

Article

# Student's perceptions of inclusive and empowering school environments in secondary multiethnic schools

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**Abstract:** This study validates the Intercultural Competence and Inclusion in Education Scale (ICIES), a novel instrument designed to assess students' perceptions of inclusivity and intercultural competence in multiethnic secondary schools. Using a sample of 276 high school students from Western Romania, the ICIES identified three dimensions: ethnic appreciation and support, intercultural engagement and integration, and school unity and cohesion. Exploratory factor analysis confirmed the scale's structural validity, while network analysis revealed key interconnections among its components. Findings highlight the critical role of inclusive teaching strategies and school cohesion in fostering intercultural competence. The ICIES provides educators and policymakers with actionable insights for designing interventions that promote empathy, mutual respect, and a sense of belonging in diverse school settings. These results contribute to the development of educational policies aimed at fostering inclusion and addressing the needs of increasingly multicultural classrooms.

**Keywords:** intercultural competence; inclusive education; multiethnic schools; student perceptions; educational environment

## 1. Introduction

Reassessing educational procedures to make sure they are inclusive and empowering for every student has become necessary due to the growing ethnic variety in schools around the globe. In educational research and practice, multicultural education—which seeks to promote an awareness and respect of cultural diversity—has taken center stage (Verkuyten and Thijs, 2013). According to Nieto (2005) and Ghosh and Galczynski (2014), this strategy is essential for fostering healthy interethnic views and interactions among students from various backgrounds. Though the importance of multicultural education has long been recognized, there are still few methods available to assess its efficacy, especially when looking at it from the viewpoint of the students. Studies show that interethnic connections among students are positively impacted by school ethnic variety, which fosters a sense of safety and belonging (Juvonen et al., 2006; Thijs and Verkuyten,

2014). In addition to fostering academic success, multicultural education helps students—particularly those from immigrant and refugee backgrounds—develop socially and emotionally (Fruja Amthor and Roxas, 2016). Teachers are essential to this process because of their viewpoints and actions, which have a big influence on how inclusive the classroom is (Blanchet-Cohen and Reilly, 2013; Faas et al., 2018).

Despite these realizations, there is still a deficiency in the number of validated measures that are especially meant to measure students' opinions about inclusiveness and intercultural competency in learning environments. Current measures, including the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ) and the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), are designed mainly for adult populations and do not account for the particular circumstances of secondary school pupils (Hammer, 2012; van der Zee et al., 2013). This discrepancy emphasizes the requirement for tools that can precisely record the subtleties of learners' experiences and viewpoints in multicultural classroom settings.

The current study introduces the Intercultural Competence and Inclusion in Education Scale (ICIES) to address a critical gap in evaluating inclusivity and intercultural competence in educational settings. Designed to measure students' perceptions of ethnic appreciation, intercultural involvement, and sense of community, the ICIES is particularly relevant for multiethnic schools. These environments present both challenges, such as linguistic barriers, cultural misunderstandings, and intergroup biases, and opportunities for fostering empathy, mutual respect, and intercultural dialogue. By providing a tool to assess and enhance these dynamics, the ICIES supports educators in creating inclusive and effective learning spaces.

This study aims to validate the ICIES as a reliable instrument for evaluating the efficacy of multicultural education practices and guiding the development of educational interventions and policies. To ensure its robustness and applicability to secondary school contexts, the ICIES is grounded in well-established educational and psychological frameworks (Colombo and Santagati, 2017; Chang and Le, 2010; Pica-Smith, 2011; Schachner et al., 2021). The validation process involves exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to identify the scale's underlying structure and network analysis to examine the relationships and interconnectedness among its items.

## **Literature review**

Recent research underscores the growing importance of intercultural competence in education. Studies by Kozina (2020) and Porto and Houghton (2023) emphasize the role of structured interventions in promoting inclusivity, while Müller et al. (2020) highlight the need for tools that address student perceptions in multicultural settings. The ICIES contributes to this discourse by bridging theoretical concepts and practical applications, particularly within multiethnic secondary schools.

The thematic of intercultural competency has been more well-known in educational settings in recent years as societies have come to appreciate how important it is to promote inclusion and understanding among varied groups.

Promoting social cohesiveness and equal educational opportunities are considered to need intercultural competence, which is roughly described as the capacity to engage and communicate successfully across cultural borders (Bennett, 2013; Barrett, 2018).

