

Future Preschool Teachers' Perspectives on Integrating Multicultural and Multilingual Content in Slovenian Kindergarten Education

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The article explores pre-service preschool teachers' perspectives on and attitudes towards integrating multilingual and multicultural content into preschool educational practice. It presents findings of a qualitative study, carried out in the form of semi-structured interviews among 16 pre-service preschool teachers in Slovenia, aimed at (1) identifying their attitudes towards integrating multilingual and multicultural content in kindergarten activities, (2) exploring their perceptions of their own competencies for successful integration of multilingual and multicultural content in their work, and (3) determining the challenges in integrating multilingual and multicultural content in kindergarten activities, as perceived by the respondents. The results reveal participants' positive attitudes towards multilingualism and multiculturalism and their awareness of the importance of multilingual/multicultural education in kindergarten but also highlight their perceptions of the challenges in multilingual/multicultural preschool education, such as insufficient teacher training, limitations imposed by the curriculum, time constraints, and teachers' negative perceptions of their own foreign language proficiency.

Keywords: multilingual and multicultural education, linguistic and cultural awareness, preschool education, attitudes, preschool teachers' competencies

Introduction

Throughout its history, Slovenia has been a country where various languages have coexisted alongside each other, with Slovenian as the official language and recognition granted to Italian and Hungarian as official languages in regions inhabited by the Italian and Hungarian minorities. Moreover, due to recent migrations throughout Europe, Slovenia is becoming an increasingly multilingual country, which is also reflected in education. According to the Slovenian Statistical Office, in the school year 2022/2023, the number of children with foreign citizenship in Slovenian kindergartens was 7,027 (Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia n.d.a), which indicates that 8.15% of

preschool children in Slovenia have a first language other than Slovene. A similar percentage (8.22%) can also be seen in primary education, where the number of pupils from other countries was 16,204 (Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia n.d.b). These preschool children and pupils mainly come from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Ukraine, Serbia, the Russian Federation and other European countries, but also from Asia, Bulgaria, Montenegro and others (Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia n.d.b). The above data, however, do not include children who are Slovenian citizens but were born to parents who speak languages other than Slovene, so the number of speakers of other languages is possibly even higher and, due to growing migrations, linguistic and cultural diversity is becoming an important topic in educational settings.

Embracing linguistic and cultural diversity in order to foster multilingualism aligns with the EU's efforts to encourage such diversity within its borders. Moreover, one of the key objectives of the EU language policy (Sasse and Milt 2024) is to provide every EU citizen with a multilingual education to enable them to communicate in at least two languages in addition to their mother tongue. With the promotion of plurilingual and pluricultural competencies in mind, the EU has produced several documents, such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe 2001), which provides a comprehensive framework to assess and compare language proficiency across different languages and serves as a basis for language syllabus and curriculum development. The CEFR defines six levels of proficiency by describing language skills in listening, reading, speaking and writing, providing a clear, standardised criteria for foreign language proficiency assessment. Furthermore, the CEFR Companion volume (Council of Europe 2018) offers several upgrades and enhancements, such as the inclusion of new descriptors for mediation (facilitating communication between speakers of different languages) and plurilingualism (using languages as an integrated communication repertoire), as well as providing expanded scales for several areas, such as phonology and sign language, and also pre-A1 levels, which were less detailed in the original framework and can be used with younger learners. The promotion of linguistic and cultural diversity in Slovenia is reflected in its Resolution on the National Programme for Language Policy 2021–2025 (2021). According to the document (Resolution on the National Programme for Language Policy of the Republic of Slovenia 2021–2025 2021), the promotion of the Slovenian language is prioritised, but there is also an emphasis on fostering language diversity by supporting Italian and Hungarian as the minority languages, as well as the languages of different ethnic minorities and

foreign languages. The development of plurilingual and pluricultural competencies, as well as linguistic and cultural awareness, is encouraged from an early age, with the Slovenian Kindergarten Curriculum (Ministrstvo za šolstvo in šport 1999) and its supplement (Strokovni svet Republike Slovenije za splošno izobraževanje 2002) also focusing on the integration of multilingualism and multiculturalism in the preschool educational context. Therefore, it is important to foster positive attitudes towards linguistic and cultural diversity among preschool teachers, as this can play a crucial role in developing linguistic and cultural awareness in preschool children. For this reason, we carried out a study to investigate pre-service preschool teachers' perceptions of and attitudes towards integrating multilingual and multicultural content in kindergarten activities.

