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# A comparative study of intercultural competence and inclusion: Mainstream vs. multiethnic schools using the Intercultural Competence and Inclusion in Education Scale (ICIES)

Mihaela David-Izvernar<sup>1,2</sup>, Alina Roman<sup>3,\*</sup>, Muşata Bocoş<sup>2</sup>, Dana Rad<sup>3,\*</sup>, Alina Costin<sup>3</sup>, Tiberiu Dughî<sup>3</sup>, Mihaela Rus<sup>4,5</sup>, Roxana Chiş<sup>3</sup>, Maria Sinaci<sup>6</sup>, Regis Roman<sup>7</sup>, Sabin Chiş<sup>8,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Liceul Tehnologic “Clisura Dunării”, 325500 Moldova Nouă, Romania

<sup>2</sup>Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca, 400029 Cluj-Napoca, Romania

<sup>3</sup>Center of Research Development and Innovation in Psychology, Faculty of Educational Sciences Psychology and Social Sciences, Aurel Vlaicu University of Arad, 310130 Arad, Romania

<sup>4</sup>Faculty of Law and Administrative Sciences, Ovidius University, 900470 Constanţa, Romania

<sup>5</sup>Institute of Psychology and Philosophy of the Romanian Academy, 010071 Bucharest, Romania

<sup>6</sup>Faculty of Economics, Aurel Vlaicu University of Arad, 310025 Arad, Romania

<sup>7</sup>Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Aurel Vlaicu University of Arad, 310130 Arad, Romania

<sup>8</sup>Faculty of Food Engineering Tourism and Environment Protection, Aurel Vlaicu University of Arad, 310130 Arad, Romania

\* **Corresponding authors:** Alina Roman, [romanalinafelicia@yahoo.com](mailto:romanalinafelicia@yahoo.com); Dana Rad, [dana@xhouse.ro](mailto:dana@xhouse.ro); Sabin Chiş, [sabin.chis@yahoo.com](mailto:sabin.chis@yahoo.com)

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**Abstract:** Using the Intercultural Competence and Inclusion in Education Scale (ICIES), this study examines variations in intercultural competence and inclusion between mainstream and multiethnic high schools. The sample consisted of 384 high school students, aged 17 to 18, from both rural and urban areas in Western Romania, enrolled in grades 11 and 12. The ICIES demonstrated strong reliability, with a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.721. Exploratory factor analysis revealed three distinct dimensions: Intercultural opportunities and activities, Comfort in diverse settings, and Cultural reflection and values. Independent samples *t*-tests identified significant differences between mainstream and multiethnic schools across several items, with students in multiethnic schools reporting higher levels of intercultural competence and inclusion. These findings highlight the critical role of multicultural educational settings in fostering students’ cultural awareness and inclusive attitudes. This study provides actionable insights for enhancing multicultural education practices and policies, including teacher training programs, inclusive curricula, and extracurricular initiatives that promote intercultural engagement and reduce intergroup biases.

**Keywords:** intercultural competence; multiethnic schools; high school students; inclusive attitudes; cultural reflection

## 1. Introduction

There is a greater emphasis on how schools foster intercultural competency and inclusion as a result of the increasing diversity in educational environments. In their 2020 paper, Nishina and Witkow emphasize the importance of addressing the unique requirements of adolescents who identify as biracial, multiracial, or multiethnic and promote educational approaches designed to foster their development. Schools now have student populations that are more varied than ever before, therefore it is essential to build spaces that not only accept but also value this variety. Research highlights the importance of practical strategies to build more inclusive multiethnic classrooms. These strategies include promoting intercultural competence among

students and staff, and implementing policies that support diversity and inclusion. De Leersnyder et al. (2022) emphasize that a multicultural approach can buffer against cultural misunderstandings, fostering inclusion and psychological safety in international classrooms. Similarly, Kurian (2024) advocates for culturally responsive care in early years education as a foundation for inclusive, multicultural classrooms. Guberina (2023) highlights the role of culturally responsive pedagogy in cultivating inclusive learning environments by incorporating diversity into teaching practices. Additionally, Assefa and Zenebe (2024) outline strategies for effective diversity management in schools, emphasizing the need for inclusive excellence through structured and intentional practices. Also, Faas (2016) explores how multiethnic schools in Europe negotiate political identities, highlighting the dynamic and complex nature of identity formation in diverse educational settings.