Bennett (2013) highlights that intercultural competence is more than just accepting cultural differences; it also includes gaining the information, abilities, and mindset needed to function well in multicultural environments. Schools are essential in helping students develop these abilities so they may succeed in a variety of settings (Cherkowski and Ragoonaden, 2016; Kozina, 2020).

Cherkowski and Ragoonaden (2016) highlight the role of leadership in promoting intercultural communication competence as a form of professional development for educators. They argue that effective leadership for diversity fosters an inclusive school climate where cultural diversity is valued and integrated into educational practices. This aligns with Van Boxtel's (2018) exploration of culturally responsive professional development initiatives designed to enhance inclusive education practices in El Salvador. The transition from intercultural education to the inclusion of diversity reflects broader shifts in educational policies and theories across Europe (Allemann-Ghionda, 2009). These shifts are grounded in the recognition that educational systems must adapt to the demographic realities of increasingly multicultural societies to ensure equitable learning opportunities for all students (Eden et al., 2024). Elosúa (2015) and Tangen et al. (2011) underscore the significance of integrating intercultural competence into educational processes through innovative pedagogical approaches such as service-learning. Such approaches not only enhance students' ability to engage meaningfully with diverse communities but also promote personal and social development.

Deardorff and Arasaratnam-Smith (2017) advocate for the systematic assessment and application of intercultural competence across global educational landscapes. Their work underscores the need for structured interventions that prepare students for global citizenship and leadership roles in an interconnected world.

Research specific to gender dynamics within intercultural competence further enriches our understanding, as evidenced by Solhaug and Kristensen's (2020) analysis of gender differences in intercultural competence among upper secondary school students in Denmark and Norway. Their findings suggest nuanced approaches to fostering cultural understanding that consider gender-specific perspectives.

School unity and cohesion within multiethnic secondary schools are essential for creating inclusive and empowering educational environments. School unity and cohesion examines students' perceptions of belongingness, collaboration, and solidarity across diverse cultural backgrounds, aiming to foster a cohesive school community. This construct encompasses various dimensions that contribute to a supportive and inclusive school climate. According to Juvonen et al. (2006), perceptions of safety and social support among students are crucial factors influencing school unity. In order to improve school cohesiveness, their research emphasizes the significance of fostering good intergroup contacts and minimizing prejudice and discrimination within school environments. Fruja Amthor and Roxas (2016) highlight how intercultural education helps pupils who are immigrants or refugees feel like they belong in. They contend that inclusive teaching strategies foster understanding and respect amongst pupils from various cultural backgrounds,

enhancing school cohesiveness and unity.

The Empowering Schools Project, which analyzes classroom and school qualities that lead to student empowerment, is discussed by Kirk et al. (2017). Their findings highlight the importance of creating inclusive and supportive learning environments in schools where students from a variety of backgrounds may feel united and have a greater feeling of collective effectiveness. In their 2013 study, Blanchet-Cohen and Reilly examine the views of educators about environmental education in multicultural settings, stressing the need of culturally sensitive teaching methods in fostering school cohesion. They contend that include cultural backgrounds of students in the curriculum increases students' involvement with learning and academic activities and helps them feel like they belong. According to Okoye-Johnson (2011) and Landsman and Lewis (2023), there is a connection between the concept of school unity and cohesiveness and more general educational policies and practices that support inclusion and diversity awareness. Schools may provide conducive learning environments where every student feels valued and encouraged to reach their maximum potential by attending to the needs and viewpoints of various student groups.

In the field of educational sciences, especially in secondary schools with many ethnic populations, promoting intercultural engagement and integration is essential to building inclusive and empowered learning environments. This component looks at how students feel about other cultural practices and how they think these interactions promote social cohesiveness. It is investigated using the Intercultural Competence and Inclusion in Education Scale (ICIES).

Intercultural communication is essential for undergraduate students to acquire global perspectives, claim Engberg et al. (2016). Their findings demonstrate how educational initiatives that promote cross-cultural interactions may raise students' awareness of the world and enhance their ability to interact with others in a range of social settings. Lawrence (2013) provides insightful viewpoints on effective teaching methods that encourage cross-cultural learning in online environments. By incorporating international concepts into educational frameworks, teachers may help students become global citizens by cultivating a respect and tolerance for cultural diversity. Ang's (2017) approach to intercultural collaboration through design education represents an example of how to effectively cultivate empathy and understanding among students from many cultural backgrounds. Collaborating on group projects helps students develop critical intercultural abilities, which are essential for managing multicultural contexts.