Linguistic and Cultural Diversity

Many authors (Candelier 2004; Finkbeiner and White 2017; Karras 2021; Bratož and Sila 2022b) acknowledge the importance of encouraging linguistic and cultural awareness in young learners, as these play a significant role in the development of plurilingual competencies (Svalberg 2007; Cots 2017; Finkbeiner and White 2017). One of the milestones in promoting language awareness was the *Janua Linguarum* initiative (Candelier 2004), which developed 'awakening to languages,' a pluralistic approach to languages and cultures that was implemented in ten European countries, including Slovenia (Fidler 2006), with the aim to encourage integrated teaching and learning of multiple languages and the recognition of linguistic diversity. According to Sayers and Láncoš (2017), the promotion of linguistic diversity within pluralistic approaches leads to the development of positive attitudes towards different language varieties and fosters multilingualism and language awareness.

Another pluralistic approach, the *DivCon model*, aimed at raising awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity among preschool children, was developed in Slovenia (Bratož and Sila 2022b). The approach emphasises the importance of providing context for developing linguistic and cultural awareness and will be described in more detail in the following chapter. Pluralistic approaches also help children develop positive attitudes towards other languages and cultures, which has been determined by many authors (Dörnyei, Csizér, and Németh 2006; Žefran 2015; Bratož, Štemberger, and Pirih 2022) as a crucial prerequisite in language learning and developing plurilingual and pluricultural competences. We believe that the best results can be achieved by beginning the endeavours to promote positive attitudes towards linguis-

tic and cultural diversity and develop linguistic and cultural awareness as early as kindergarten.

Multilingual and Multicultural Content at the Preschool Level

Multilingual and multicultural education is a topic widely addressed by many authors. Banks (2014) defines five dimensions of multicultural education: content integration, knowledge of the construction process, prejudice reduction, an equity pedagogy, and an empowering school culture and social structure, and argues that one of the main aims of multicultural education is 'to provide all students with the skills, attitudes, and knowledge needed to function within their community cultures, within the mainstream culture, and within and across other ethnic cultures' (Banks 2014, 4).

One of the principles of the Slovenian Kindergarten Curriculum (Ministrstvo za šolstvo in šport 1999) is also the principle of multiculturalism by creating equal conditions for the development of all children regardless of their individual differences (such as gender, social, cultural or linguistic background) on the one hand, and considering multiculturalism at the level of design and implementation of content, activities and materials on the other. It offers some examples of activities, such as discussions, songs, rhymes, chants, games, word plays and fairy tales related to various cultures and addressing topics like traditions, celebrations and cultural heritage, as well as pointing out the importance of challenging prejudices and stereotypes and encouraging tolerance and respect towards others. However, while the Curriculum does encourage the promotion of multilingualism and multiculturalism, it does not provide specific guidelines for teachers in terms of content and activity design, which was also confirmed by Vah Jevšnik (2010), who suggests that multiculturalism should be reflected in both the organisation of the playroom as well as in the educational process.

Numerous researchers exploring multilingualism and multiculturalism in preschool settings (Phoon, Abdullah, and Abdullah 2013; Mertelj 2017; Kitzinger 2019; Yörüko, Özel, and Dalgat 2024) agree that while these topics are outlined in various national and other documents, in practice the responsibility for their implementation falls on the teachers. There is a pressing need for comprehensive guidelines for teachers to rely on and in recent years there have been initiatives to address these issues. Bratož and Sila (2022a), for example, have developed a pluralistic approach for developing plurilingual and pluricultural awareness at preschool and lower primary school level. Their DivCon model (*Linguistic and Cultural Diversity in Context*), which was developed within the Languages Matter project, is based