The sociological dimensions of integration in multiethnic schools are examined by Santagati (2015), who provides insights into the educational inequalities that persist despite efforts to create inclusive environments. This research highlights the need for a deeper understanding of the structural barriers that hinder true integration. Schachner et al. (2015) add to this discussion by identifying the structural and normative conditions necessary for fostering interethnic friendships in multiethnic classrooms. Their findings suggest that both policy and practice must align to create environments conducive to positive intergroup relations.

Extracurricular activities are identified as an ideal context for promoting positive intergroup attitudes in multiethnic middle schools by Knifsend and Juvonen (2017). These activities provide opportunities for students from different backgrounds to interact and collaborate, thus enhancing intercultural competence. Schwarzenhal et al. (2018) further discuss the effects of equality, inclusion, and cultural pluralism on intergroup outcomes in multiethnic classrooms, emphasizing the importance of adopting inclusive practices that respect and value cultural diversity.

Cowie et al. (2018) demonstrate the positive impact of cooperative group work on social relationships in multiethnic classrooms, suggesting that collaborative learning can enhance intercultural understanding and inclusion. Murrell Jr (2017) explores the intersection of race, culture, and schooling, arguing that multicultural urban schools must develop identities of achievement that are inclusive of all cultural backgrounds. Graham (2018) highlights the significant role of school diversity in the social adjustment of adolescents, showing that diverse environments can positively influence students' social development.

Meetoo (2020) examines how teachers enact diversity in everyday multicultural settings, revealing the challenges and successes of implementing inclusive practices in inner-city schools. Nishina et al. (2019) discuss the importance of creating inclusive school environments that support ethnic diversity, while Schachner et al. (2019) traces the evolution of cultural diversity perspectives in schools, advocating for a shift from equality and inclusion towards cultural pluralism.

Celeste et al. (2019) analyzed how school diversity policies shape belonging and achievement disparities between minority and majority youth. Their findings underline that well-implemented multiculturalism can narrow these gaps and enhance a sense of belonging for all students. Törngren et al. (2021) propose a

conceptual framework to grasp the global experiences of multiethnic and multiracial individuals, stressing the necessity for educational systems to adapt to these intricate identities.

Civitillo et al. (2017) enrich our understanding of cultural diversity approaches in schools through a comprehensive study using multiple sources and methods. They emphasize the value of integrating diverse perspectives to effectively address the needs of varied student populations.

Despite significant research on intercultural competence and inclusion, there remains a notable gap in comparative studies between mainstream and multiethnic schools. Existing literature often focuses separately on multicultural or monocultural environments, with few directly comparing these contexts within the Romanian educational framework. Moreover, while ample evidence supports the advantages of diverse educational settings, the precise mechanisms through which these benefits manifest remain incompletely understood.

By comparing intercultural competency and inclusion in mainstream vs multiethnic high schools in western Romania, this study aims to close these disparities. This study intends to demonstrate how various educational settings affect students' views of intercultural competence and inclusion. It does this by utilizing the novel Intercultural Competence and Inclusion in Education Scale (ICIES). This study highlights the significance of fostering inclusive attitudes in varied educational situations and offers insights into the elements that contribute to effective multicultural education by analyzing both mainstream and multiethnic settings.

## **2. Literature review**

Global education systems are facing a growing challenge: How to manage cultural diversity in schools effectively? This is because school surroundings have a significant impact on students' educational experiences and outcomes. Using information from a wide range of studies, this overview of the literature summarizes current research on intercultural interactions, multicultural education, and the effects of cultural diversity in educational settings.

