiber, 2025). The cognitive dimension concerns knowledge and understanding of different cultural contexts and forms of diversity. The emotional dimension is linked to attitudes such as respect, acceptance, and empathy, while the behavioral dimension relates to the ability to communicate and collaborate effectively in multicultural environments (Wolff, 2017). Importance is also attributed to intercultural sensitivity, that is, an individual's ability to recognize, understand, and accept diversity without prejudice or stereotypes. In the school setting, intercultural sensitivity helps build relationships of trust and mutual respect between teachers and students and enhances all children's participation in the learning process (Alcantara, 2025).

At the same time, intercultural competence is closely linked to the teacher's own self-reflection. Teachers are called upon to recognize their personal perceptions, potential biases, and cultural assumptions so that they can create a fair and inclusive learning environment. Self-awareness and continuous professional reflection are considered key elements for the development of meaningful intercultural practices (Ormsby, 2021). In the Greek educational context, studies have shown that teachers recognize the importance of intercultural education, yet they often feel they lack adequate training and support for managing culturally diverse classrooms (Sakka, 2010; Maniatis & Panagiotidou, 2025). This need is particularly evident in early childhood education, where preschool is the first organized social setting in which children encounter diversity and form attitudes toward others. The development of intercultural competencies among teachers is linked not only to the effective management of cultural diversity, but also to the creation of a school that promotes inclusion, democracy, and social cohesion. Through such practices, the school can function as a space of acceptance, collaboration, and equal participation for all children, regardless of their cultural or social background (Hajisoteriou et al., 2019).

3. Methodology

The purpose of this study was to investigate the ways in which early childhood educators manage cultural and linguistic diversity in the everyday classroom setting. Specifically, the study focused on the strategies and pedagogical practices that they employ to create an inclusive learning environment for children from diverse cultural and social backgrounds. The main research question of the study was formulated as follows: "What strategies do early childhood educators use to support culturally inclusive classrooms?"



Table 1. Demographic and professional characteristics

Characteristic	Information
Sample size	20 early childhood educators
Gender	All participants were female
Age	35–50 years
Professional experience	10–20 years
Educational level	Master's degree
School context	Public kindergartens
Geographical area	Thessaloniki, Kilkis, and Chalkidiki
Classroom diversity	All participants taught children from immigrant and culturally diverse backgrounds

Table 1 presents the demographic and professional characteristics of the participants. All educators were working in public kindergartens with culturally diverse student populations and had substantial professional experience in early childhood education.

For the purposes of this study, a qualitative methodological approach was chosen, as it was deemed appropriate for investigating teachers' experiences, attitudes, and personal perceptions regarding intercultural education. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured open-ended interviews. This method allowed participants to freely elaborate on their experiences and concerns regarding the management of diversity in educational practice, while also enabling an in-depth exploration of the issues that emerged during the discussion (Neupane et al., 2026). During the interviews, educators were asked to describe the practices they use in their classrooms, the challenges they face, and their views on intercultural education and inclusion. Although there was a basic set of questions, particular emphasis was placed on allowing participants to express themselves freely, to highlight personal experiences, feelings, and reflections. Participants were not given a predetermined definition of cultural or linguistic diversity, to avoid limiting their responses and to capture how they themselves perceive diversity within the school environment. The interviews lasted between thirty and sixty minutes. Data collection took place between November 2025 and February 2026. All interviews were recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed in full to facilitate the data analysis process. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the research data, following the approach outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis was chosen because it allows for the identification and interpretation of recurring themes and patterns within qualitative data, while also enabling an in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences. The analysis process began with repeated readings of the transcribed interviews, with the aim of familiarizing myself with the content of the data. This was followed by the initial coding of the material, during which references related to the teachers' experiences, attitudes, and practices regarding the management of cultural diversity were identified. The individual codes were gradually organized into broader thematic categories through the process of comparing and grouping common elements and meanings.

The application of thematic analysis helped to identify the key themes related to the intercultural practices of early childhood educators, as well as the way in which they perceive and manage diversity in the contemporary school environment. Through this process, it became possible to link the participants' experiences to the theoretical framework of intercultural education and inclusive pedagogy.



3.1. Ethical considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with the fundamental principles of research ethics governing qualitative social and educational research. Before the interviews were conducted, participants were informed in detail about the purpose of the study, the data collection process, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. The teachers' participation was based on informed consent. Participants were informed that the interviews would be recorded exclusively for research purposes and that the data collected would be used only within the context of this study. At the same time, the anonymity and confidentiality of the information they provided were ensured. For this reason, codes (e.g. Participant 1, Participant 2) were used, without any reference to details that could lead to the identification of the participants or the schools where they work. Particular care was taken to ensure the secure storage and management of research data, in accordance with data protection principles and the provisions of the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). The audio recordings and transcripts were stored in a secure digital environment accessible exclusively to the researcher. Throughout the research process, every effort was made to ensure respect for the participants' experiences, opinions, and professional practices. The analysis and presentation of the data were conducted in a manner aimed at faithfully and objectively reflecting their views, avoiding any form of distortion or selective interpretation of the research findings.