Hartman et al. (2015) draw attention to the link between intercultural skills and civic engagement, highlighting how students' capacity to negotiate cultural differences enables them to actively engage in community initiatives. This highlights how inclusive citizenship and intercultural knowledge are two ways that education may transform society. Porto and Houghton (2023) advocate for the use of the arts as a catalyst for cross-cultural contact in language training. Their research highlights how artistic and cultural activities promote meaningful relationships amongst students from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds, which in turn cultivates respect and appreciation for one another.

The construct of "school unity and cohesion" includes a number of elements

that are essential to creating a welcoming and inclusive learning environment. It emphasizes solidarity and togetherness and represents the overall sense of oneness among students in a multiethnic educational environment. According to Kohlenberg et al. (2019), fostering a supportive school environment where all students feel appreciated and included depends on this cohesiveness.

Studies highlight the significance of students' participation in cultural and social events as a way to improve school community. In addition to promoting intergroup connections, active involvement in these kinds of events reinforces students' feeling of identification and belonging in the school community (Balagopalan, 2009; Veerman and Denessen, 2021). These activities serve as platforms for students to engage with diverse cultural perspectives, thereby promoting understanding and mutual respect among peers of different ethnic backgrounds (Loader and Hughes, 2017).

Moreover, a supportive school environment plays a pivotal role in nurturing cohesion among students. Schools that prioritize creating inclusive spaces and organizing activities aimed at fostering unity contribute significantly to students' overall well-being and academic success (Corson, 1991; Nordin et al., 2011). Such environments not only mitigate social divisions but also enhance educational outcomes by promoting a sense of collective identity and shared responsibility among students (Coulangeon, 2018).

The concept of school cohesiveness and unity is consistent with more general educational objectives, such as advancing social justice and eradicating prejudice. It emphasizes how crucial it is to foster an educational environment where diversity is valued and students from all backgrounds experience empowerment and support (Lareau, 1987; Miles and Gibson, 2016). According to Morelli et al. (2003) and Dobia et al. (2019), adopting an inclusive approach not only benefits students' social and emotional growth but also equips them with the skills necessary to prosper in a world that is becoming more varied and interconnected. Therefore, the joint efforts made in educational environments to help students from different ethnic origins develop a feeling of belonging, mutual respect, and shared responsibility are embodied in school unity and cohesiveness.

The literature review highlights the complexity of intercultural competence and its vital function in fostering inclusive learning settings. This study fills a vacuum in the literature about validated measures for evaluating students' views of inclusive and empowering school settings in multiethnic secondary schools by combining findings from multiple disciplinary perspectives. In order to close this disparity, the current study uses the Intercultural Competence and Inclusion in Education Scale (ICIES) to examine students' perspectives. This will help create educational practices and policies that are specifically designed to promote intercultural competence and inclusion.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

In this study, 276 high school students—ages 17 to 18—attending multiethnic

schools in Western Romania’s rural and urban districts in grades 11 and 12 were included. Numerous ethnic minorities, including Romanian, Hungarian, Serbian, and Czech and German students, are served by these institutions.

The proportion of students in the participating group was balanced, with 126 male students (45.7%) and 150 female students (54.3%). Particularly in mainstream schools, there were 48 male students (44.4%) and sixty female students (55.6%).

The participants’ socioeconomic position was determined by the occupation and educational level of their parents. Among the students, a considerable percentage—92 students, or 33.3 percent—came from poor socioeconomic backgrounds, followed by middle-class students—126 students, or 45.7%—and high-class students, or 58 students, or 21.0%. **Table 1** presents a comprehensive summary of the demographic attributes of the research participants.

**Table 1.** Demographic characteristics of participants.

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Multiethnic Schools (<i>n</i> = 276)</b>
Gender	
• Male	126 (45.7%)
• Female	150 (54.3%)
Ethnic Background	
• Romanian	162 (58.7%)
• Hungarian	42 (15.2%)
• Serbian	30 (10.9%)
• Other (Czech, German, etc.)	42 (15.2%)
Socioeconomic Status	
• Low	92 (33.3%)
• Medium	126 (45.7%)
• High	58 (21.0%)

## **Instrument**

The Intercultural Competence and Inclusion in Education Scale (ICIES) was the tool used in this study. It is a structured questionnaire designed to assess factors related to high school students’ social and academic cohesiveness. Created by specialists in psychology and educational sciences, the 11 items of the ICIES are individually scored on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The existing literature on intercultural competency and inclusivity in educational settings served as the inspiration for the ICIES items.