Recent theoretical frameworks, such as the Cultural Diversity Climate model (Schachner et al., 2019) and the Multicultural Personality constructs (van der Zee et al., 2013), emphasize the importance of tools like the ICIES. These frameworks underline the need for assessments that capture the experiences of students in multicultural settings, bridging theoretical insights with practical strategies for fostering inclusivity in schools.

Multicultural education, which promotes inclusive methods that recognize and celebrate student cultural diversity, is at the center of this conversation (Bryan, 2010; Foster, 2019). In order to provide inclusive learning settings, multicultural education involves a number of different aspects, such as developing curriculum, teacher preparation, and policy implementation (Agirdag et al., 2016; Sleeter and Zavala, 2020). Multicultural education seeks to strengthen educational achievements and intergroup interactions by promoting cultural awareness and empathy (Chang and Le, 2010; Celeste et al., 2019).

The ethnical structure of schools significantly influences students' interethnic relationships and attitudes. According to research, schools with a diverse student body can promote social cohesiveness and lessen bias and discrimination (Mickelson and Nkomo, 2012; Thijs and Verkuyten, 2014). Furthermore, cross-ethnic friendships are essential for fostering inclusive school settings and enhancing students' overall educational experiences (Bagci et al., 2014; Vervoort et al., 2011).

There are still issues in intercultural education despite progress. Significant obstacles include things like racial power dynamics, equal access to education, and the continuation of segregated educational systems (Stroub and Richards, 2013). Alam and Mohanty (2023) explore how cultural beliefs and ability groupings impact equity in educational institutions, particularly in the teaching and learning of mathematics. Arneback and Jämte (2022) highlight teachers' anti-racist actions as a critical approach to counteracting racism in educational settings. Richardson (2021) critiques the failure to address root causes of racial segregation, perpetuating separate and unequal realities in a data-driven society. Diem et al. (2022) analyze how language and power dynamics in school integration policies influence racial and choice discourses. Finally, Windle (2023) examines the geographical, racial, and historical dimensions of school segregation in Rio de Janeiro, shedding light on the persistent centre-periphery dynamics in education. Comprehensive policies and methods that address structural inequality and advance inclusive practices in a variety of educational contexts are needed to address these issues (Okoye-Johnson, 2011; Paris, 2011).

Recent research (Georgiades et al., 2013; Schachner et al., 2019) highlights the critical role that cultural diversity climates play in schools and their influence on students' academic progress and sense of belonging. Students from different origins feel appreciated and encouraged in positive cultural diversity climates, which enhances their general well-being and academic performance (Schachner et al., 2019; Uddin, 2023).

The literature emphasizes how important it is to conduct more research in intercultural education to address new issues and improve current methods. This study informs policymakers, educators, and researchers committed to promoting intercultural education and creating inclusive learning environments worldwide by offering a thorough assessment of current research.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Participants**

In this study, we engaged 384 high school students from grades 11 and 12, aged 17 to 18 years old. These participants reside in both rural and urban areas of Western Romania. The sample included 108 students from mainstream schools and 276 students from multiethnic schools. Mainstream schools predominantly served homogeneous student populations, while multiethnic schools encompassed diverse backgrounds including Romanian, Hungarian, Serbian, and other ethnic minorities (Czech, German, etc.).

The study included a balanced gender distribution among participants, comprising 204 female students (53.1%) and 180 male students (46.9%) overall.

There were sixty female pupils (55.6%) and forty-eight male students (44.4%) in conventional schools particularly. Based on parental profession and educational attainment, the participant group’s socioeconomic standing was classified as follows: 128 students (33.3%) were classified as low, 176 students (45.8%) as middle, and 80 students (20.8%) as high.