4. Findings

Twenty early childhood educators working in kindergartens with a culturally and linguistically diverse student population participated in this study. Through the interviews, the ways in which educators perceive and manage diversity in the daily context of school life were highlighted. The thematic analysis of the data revealed three key levels through which participants approach intercultural education: the level of practical arrangements, the pedagogical level, and the level of intercultural understanding and awareness.

Table 2. Thematic Structure of the Findings

Theme	Description
Practical Arrangements	Everyday organizational adaptations that support children's participation and communication with families.
Pedagogical Practices	Inclusive teaching strategies that promote engagement, learning, and recognition of diversity.
Intercultural Understanding and Awareness	Values, attitudes, and reflective practices that shape educators' responses to cultural diversity.

4.1. Level of practical arrangements

The first thematic category concerns the practical and everyday adjustments that teachers implement to facilitate the participation of all children in school life. Participants described that they often need to adapt activities, procedures, or modes of communication to meet the needs of children and families with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Several educators mentioned the importance of communicating with families, especially when there are language barriers or differing perceptions regarding school and the teacher's



role. *“There are times when you need to explain several times to parents how preschool works or why we’re asking for something specific. It’s not a given that everyone knows the philosophy of the Greek school system or has had the same educational experiences”* (Participant 4). Participants also reported that they try to adapt daily activities so that all children feel they are participating on an equal footing, without being excluded due to cultural or religious differences. *“I try to think about whether an activity might put a child in an awkward position or make them feel different. Sometimes we make small changes, but they’re important for the children”* (Participant 11). At the same time, several teachers expressed concern about where to draw the line between respecting diversity and the risk of over-differentiating or unintentionally categorizing children. *“You try to support every child, but at the same time you constantly wonder if, in the end, without meaning to, you’re singling them out more than necessary”* (Participant 7). Some participants also mentioned instances where they had to navigate different cultural perspectives on issues related to development or learning difficulties. *“There were parents who had a very hard time accepting that their child might need some support. In some families, this is met with fear or shame and requires very careful handling”* (Participant 15). The above comments indicate that even the practical aspects of daily life are directly linked to issues of equality, acceptance, and pedagogical sensitivity.

4.2. Pedagogical level

The second thematic category concerns the pedagogical practices that educators employ to meet the needs of children in a multicultural classroom. Participants described how they systematically adapt their teaching methods, language, resources, and activities to ensure that all children can meaningfully participate in the learning process. Several participants reported that they place particular emphasis on the clarity of instructions and the use of visual aids. *“I always try to show the children what to do, not just tell them. We use pictures, cards, and gestures, because some children still struggle with language”* (Participant 2). A consistent daily routine was also cited as an important factor in providing children with a sense of security and structure. *“Children need stability. When they know what to expect throughout the day, they feel more secure and participate more readily”* (Participant 9).

Many educators described how they leverage the linguistic diversity of the classroom as an element of learning and interaction. *“When we learn a new word, we ask the children to tell us what it’s called in their own language. The children are very happy when they hear their language spoken in the classroom”* (Participant 18). The participants also emphasized the importance of open dialogue about cultural customs, holidays, and different family experiences. *“The children talk very naturally about what they do at home, about celebrations or customs. Through these discussions, they understand that every family can function differently, and that this is perfectly normal”* (Participant 5). At the same time, they reported that they often use spontaneous moments in the classroom as opportunities for intercultural learning. *“One day, some children started singing a song from their country, and eventually the whole class joined in. These moments aren’t planned, but they’re among the most meaningful”* (Participant 13). The above practices show that participants do not limit themselves to merely making adjustments to facilitate learning but strive to create a learning environment where diversity is recognized as a source of interaction and enrichment for the educational process.



4.3. Level of intercultural understanding and awareness

The third thematic category concerns the way in which educators develop a deeper understanding of diversity and its place within the school environment. At this level, participants mainly referred to attitudes, values, and personal experiences that influence how they approach children and their families. Most educators emphasized the importance of personal relationships and meaningful communication with children and parents. *“Before you talk about any issue, you must first build trust. When the other person feels that you truly respect them, then everything becomes easier”* (Participant 1). Several participants mentioned that their personal experiences of interacting with different cultures had a significant impact on how they perceive diversity. *“Having lived abroad for a few years really helped me understand how someone feels when they’re in a country where they don’t know the language or the rules very well”* (Participant 10). The teachers also described how they strive to treat each child as a unique individual rather than through stereotypical cultural categories. *“I don’t like to think of children based on their background. I try to see what each child needs individually and not assume that all children in a group are the same”* (Participant 6). At the same time, several participants noted that daily exposure to diversity has a positive effect on both the children and the teachers themselves. *“Children learn from a very young age to coexist with people who are different from themselves, and I believe that this is one of the most important things school can offer them”* (Participant 20). The participants’ accounts revealed that intercultural competence is not limited to specific techniques or practices but is primarily linked to a way of thinking and an attitude toward diversity. Empathy, reflection, acceptance, and a willingness to engage in meaningful communication appear to be key elements of the daily pedagogical practice of the educators who participated in the study.

5. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the strategies used by early childhood educators to manage culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms in the context of everyday school practice. Through the participants’ narratives, it emerged that educators’ intercultural approach manifests itself on multiple levels, encompassing both practical arrangements of daily life and deeper pedagogical and value-based dimensions of the educational process. The research findings showed that participants strive to create conditions for equal participation for all children, regardless of their cultural or linguistic background. In terms of practical arrangements, educators described daily adjustments related to communicating with families, organizing activities, and fostering a supportive school environment. These practices were not only related to operational issues but also reflected the teachers’ efforts to ensure a climate of acceptance and equality within the classroom (Maguvhe, 2023).

At the pedagogical level, participants reported that they systematically adapt their teaching practices based on the children’s needs and characteristics. The use of visual aids, simplifying language, utilizing repetition, and maintaining a consistent daily routine emerged as key strategies for supporting the learning process (Qasserras, 2024). At the same time, recognizing and drawing on the children’s languages and cultural experiences appears to reinforce their participation and sense of belonging within the school community. Of particular interest is the fact that many teachers did not view diversity as a problem to be managed, but as an integral part of the educational reality. This attitude is linked to the level of intercultural understanding and awareness, where diversity is approached primarily through the concepts of empathy, respect, and meaningful communication (Erkanli, 2024). Participants emphasized the importance of personal relationships with the children and their



families, as well as the need to avoid stereotypical perceptions and generalizations linked to cultural background (Aguayo et al., 2021).

A key finding of the study is that educators perceive intercultural competence not so much as a set of technical knowledge or skills, but primarily as a broader pedagogical and ethical attitude toward diversity. Intercultural competence appears to be more closely linked to teachers' ways of thinking, reflection, and everyday pedagogical attitudes than to the application of specific methods. Similar findings have emerged in previous studies, according to which intercultural competence is directly linked to the development of critical thinking, empathy, and self-awareness on the part of teachers (Kim et al., 2023; Genkova & Schreiber, 2025). At the same time, the research data revealed that teachers' personal experiences play a significant role in shaping their intercultural sensitivity. Several participants reported that their exposure to different cultural environments, whether through their studies or through personal or professional experiences, substantially contributed to how they perceive and manage diversity in school. This finding appears to confirm the importance of experiential learning in the development of intercultural skills and attitudes (Yang, 2017).

However, the study also highlighted certain difficulties and concerns faced by educators. Some participants expressed uncertainty about how they can recognize and support diversity without unintentionally categorizing or differentiating among children. Furthermore, several educators reported that they do not always feel adequately prepared to manage multicultural classrooms, highlighting the need for more systematic training and support in the field of intercultural education (Ulbricht et al. 2022). Finally, the research findings highlight the need to strengthen the intercultural dimension in the initial education and professional development of educators. Participants did not mention extensive organized preparation regarding issues of intercultural education during their studies, a fact that suggests that such training remains limited or fragmented (Roiha & Sommier, 2021). Consequently, it is necessary to develop professional development programs that emphasize both theoretical training and an experiential and practical approach to intercultural education, so that teachers feel better prepared to meet the demands of today's multicultural school environments.

6. Conclusion

This study sought to investigate the perceptions and practices of early childhood educators regarding the management of cultural and linguistic diversity in kindergarten. The findings revealed that participants recognize the importance of intercultural education and strive, through daily pedagogical practices, to create a learning environment that promotes the participation, acceptance, and inclusion of all children. At the same time, it was found that intercultural competence is not limited exclusively to teaching techniques or theoretical knowledge, but is essentially linked to attitudes, values, and forms of pedagogical reflection that collectively influence the way in which teachers approach diversity. A particularly important finding of the study was the emphasis placed on the importance of personal experience and daily exposure to culturally diverse environments in the development of intercultural sensitivity. The educators who participated in the study appeared to view diversity more as an opportunity for interaction and learning than as a difficulty or obstacle in the educational process. However, several expressed the need for greater support and more systematic training on issues of intercultural education, a fact that highlights the importance of strengthening this dimension in both initial teacher education and continuing professional development.



Despite its contributions, this study has certain limitations that should be taken into account. The study sample was limited and consisted exclusively of early childhood educators working in school settings with high cultural diversity. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized to the entire teaching population. Furthermore, the research was based on the participants' personal narratives and experiences, which means that the data are inevitably influenced by the subjective way in which they themselves perceive and interpret diversity and intercultural practice.

Based on the above, further investigation of this issue through broader and multi-level research approaches is deemed necessary. Future research could focus on different levels of education, as well as on exploring the experiences of students and families regarding inclusion and intercultural communication in school. At the same time, it would be particularly interesting to study how initial teacher education and professional development programs contribute to the development of intercultural competencies and practices. Through such research approaches, understanding of the needs of contemporary multicultural school communities can be substantially enhanced, and the development of more inclusive educational practices. Through such research approaches, understanding of the needs of contemporary multicultural school communities can be substantially enhanced, and the development of more inclusive educational practices can be supported.

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