Specifically, the questionnaire draws upon scholarly work such as Malau-Aduli, Ross, and Adu’s (2019) exploration of intercultural competence among first-year medical students, Solhaug and Kristensen’s (2020) analysis of intercultural competence among upper secondary school students, and Müller et al.’s (2020) systematic review on social, emotional, and intercultural competences in educational settings.

Examples of the items from the ICIES that have been translated into English for

clarity show several facets of students' attitudes and actions about cultural diversity and school community cohesiveness. One question, for example, probed students' feelings of connection to classmates from other cultural backgrounds and examined how they perceived a sense of togetherness within their multiethnic educational environment. An additional item of the survey measured students' participation in school-sponsored social and cultural events that promote intercultural understanding and student unity. Additionally, an item assessed students' attitudes towards the supportive role of the school environment in promoting cohesion among diverse student populations, reflecting their perceptions of how institutional initiatives contribute to fostering a unified school community.

The 11 items together capture important aspects of students' experiences with cultural diversity, social interaction, and the supportive role that schools play in fostering a sense of community among varied student populations.

## **Data analysis**

The data for this study were analyzed using SPSS Statistics version 26.0. First, the responses from the participants and the items on the Intercultural Competence and Inclusion in Education Scale (ICIES) were described using descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and frequencies). These data provided a thorough overview of the sample characteristics and the distribution of answers across the ICIES scale questions.

The ICIES scale's validity was verified by calculating the Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which assesses the internal consistency of the scale items (Vaske et al., 2017).

Using main axis factoring with promax rotation, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was utilized to investigate the ICIES scale's underlying structure and determine its dimensionality (Fabrigar and Wegener, 2011).

Prior to doing EFA, Bartlett's test of sphericity and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy (KMO) were used to check that the data were suitable for factor analysis and that there were enough correlations between the items to extract factors (Aldrich, 2018).

Various fit indices, such as the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Standardized Root Mean Residual (SRMR), and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), were calculated to assess the EFA model's goodness of fit. An improved model fit to the data is shown by lower RMSEA and SRMR values along with higher TLI values (Cho et al., 2020).

To find out how the 11 items of the ICIES scale relate to one another, a network analysis was first conducted. This method gave insights into the relationships between each item and the larger network of inclusion and intercultural competency in education. The study looked at each item's relative relevance and influence within the network structure by examining centrality indicators including betweenness, proximity, and strength (Borgatti et al., 2018). Centrality measures (betweenness, closeness, strength, and expected influence) were employed to identify each item's roles within the network. Centrality measures quantify how items connect and influence each other, with betweenness highlighting bridging nodes and strength

indicating overall connectivity. These analyses aligned with the study’s objective to validate ICIES and understand its structural dimensions.

## Results

### Reliability analysis

Out of the total 276 cases, 274 were valid and included in the analysis, accounting for 99.3% of the sample. Only 2 cases (0.7%) were excluded based on listwise deletion due to missing data across the variables.

Cronbach’s alpha was used to evaluate the Intercultural Competence and Inclusion in Education Scale (ICIES) internal consistency reliability. With an internal consistency of excellent and a Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of 0.821, the scale showed a high degree of dependability. Standardizing the factors resulted in a modest boost in dependability, reaching 0.834.

The item statistics provide the means and standard deviations for each of the 11 items on the ICIES scale (**Table 2**).

**Table 2.** Items statistics.

Item	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
There is a sense of unity in this multiethnic school.	3.8467	0.95611	274
I am involved in social and cultural activities at the school level.	3.6533	1.10620	274
The school environment and organized activities support cohesion among students.	3.9124	0.76531	274
I respect the beliefs and cultural differences of other ethnic groups in the local community and school community.	4.0401	0.74263	274
I support my peers from other ethnicities during school and extracurricular competitions.	4.2409	0.68501	274
I am proud of my peers from other ethnicities who achieve school success.	4.2883	0.69066	274
I enjoy eating food specific to other ethnic groups (e.g., Serbian, Czech dishes).	4.0766	0.91265	274
I like eating in restaurants specific to other ethnic groups.	4.0292	0.89722	274
I feel comfortable wearing traditional costumes of other ethnic groups.	3.5146	1.12651	274
I do not make efforts to learn something new from other ethnic groups.	3.6934	0.95742	274
I feel that multiethnic families help in the local integration process.	3.8212	0.74184	274

The average scores ranged from 3.5146 to 4.2883 on a 5-point Likert scale, indicating generally positive responses across all items. Specifically, the item 6. “I am proud of my peers from other ethnicities who achieve school success” had the highest mean score ( $M = 4.2883$ ,  $SD = 0.69066$ ), reflecting strong agreement among participants. In contrast, item 9. “I feel comfortable wearing traditional costumes of other ethnic groups” had the lowest mean score ( $M = 3.5146$ ,  $SD = 1.12651$ ), suggesting a comparatively lower level of comfort among students in this area.