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

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Mainstream Schools (n = 108)</b>	<b>Multiethnic Schools (n = 276)</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
- Male	48 (44.4%)	126 (45.7%)
- Female	60 (55.6%)	150 (54.3%)
<b>Ethnic Background</b>		
- Romanian	76 (70.4%)	162 (58.7%)
- Hungarian	12 (11.1%)	42 (15.2%)
- Serbian	10 (9.3%)	30 (10.9%)
- Other (Czech, German, etc.)	10 (9.3%)	42 (15.2%)
<b>Socioeconomic Status</b>		
- Low	36 (33.3%)	92 (33.3%)
- Medium	44 (40.7%)	126 (45.7%)
- High	28 (25.9%)	58 (21.0%)

### **3.2. Instrument**

As societies grow more varied, it is imperative to comprehend and assess intercultural competency and inclusivity in educational environments. Although the significance of promoting intercultural awareness in schools is becoming more widely acknowledged, there are few validated tools available to evaluate these variables in their whole. Educational strategies and procedures targeted at improving youth multicultural competency must be guided by scales that accurately measure students’ attitudes about cultural diversity, inclusion, and intercultural relationships. For example, Hammer (2012) created the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), which is frequently used to evaluate individuals’ intercultural competency in a variety of scenarios. This instrument assesses a person’s international communication skills, behavioral adaptability across cultures, and sensitivity to cultural differences. The Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ), created in 2013 by van der Zee and associates, is an additional illustration. It gauges a person’s efficacy in multicultural settings, cultural empathy, and openness to variety.

Even with these developments, there is still a large need in the literature regarding measures designed expressly to evaluate teenagers’ inclusion and intercultural competency in learning environments. Closing this gap will be essential to the advancement of multicultural education research as well as the creation of focused interventions that support inclusive learning environments.

The Intercultural Competence and Inclusion in Education Scale (ICIES) was employed in this study to measure students’ attitudes toward cultural diversity, inclusivity within their educational environment, and perceptions of intercultural

possibilities in order to meet this requirement. The thirteen items on this scale were adapted from established models found in psychological and educational research (Pica-Smith, 2011, 2018; Schachner et al., 2021).

#### **4. Data analysis**

Version 26.0 of SPSS Statistics was used for data analysis. The Intercultural Competence and Inclusion in Education Scale (ICIES) components and participant data were summarized using descriptive statistics. These data, which gave an overview of the sample characteristics and the distribution of answers across the scale items, comprised means, standard deviations, and frequencies.

Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which measures the degree of item interdependence within the scale, was used to evaluate the internal consistency reliability of the ICIES scale (Vaske et al., 2017). The ICIES items' underlying structure was investigated, and the scale's dimensionality was evaluated, using exploratory factor analysis (EFA). The extraction approach that took into consideration predicted correlations was principal axis factoring with promax rotation, among the scale items (Fabrigar and Wegener, 2011).

Several measures were used to confirm that the data were suitable for factor analysis: Bartlett's test of sphericity, which verifies that correlations between items were large enough for EFA, and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy (KMO), which assesses the percentage of variance among variables that might be common variance (Aldrich, 2018).

To assess the EFA model's goodness of fit, several fit indices were computed, such as the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Standardized Root Mean Residual (SRMR), and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). Better model fit is indicated by lower RMSEA and SRMR values and higher TLI values (Cho et al., 2020).

Independent sample *t*-tests were used to compare students in conventional and multiethnic schools' perspectives of intercultural competency and inclusion. These assessments looked at whether the mean scores on the ICIES questions between the two types of schools differed significantly. There were 108 individuals in the conventional school group and 276 in the multiethnic school group.

#### **5. Results**

The internal consistency reliability of the Intercultural Competence and Inclusion in Education Scale (ICIES) was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which yielded a value of 0.721 for the original scale and 0.727 based on standardized items. This indicates moderate to good reliability, suggesting that the items in the scale are sufficiently interrelated to measure the intended constructs effectively (Cronbach, 1951).