on a framework integrating six dimensions: the journey metaphor, exposure to linguistic diversity, exposure to cultural diversity, concrete to symbolic level, effective foreign language teaching approaches, and children's participation. The model provides a strong conceptual framework based on the journey metaphor, through which the children 'travel' to different countries and thus experience languages and cultures through multi-sensory perceptions (including singing, movement, tasting, and artistic expression). During their 'travel,' children are exposed to linguistic diversity, with English serving as a lingua franca, and other languages presented through songs and rhymes. They also encounter a puppet (*Jegulja Klepetulja, Chatty Betty*) which helps them develop linguistic and phonological awareness in a variety of languages (comparing words and sounds of languages, counting syllables, learning common phrases, etc.). Exposure to cultural diversity is facilitated in different ways: through singing, dancing, storytelling, videos, art, etc. children learn about topics such as food, clothing, sports and music. The model (Bratož and Sila 2022b) also suggests a gradual progress from the concrete to the symbolic level of content, by children starting the journey with concrete items, such as a passport, and later learning about abstract concepts (such as country, language, capital city, anthem, flag, president) through concrete visual/multimodal support (maps, videos, concrete items). In this way, children learn about abstract concepts through play. Activities in the model rely on a combination of effective foreign language learning approaches for young and very young learners, such as CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning), developed by Coyle, Hood, and Marsh (2010), and the TPR (Total Physical Response), developed by Asher (1969). Additionally, the model strongly emphasises children's participation, which, according to Rutar (2014), is considered a vital element of an inclusive society, where children, too, should be acknowledged as active participants. Children's participation in the model is encouraged by the teacher, where children, having experienced the journey to various countries, together with their teacher design new activities, make rhymes and chants in other languages and suggest new destinations they would like to discover.

Methodology

In our research, we carried out a qualitative study aimed at (1) identifying the attitudes of pre-service preschool teachers towards integrating multilingual and multicultural content in kindergarten activities, (2) exploring the respondents' perceptions of their own competencies for successful integration of multilingual and multicultural content in their work, and (3) deter-

mining the challenges in integrating multilingual and multicultural content in kindergarten activities, as perceived by the respondents. The study was conducted in the form of semi-structured interviews. The questions were related to the demographic data of the respondents, including their age and their work experience in kindergarten, followed by questions about their perception and understanding of multilingual/multicultural content and activities in kindergarten and their attitudes towards including such content at the preschool level. Then we wanted to know how competent they feel in integrating multilingual/multicultural content in their work, where they acquired their competencies and whether they have any experience in integrating multilingual/multicultural content in kindergarten activities. Finally, the participants were asked to share their perceptions of the challenges in integrating multilingual/multicultural content in preschool education. The sample comprised 16 students of preschool education in Slovenia in their final year of study. Eight of them were already employed in kindergartens as teaching assistants, while eight of them had no work experience in preschool education. All the participants were female. 13 participants were under the age of 30 (from 21 to 28), and three of them were over the age of 30. The interviews were carried out in April 2023 and were recorded with the consent of participants and later transcribed and coded. The length of the interviews was between 15 minutes and 1 hour.

The results of our study, organised by the research questions, are presented and discussed in the following section.

Results and Discussion

Slovenian Pre-Service Preschool Teachers' Attitudes towards Integrating Multilingual and Multicultural Content in Kindergarten Activities

Firstly, we explored how our respondents perceive and understand the concepts of multilingual and multicultural activities in kindergarten. All of them agreed that multicultural activities involved those activities that include different cultures and learning about those cultures, as well as those that promote acceptance of otherness, tolerance and positive attitudes towards other cultures. All the respondents connect multicultural activities with learning about traditional food and folklore, including traditional folk costumes and dances, as well as national holidays and customs, through literature (especially picture books), songs, games, videos, dancing and discussions. One of the interviewees also pointed out the importance of learning about national symbols, such as flags and anthems, and also the history and distinct characteristics of different countries, which is in line with the

ideas of Bratož and Sila (2022a), who suggest introducing both concrete and symbolic concepts into multilingual and multicultural preschool education. Similar types of activities to those including multiculturalism were also suggested in relation to multilingual activities, with participants defining multilingual activities as those aimed at raising awareness of other languages and language learning. Several respondents agreed that it is important to learn about other languages and to develop positive attitudes towards language learning, while four respondents also emphasised the importance of learning about the Slovene dialects, and the languages of Italian and Hungarian minorities, as well as all the mother tongues of the children in the group. They believe that encouraging language diversity and emphasising the importance of all languages is crucial, with one of the participants pointing out that '[it is necessary] to include multilingual content, but if this means learning English because this is the trend nowadays, it is not ok' (Interviewee 13). The results also reveal that several respondents view multicultural and multilingual content as one concept, which points to their perception of language as being an inseparable part of culture. When analysing participants' attitudes towards integrating multilingual and multicultural content in kindergarten activities, we found that they all acknowledge the immense significance of such activities in everyday kindergarten activities, as they not only develop children's awareness of other languages and cultures, as well as encourage children's acceptance of people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, but also help them 'learn about their own culture, including its language, traditions, customs and values' (Interviewee 11). In this way, children can compare other cultures and languages with their own, thus developing their plurilingual and pluricultural competencies. The main aims of involving multilingual and multicultural content in kindergarten activities, as suggested by the respondents, are developing children's linguistic and cultural awareness, encouraging children's acceptance of other languages and cultures, including people coming from diverse linguistic and cultural environments, fostering children's positive attitudes towards languages and cultures as well as towards language learning, and developing children's cognitive and social skills alongside their plurilingual and pluricultural competences. They also emphasised the significance of these activities in terms of including children from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds in the kindergarten groups, thus promoting inclusion, tolerance and respect for linguistic and cultural diversity. However, one of the participants pointed out that 'in kindergartens and primary schools in Slovenia, teachers are still not sufficiently aware of the impact they have on the in-