The item-total statistics reveal the impact of removing each item on the overall scale reliability. With a positive adjusted item-total correlation for every item ranging from 0.381 to 0.614, all of the items demonstrated sufficient contribution to the overall construct. The values of Cronbach’s alpha if item eliminated ranged from 0.798 to 0.821, indicating that the scale’s overall reliability would not be considerably enhanced by the removal of any one item.

The overall mean score for the ICIES was 43.1168, with a variance of 33.942



and a standard deviation of 5.82601, across the 11 items.

The ANOVA with Tukey’s Test for Nonadditivity provided further insights into the data structure. There were notable variations found among the items ( $F(10, 2730) = 29.418, p < 0.001$ ), suggesting that answers to the scale’s items vary from one another. Additionally noteworthy was the test for nonadditivity ( $F(1, 2729) = 14.765, p < 0.001$ ), indicating the possibility of a non-linear connection between the items.

### Exploratory factor analysis

The Intercultural Competence and Inclusion in Education Scale’s (ICIES) underlying structure was to be investigated via the use of exploratory factor analysis (EFA). The data’s appropriateness for factor analysis was confirmed using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy. The sample was sufficient for factor analysis, as shown by the overall KMO value of 0.825. The individual KMO values for the items ranged from 0.769 to 0.913, surpassing the acceptable threshold of 0.6. This suggests that the items are adequately related for factor analysis.

Significant results using Bartlett’s test of sphericity ( $\chi^2 = 1029.499, df = 55, p < 0.001$ ) showed that there was enough evidence of item correlations to support factor analysis. The model’s chi-squared test also showed significant results ( $\chi^2 = 128.144, df = 25, p < 0.001$ ), supporting the sufficiency of the data for factor analysis.

Three factors with eigenvalues larger than one were found using principal axis factoring with promax rotation, and they accounted for 48.2% of the variance in total. The factor loadings provided a clear structure, with items loading strongly on distinct factors (**Table 3**).

**Table 3.** Factor loadings.

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Uniqueness
item7	0.759			0.423
item6	0.739			0.497
item8	0.722			0.455
item5	0.655			0.497
item4	0.533			0.576
item10		0.895		0.317
item9		0.561		0.626
item11		0.507		0.494
item1			0.640	0.574
item2			0.585	0.622
item3			0.580	0.613

Note. Applied rotation method is promax.

**Factor 1:** Items demonstrating pride in accomplishments, support for peers from different ethnic backgrounds, and appreciation of ethnic cuisine were examples of ethnic respect and support. “Enjoyment of ethnic foods” (loading = 0.759), “Pride in ethnic peers’ achievements” (loading = 0.739), “Dining at ethnic restaurants”

(loading = 0.722), “Supporting ethnic peers in competitions” (loading = 0.655), and “Respect for cultural differences” (loading = 0.533) were the items and their loadings. These items highlight a supportive attitude towards ethnic diversity and an appreciation for cultural experiences.

**Factor 2:** Intercultural engagement and integration encompassed items reflecting openness to and comfort with cultural practices of other ethnic groups, proactive engagement in learning from them, and the perceived role of multiethnic families in fostering local integration. The items and their loadings were “Effort to learn from other ethnic groups” (loading = 0.895), “Comfort with ethnic costumes” (loading = 0.561), and “Perception of multiethnic families in integration” (loading = 0.507). These items collectively describe personal engagement with other cultures and the perceived benefits of cultural diversity in community integration.

**Factor 3:** school unity and cohesiveness, covered topics like participation in social and cultural events, a feeling of oneness, and a cooperative learning environment. “Sense of unity in the multiethnic school” (loading = 0.640), “Involvement in school social and cultural activities” (loading = 0.585), and “Supportive school environment and activities fostering cohesion” (loading = 0.580) were the items and their loadings. These items capture the collective sense of unity, active participation in communal activities, and the supportive role of the school environment in fostering student cohesion.