Descriptive statistics for each of the 13 items of the ICIES are presented in **Table 2**. The mean scores ranged from 3.2526 to 4.4635 on a 5-point Likert scale, with standard deviations ranging from 0.73957 to 1.34561. Item 7. "When I have the opportunity to help others, I help everyone, regardless of ethnicity." received the highest mean score of 4.4635, indicating strong agreement with the statement.

Conversely, Item 6. “Since attending this school, I often reflect on how different cultures affect beliefs, attitudes, and behavior” received the lowest mean score of 3.2526, suggesting a moderate level of agreement among participants.

**Table 2.** Item statistics.

Item	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
1. This school provides opportunities for intercultural educational activities and projects.	3.8906	0.93581	384
2. This school offers the possibility for all students to study languages of different ethnicities (e.g., Serbian, Czech, German, etc.).	3.8698	1.34561	384
3. Teachers in this school respect the specifics of each ethnicity, actively contributing to all students’ learning.	3.9245	0.95978	384
4. Since attending this school, my interest in different ethnicities and their specifics has increased.	3.6016	0.98027	384
5. I believe my way of thinking, attitudes, and behavior are influenced by my own culture.	3.3411	1.11752	384
6. Since attending this school, I often reflect on how different cultures affect beliefs, attitudes, and behavior.	3.2526	0.94565	384
7. When I have the opportunity to help others, I help everyone, regardless of ethnicity.	4.4635	0.73957	384
8. I feel comfortable working in teams with people from different ethnicities than mine.	4.1198	0.91190	384
9. I do not feel uncomfortable in the presence of people from different ethnicities than mine.	4.0156	1.07415	384
10. I believe that students’ cultural values influence their behavior in class (e.g., asking questions, participating in group activities, making comments on the lesson topic).	3.5130	0.98014	384
11. I believe that the multicultural experiences offered by the school help students interact more easily with peers from different ethnicities.	3.8984	0.87172	384
12. Teachers in this school initiate discussions on interculturality topics.	3.4766	1.00882	384
13. I have noticed that during lessons, most teachers demonstrate an inclusive attitude towards all students.	3.7448	0.96002	384

Item-total statistics indicated corrected item-total correlations ranging from 0.121 to 0.517, with higher correlations suggesting stronger relationships between individual items and the overall scale. Items such as Item 1. “This school provides opportunities for intercultural educational activities and projects” and Item 3. “Teachers in this school respect the specifics of each ethnicity, actively contributing to all students’ learning” demonstrated relatively stronger correlations with the total scale score, indicating their importance in assessing overall intercultural competence and inclusion perceptions.

The ICIES scale exhibited a mean score of 49.1120 and a variance of 38.570, with a standard deviation of 6.21045 across its 13 items. These statistics provide an overview of the central tendency and variability of responses among participants, suggesting a generally positive perception of intercultural opportunities and inclusiveness within the educational environment. The results of Hotelling’s *T*-Squared test indicated a statistically significant effect,  $T^2 = 549.701$ , with 12 degrees of freedom for the numerator and 372 degrees of freedom for the denominator ( $F = 44.493$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

The exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted to explore the underlying structure of the Intercultural Competence and Inclusion in Education Scale (ICIES) among high school students in West Romania. Utilizing SPSS Statistics version 26.0, initial checks including the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy ( $KMO = 0.772$ ) indicated the dataset’s suitability for factor analysis. Bartlett’s test of sphericity was highly significant ( $\chi^2(78) = 967.300$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), affirming that

correlations between items were sufficient for meaningful factor extraction. However, Mardia’s test of multivariate normality revealed significant skewness (Skewness = 27.072,  $p < 0.001$ ) and kurtosis (Kurtosis = 235.489,  $p < 0.001$ ), suggesting a departure from multivariate normality. Despite these deviations, the chi-squared test for the model indicated a significant fit ( $\chi^2(42) = 111.435$ ,  $p < .001$ ), supporting the adequacy of the model for the data.

The EFA yielded a three-factor solution using principal axis factoring with promax rotation.