tegration of immigrant children into their new environment. There is also a lack of awareness of the importance of overcoming one's own stereotypes and prejudices and a lack of sufficient intercultural teacher training' (Interviewee 6). Based on the findings of our study, pre-service preschool teachers recognise the importance of multilingual and multicultural education in kindergartens and emphasise the crucial role of the teacher in its implementation. This is also argued by Rutar (2014) and Knaflič (2016), who stress that such education is necessary in order to ensure positive outcomes of early childhood education as well as mutual recognition and development of children's cultural identities and encourage intercultural acceptance and respect. Moreover, Knaflič (2016) discusses the issue of teacher's beliefs and competencies and their impact on teachers' educational practices, highlighting that in the absence of professional training, teachers may rely on their personal beliefs, past experience and spontaneous decisions, which could potentially lead to unintended errors in their teaching practices.

Slovenian Pre-Service Preschool Teachers' Perceptions of their Own Competencies for Successful Integration of Multilingual and Multicultural Content in their Work

According to our study, there were mixed responses in terms of the respondents' perceptions of their competencies for successfully integrating multilingual and multicultural content in their work. Ten participants evaluated their competencies as relatively good, commenting that they mostly acquired them by exchanging good practices with other colleagues, through self-study, or in their student years at university. Several participants expressed confidence in their theoretical knowledge but acknowledged a need for practical guidance, citing a lack of suitable training programmes. On the other hand, six participants felt their competencies were insufficient, attributing this to either limited experience or the scarcity of appropriate training opportunities. Additionally, two respondents perceive their lack of competencies as strongly connected to their (insufficient) knowledge of foreign languages. The results reveal the necessity for preschool teachers to gain appropriate competencies for effectively implementing multilingual and multicultural practices in kindergartens, a perspective echoed by several Slovenian authors (Rutar 2014; Knaflič 2016; Licardo and Agić 2022; Žefran et al. 2024). Furthermore, Žefran et al. (2024) highlight the lack, and advocate for the creation, of teacher training programmes aimed at enhancing teachers' multilingual and multicultural competencies.

Slovenian Pre-Service Preschool Teachers' Perceptions of the Main Challenges in Integrating Multilingual and Multicultural Content in Kindergarten Activities

The main challenges in integrating multilingual and multicultural activities in kindergarten, as reported by the interviewees, are insufficient competencies of the teachers, a lack of appropriate teaching materials and very few suitable training courses on these topics, or as one of the participants pointed out: 'We are not sufficiently trained to include this type of content. There is very little of it in the curriculum, little or no training. Somehow it's all on our shoulders' (Interviewee 7). One of the common issues suggested was also preschool teachers' own perception of their (in)competence and, consequently, their fear of tackling these topics in their work. Interviewee 9 stated: 'I would feel terrible if, because of my incompetence, ignorance or lack of experience, I singled out or unknowingly discriminated against a child,' which clearly reflects her unwillingness to even try addressing these topics due to her own negative perception of her competencies. Seven participants raised the issue of the parents' role in the successful integration of multilingual/multicultural content in kindergarten. They believe that many parents hold negative attitudes towards multilingualism and multiculturalism and especially towards including languages and cultures of migrant children into kindergarten activities, and since parents' attitudes are strongly reflected in their children's attitudes, this could present a challenge for the teacher. On the other hand, as stated by the respondents, many parents with migrant background refuse to cooperate with the teachers, primarily due to language barriers. As argued by Rutar (2014; 2018), in order to ensure successful inclusive preschool education it is crucial to include both children and parents coming from migrant backgrounds in kindergarten activities. Their participation in designing, implementing, and evaluating the children's learning process is essential. Establishing a respectful environment free from prejudices is key to achieving this goal (Rutar 2014; 2018). Another challenge, perceived by five participants, was the issue of language; their perception of not being able to speak other languages well enough to include them in their activities on the one hand, and problems in communication with children speaking other languages on the other. Equally, five participants suggested the limitations of the Slovenian Kindergarten Curriculum (Ministrstvo za šolstvo in šport 1999), clearly reflected in one of the statements: 'The curriculum is not flexible enough, there are too many projects involving kindergartens that need to be completed, leaving little time for preschool teachers to be