**Table 4.** Factor characteristics.

	Eigenvalues	Unrotated solution			Rotated solution		
		SumSq. Loadings	Proportion var.	Cumulative	SumSq. Loadings	Proportion var.	Cumulative
Factor 1. Ethnic appreciation and support	4.223	3.721	0.338	0.338	2.558	0.233	0.233
Factor 2. Intercultural engagement and integration	1.319	0.865	0.079	0.417	1.557	0.142	0.374
Factor 3. School unity and cohesion	1.301	0.720	0.065	0.482	1.191	0.108	0.482

The factor characteristics table provides detailed insights into the variance explained by each factor in both the unrotated and rotated solutions, reflecting how much of the total variance in the data each factor accounts for (**Table 4**).

The rotated solution, achieved through promax rotation, aims to provide a more interpretable factor structure by maximizing high loadings and minimizing low loadings within factors. In this solution, Factor 1: Ethnic appreciation and support has a sum of squared loadings of 2.558, explaining 23.3% of the variance (0.233). This slight reduction compared to the unrotated solution indicates a redistribution of variance for better clarity in factor interpretation. Factor 2: Intercultural engagement and integration in the rotated solution shows an increase in its explanatory power, with a sum of squared loadings of 1.557, accounting for 14.2% of the variance (0.142). This improved clarity underscores the importance of rotation in revealing the distinct contributions of each factor. Lastly, Factor 3: School unity and cohesion in the rotated solution has a sum of squared loadings of 1.191, explaining 10.8% of the variance (0.108). This cumulative approach of 48.2% (0.482) for all three factors

highlights the effective distribution of variance among the factors, providing a comprehensive understanding of the underlying structure of the data.

### **Network analysis of intercultural competence and inclusion in education scale (ICIES)**

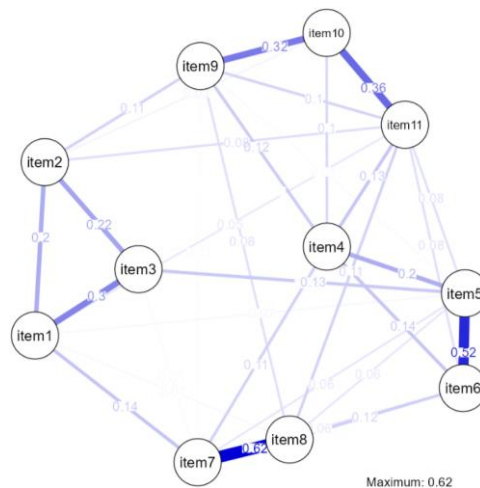
Network analysis offers significant advantages for examining the structure of psychometric scales like the Intercultural Competence and Inclusion in Education Scale (ICIES). In contrast to conventional factor analysis, network analysis views the items as linked nodes and generates a detailed, quantitative, and graphical map of the interactions between them. The identification of important scale items and their interactions can be facilitated by this method, which can show the centrality and importance of each item within the network (Epskamp et al., 2018).

The network analysis for the ICIES involved calculating several centrality measures, including betweenness, closeness, strength, and expected influence for each item. These measures help determine the importance and role of each item within the network. Betweenness, which reflects a node’s function as a bridge, quantifies how frequently a node is on the shortest path connecting other nodes. The degree of a node’s closeness to all other nodes is measured, and this indicates how well information is transferred. A node’s overall connectivity is shown by its strength, which is the sum of its connections. According to Opsahl et al. (2010), expected influence evaluates a node’s impact inside the network by taking into account both direct and indirect connections.

With 11 nodes (items) and 36 non-zero edges, the network analysis showed a sparse network with a sparsity of 0.345. This indicates a moderately connected network where some items are more central than others.

**Table 5.** Centrality measures per variable.

<b>Network</b>				
<b>Variable</b>	<b>Betweenness</b>	<b>Closeness</b>	<b>Strength</b>	<b>Expected influence</b>
item1	-0.185	-0.869	-0.814	-0.814
item2	0.833	-0.843	-1.429	-1.429
item3	0.833	-0.053	-1.228	-1.228
item4	-0.185	0.799	-0.355	-0.355
item5	1.852	1.266	1.445	1.445
item6	-1.204	-0.030	0.399	0.399
item7	-0.185	0.998	1.049	1.049
item8	0.324	1.310	0.886	0.886
item9	-0.695	-0.502	-0.660	-0.660
item10	-1.713	-1.803	-0.297	-0.297
item11	0.324	-0.274	1.003	1.003



**Figure 1.** Network analysis of Intercultural Competence and Inclusion in Education Scale (ICIES).

Centrality measures in network analysis (**Table 5** and **Figure 1**) provide valuable insights into the structure and importance of individual nodes within a network, such as the Intercultural Competence and Inclusion in Education Scale (ICIES). Item 1, referring to the sense of unity in the multiethnic school, exhibited negative values for betweenness ( $-0.185$ ) and closeness ( $-0.869$ ), indicating its peripheral role in the network. Similarly, its strength ( $-0.814$ ) and expected influence ( $-0.814$ ) further underscore its limited centrality, suggesting that this item may not play a central role in connecting other aspects of intercultural competence and inclusion.