**Table 3.** Factor loadings.

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Uniqueness
item1	0.721			0.511
item12	0.662			0.561
item2	0.620			0.653
item3	0.570			0.645
item13	0.523			0.719
item4	0.523			0.668
item11	0.466			0.678
item7		0.638		0.582
item8		0.615		0.584
item9		0.585		0.667
item5			0.626	0.629
item6			0.509	0.746
item10			0.458	0.751

Note: Applied rotation method is promax.

Factor loadings revealed distinct patterns across the three identified factors. Factor 1, termed Intercultural opportunities and activities, encompassed items related to the availability and quality of intercultural educational opportunities and extracurricular projects offered by the school. Items such as “This school provides opportunities for intercultural educational activities and extracurricular projects” (loading = 0.721) and “Teachers in this school correctly address the specificities of each ethnicity, actively contributing to all students’ learning” (loading = 0.570) were prominent in this factor.

Factor 2, Comfort in diverse settings, reflected students’ comfort levels when interacting with peers from different ethnic backgrounds and their reflections on cultural differences. Items such as “I feel comfortable working in a team with people of different ethnicities than mine” (loading = 0.615) and “I do not feel uncomfortable in the presence of people from different ethnicities than mine” (loading = 0.585) were indicative of this factor.

Factor 3, Cultural reflection and values, captured aspects related to students’ reflections on their own cultural influences and their awareness of cultural impacts on beliefs and behaviors. Items like “I believe that the cultural values of students influence their behavior in class” (loading = 0.626) and “Since I have been in this



school, I often reflect on how different cultures affect beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors” (loading = 0.509) characterized this factor.

The eigenvalues for the factors were Factor 1 (3.317), Factor 2 (1.767), and Factor 3 (1.448), explaining 20.7%, 8.8%, and 6.0% of the variance, respectively. Together, these factors accounted for 35.4% of the total variance, highlighting their substantial contribution to understanding students’ perceptions of intercultural competence and inclusion.

**Table 4.** Factor characteristics.

	Unrotated solution				Rotated solution		
	Eigenvalues	SumSq. Loadings	Proportion var.	Cumulative	SumSq. Loadings	Proportion var.	Cumulative
Factor 1. Intercultural opportunities and activities	3.317	2.689	0.207	0.207	2.435	0.187	0.187
Factor 2. Comfort in diverse settings	1.767	1.144	0.088	0.295	1.250	0.096	0.283
Factor 3. Cultural reflection and values	1.448	0.774	0.060	0.354	0.922	0.071	0.354

Furthermore, additional fit indices supported the adequacy of the three-factor model: Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = 0.066 (90% CI: 0.051–0.081), Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) = 0.037, Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) = 0.854, Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = 0.922, and Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) = -138.492. These indices collectively suggest a reasonable fit of the model to the data, underscoring the robustness of the three-factor structure in capturing students’ perceptions of intercultural competence and inclusion within their educational context.

Next, independent samples *t*-tests were conducted to examine differences in perceptions of intercultural competence and inclusion between students from mainstream schools and multiethnic schools in West Romania. The results revealed significant differences across several items, providing insights into how ethnical structure may influence students’ perspectives.

Across the items analyzed, significant differences were found for most variables between students from mainstream schools and those from multiethnic schools. Specifically, students from multiethnic schools consistently reported higher mean scores compared to their counterparts in mainstream schools on items related to intercultural competence and inclusion.

For instance, on item 1, “This school provides opportunities for intercultural educational activities and extracurricular projects”, students from multiethnic schools (M = 4.036, SD = 0.839) reported significantly higher scores than those from mainstream schools (M = 3.519, SD = 1.063),  $t(161.775) = -4.537, p < 0.001$ , Cohen’s  $d = -0.541$ . This trend was similarly observed across items 2, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, and 13, where students from multiethnic schools consistently showed

significantly higher mean scores, indicating stronger perceptions of intercultural opportunities, comfort in diverse settings, and inclusive attitudes and behaviors.