creative in such activities' (Interviewee 10). Another closely related challenge, proposed by five participants, is the lack of time on the part of the teachers and the extra work that is involved in planning additional activities to promote multilingualism and multiculturalism. Finally, four respondents raised the issue of a number of preschool teachers refusing to encourage multilingualism and multiculturalism in kindergarten due to their own negative attitudes towards the subject, as well as their lack of readiness for adapting their whole syllabus for only a few children, or as one of the participants stated: 'I would point to some educators who, because of their own views and attitudes, do not want to include this content or otherwise adapt their work for some children' (Interviewee 13).

Conclusion

Given the growing acknowledgement of the significance of introducing multilingualism and multiculturalism during early childhood, our study aimed to explore pre-service preschool teachers' perspectives and attitudes regarding the integration of multilingual and multicultural content at the preschool level. Additionally, we sought to uncover their perceptions of their own qualifications in this domain and the primary challenges they perceive. The findings indicate that the participants possess a good understanding of multilingualism and multiculturalism. However, many still tend to focus on traditional aspects, such as food, clothing, folk dance, holidays, and celebrations. A few participants broaden this perspective to include national symbols, common characteristics, and the history of countries, including their cultural heritage. Some participants perceive multilingualism and multiculturalism as interconnected concepts, suggesting that they view language as an integral component of culture. They all emphasise the importance of multilingual and multicultural education and its impact, not only in cultivating children's appreciation for diverse languages and cultures but also in fostering an inclusive mindset toward individuals from varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds and, through this, also facilitating a deeper understanding of one's own culture and language. However, in practice, they encounter various challenges in implementing multilingual and multicultural education successfully. These include a lack of appropriate teacher training, limitations imposed by the curriculum, time constraints, and teachers' negative perceptions of their own foreign language proficiency, as well as negative attitudes towards linguistic and cultural diversity, held by many parents and teachers alike. To address these challenges effectively, there is a growing need to ensure the availability of teacher training programmes, develop comprehen-

sive guidelines for curriculum design, and provide a selection of educational materials, aimed at cultivating children's awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity, while nurturing positive attitudes towards all languages and cultures.

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Pogledi bodočih vzgojiteljev na vključevanje večjezičnih in večkulturnih vsebin v slovenskih vrtcih

Članek se ukvarja s pogledi in stališči bodočih vzgojiteljev predšolskih otrok glede vključevanja večjezičnih ter večkulturnih vsebin na predšolski stopnji. Predstavljene so ugotovitve kvalitativne raziskave, izvedene v obliki polstrukturiranih intervjujev med 16 bodočimi vzgojitelji predšolskih otrok v Sloveniji. Cilji raziskave so bili: (1) prepoznati stališča intervjuvancev do vključevanja večjezičnih in večkulturnih vsebin v vrtčevske dejavnosti, (2) raziskati, kako udeleženci ocenjujejo lastne kompetence za uspešno vključevanje večjezičnih in večkulturnih vsebin v svoje delo, in (3) ugotoviti, katere izzive izpostavljajo udeleženci pri vključevanju večjezičnih in večkulturnih vsebin v dejavnosti v vrtcu. Rezultati razkrivajo pozitivna stališča udeležencev do večjezičnosti in večkulturnosti ter njihovo zavedanje o pomenu večjezične/večkulturne vzgoje v vrtcu, hkrati pa kažejo na pomembne izzive v večjezični/večkulturni predšolski vzgoji, kot so nezadostna usposobljenost vzgojiteljev, omejujoč kurikulum, časovna stiska in negativna prepričanja vzgojiteljev o lastnih tujejezikovnih zmožnostih.

Ključne besede: večjezična in večkulturna vzgoja, jezikovno in kulturno zavedanje, predšolska vzgoja, stališča, kompetence predšolskih učiteljev