Conversely, Item 5 referring to supporting ethnic peers in competitions, demonstrated high centrality with positive values across all measures: betweenness (1.852), closeness (1.266), strength (1.445), and expected influence (1.445). These metrics collectively highlight its essential role within the network, indicating that supporting peers from diverse ethnic backgrounds during competitions significantly influences other aspects of intercultural competence and inclusion measured by the ICIES.

Items 2 and 3, referring to involvement in school social and cultural activities and supportive school environment and activities fostering cohesion, respectively, displayed positive betweenness (0.833) but negative closeness, indicating they act as bridges within the network but are not closely connected to other nodes. Their strength ( $-1.429$  and  $-1.228$ , respectively) and expected influence ( $-1.429$  and  $-1.228$ ) further suggest a lower overall influence compared to more central items like Item 5.

Item 10, referring to effort to learn from other ethnic groups, exhibited strongly negative values for betweenness ( $-1.713$ ) and closeness ( $-1.803$ ), as well as low strength ( $-0.297$ ) and expected influence ( $-0.297$ ). These findings indicate that this item is the least central within the network, suggesting that efforts to learn from other ethnic groups may not significantly impact other items measured by the ICIES.

The centrality measures provide a complex understanding of how each item contributes to the overall structure of the ICIES network. Items referring to supporting ethnic peers in competitions and enjoyment of ethnic foods play essential

roles by virtue of their high centrality, while others like sense of unity in the multiethnic school and effort to learn from other ethnic groups occupy more peripheral positions. These results help analyzing which aspects of intercultural competence and inclusion are more interconnected and influential within the educational context.

## **Discussion**

The current study used network analysis in addition to exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and standard reliability analysis to examine the psychometric qualities and underlying structure of the Intercultural Competence and Inclusion in Education Scale (ICIES).

Reliability analysis indicated that the ICIES demonstrated strong internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.821, which increased slightly to 0.834 after standardization of items. These values suggest that the scale reliably measures intercultural competence and inclusion constructs among participants, aligning with previous studies emphasizing the importance of internal consistency for scale validity (Hajjar, 2018). Item analyses further supported the reliability findings, showing positive item-total correlations and consistent internal reliability across all items.

The average scores across ICIES items ranged from 3.5146 to 4.2883 on a 5-point Likert scale, indicating generally positive attitudes toward intercultural competence and inclusion among the study participants. Particularly noteworthy was the high mean score for Item 6 ("I am proud of my peers from other ethnicities who achieve school success"), suggesting strong endorsement of positive interethnic attitudes within the school environment. Conversely, Item 9 ("I feel comfortable wearing traditional costumes of other ethnic groups") received the lowest mean score, indicating potential areas for cultural discomfort or less familiarity among students in this context.

The EFA identified three distinct factors underlying the ICIES: ethnic appreciation and support, intercultural engagement and integration, and school unity and cohesion. These factors collectively explained 48.2% of the variance, indicating a robust structural framework for understanding different dimensions of intercultural competence within educational settings. This factor structure aligns with existing literature highlighting the complex nature of intercultural competence, encompassing attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions toward cultural diversity (Roberge et al., 2014; Saleh et al., 2011). For instance, the dimension of ethnic appreciation and support echoes findings by Bennett (2013), which emphasize the importance of fostering respect for cultural diversity. Similarly, school unity and cohesion align with Juvonen et al.'s (2006) work on promoting a sense of belonging in diverse educational environments.

Network analysis provided additional insights into the interrelationships among ICIES items, highlighting varying degrees of centrality and influence within the network. Items such as supporting ethnic peers in competitions (Item 5) emerged as highly central, indicating their pivotal role in connecting and influencing other aspects of intercultural competence and inclusion. In contrast, items like effort to

learn from other ethnic groups (Item 10) exhibited peripheral centrality, suggesting their lesser impact within the network structure.

The findings underscore the critical importance of implementing tailored educational strategies to foster intercultural competence and inclusivity within school environments. By enhancing school unity and promoting healthy interethnic attitudes, educators can create learning spaces that are both inclusive and supportive of cultural diversity. Activities such as participation in multicultural events, the integration of culturally responsive teaching materials, and the provision of assistance to students from diverse backgrounds serve as pivotal tools for cultivating these values (Coperías Aguilar, 2002; Durlak et al., 2011; Greenberg et al., 2003).

These approaches align with evidence from studies emphasizing the value of inclusive and responsive pedagogies. For example, research highlights the impact of positive feedback on fostering a sense of belonging among students (Câmpean et al., 2024) and the role of mentoring in supporting metacognitive and social-emotional development (Bocoş et al., 2023). Additionally, creating organizational climates conducive to inclusive behavior has been shown to significantly influence students' academic and social outcomes, particularly in preschool education (Redeş et al., 2023; Rad et al., 2023). Policymakers and educators can utilize these findings to design interventions that not only support academic achievement but also address students' social and emotional growth, critical for navigating increasingly multicultural societies. For instance, digital education resources tailored to diverse needs have been identified as a means of bridging educational gaps and ensuring equitable learning opportunities (Mara et al., 2024). Similarly, incorporating strategies to manage burnout and promote stress-related growth among educators can further enhance the quality of educational environments, ensuring they are both inclusive and sustainable (Puticiu et al., 2024; Marci et al., 2024).

In alignment with the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4), which emphasizes inclusive and equitable quality education, fostering intercultural competence through intentional and evidence-based approaches ensures progress toward a more cohesive and culturally responsive educational landscape (Rad et al., 2022). These strategies collectively highlight the interdependencies between cultural inclusivity, organizational climate, and student outcomes, forming a foundation for impactful educational practices. For example, the high mean score for ethnic appreciation and support emphasizes the need to integrate cultural exchange programs, such as food festivals or interethnic project collaborations, into the curriculum. Similarly, the dimension of school unity and cohesion highlights the value of team-building activities and inclusive classroom discussions that promote solidarity. Teachers can leverage these insights to create lesson plans that incorporate diverse cultural materials and emphasize cooperative learning environments.

While this research offers valuable insights, it is not without its limitations. The sample predominantly consisted of students from West Romania, limiting the generalizability of findings to other geographical and cultural contexts. Adaptations may be necessary to account for contextual differences in educational policies, cultural norms, and societal values. Future research should consider cross-cultural validation studies, involving comparative samples from other European and non-European regions, to ensure broader applicability. In order to get insight into the

efficacy of educational interventions, longitudinal research should also look at the evolutionary trajectories of intercultural competence and inclusion across time.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the Intercultural Competence and Inclusion in Education Scale (ICIES) represents a significant advancement in the field of multicultural education by offering a reliable and valid instrument to assess students' perceptions of their school environment. Through its comprehensive evaluation of intercultural engagement, ethnic appreciation, and school unity, the ICIES equips educators and policymakers with critical insights to enhance inclusive practices and empower students in multiethnic secondary schools. To translate these insights into practice, educational practitioners can adopt targeted strategies such as organizing cultural exchange programs, facilitating inclusive extracurricular activities, and providing professional development opportunities for teachers to strengthen intercultural dialogue and understanding. These initiatives not only foster a sense of belonging and respect among students but also contribute to the creation of cohesive and inclusive educational environments.

Furthermore, scaling policy interventions to national or regional levels requires integrating findings from studies like this into broader frameworks of social infrastructure, governance, and public management. Policymakers can leverage the ICIES to design evidence-based interventions that align with national education strategies and social cohesion policies. For instance, regional collaborations can promote the standardization of inclusive practices across diverse educational settings while adapting to local cultural contexts. Effective governance models must incorporate mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the implementation of intercultural and inclusive policies, ensuring alignment with broader societal goals. Partnerships between educational institutions, local governments, and community organizations can further strengthen the social infrastructure necessary for sustaining these initiatives, fostering long-term impacts on equity and inclusivity in education.

To build on the contributions of the ICIES, future research should explore the longitudinal impact of intercultural competence and inclusion on students' academic, social, and emotional outcomes. Investigating how school-based interventions designed to enhance intercultural competence influence long-term attitudes and behaviors toward diversity would provide valuable insights. Additionally, the scale could be adapted and validated for use in different educational contexts, such as early childhood or higher education, to broaden its applicability. Research could also examine the role of digital tools and resources in fostering intercultural engagement, particularly in remote or hybrid learning environments, where opportunities for face-to-face interactions are limited. Finally, comparative studies across countries and cultural settings could provide a deeper understanding of the global relevance and cultural adaptability of the ICIES, further enhancing its utility in promoting inclusion and empowerment in diverse educational contexts.

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