**Table 5.** Independent samples *t*-test.

	Test	Statistic	df	<i>p</i>	Effect Size	SE Effect Size
item1	Welch	-4.537	161.775	< 0.001	-0.541	0.119
	Mann-Whitney	10727.000		< 0.001	-0.280	0.066
item2	Welch	-15.110	126.960	< 0.001	-1.934	0.174
	Mann-Whitney	3613.500		< 0.001	-0.758	0.066
item3	Welch	-1.409	169.010	0.161	-0.166	0.114
	Mann-Whitney	13847.000		0.251	-0.071	0.066
item4	Welch	-5.793	196.076	< 0.001	-0.657	0.122
	Mann-Whitney	9452.000		< 0.001	-0.366	0.066
item5	Welch	0.462	239.215	0.645	0.050	0.114
	Mann-Whitney	15002.500		0.917	0.007	0.066
item6	Welch	-0.733	184.778	0.465	-0.084	0.114
	Mann-Whitney	14142.000		0.407	-0.051	0.066
item7	Welch	2.013	199.430	0.046	0.227	0.115
	Mann-Whitney	17012.000		0.014	0.141	0.066
item8	Welch	4.973	231.464	< 0.001	0.542	0.119
	Mann-Whitney	19515.500		< 0.001	0.309	0.066
item9	Welch	2.538	226.570	0.012	0.278	0.115
	Mann-Whitney	16932.500		0.028	0.136	0.066
item10	Welch	-2.793	187.305	0.006	-0.320	0.116
	Mann-Whitney	11970.500		0.002	-0.197	0.066
item11	Welch	-2.799	200.896	0.006	-0.316	0.116
	Mann-Whitney	11954.500		0.001	-0.198	0.066
item12	Welch	-5.531	194.515	< 0.001	-0.628	0.121
	Mann-Whitney	9858.500		< 0.001	-0.339	0.066
item13	Welch	-5.587	178.820	< 0.001	-0.648	0.122
		9697.000		< 0.001	-0.349	0.066

Note. For the Welch *t*-test, effect size is given by Cohen's *d* or the Mann-Whitney test, effect size is given by the rank biserial correlation.

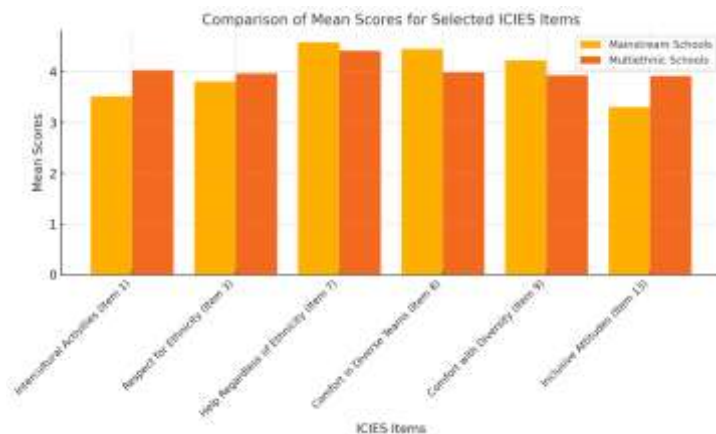
**Table 6.** Group descriptives.

	Group	N	Mean	SD	SE	Coefficient of variation
item1	mainstream school	108	3.519	1.063	0.102	0.302
	multiethnic school	276	4.036	0.839	0.051	0.208
item2	mainstream school	108	2.333	1.408	0.135	0.603
	multiethnic school	276	4.471	0.679	0.041	0.152
item3	mainstream school	108	3.806	1.080	0.104	0.284
	multiethnic school	276	3.971	0.906	0.055	0.228
item4	mainstream school	108	3.157	0.939	0.090	0.297
	multiethnic school	276	3.775	0.942	0.057	0.250

item5	mainstream school	108	3.380	0.954	0.092	0.282
	multiethnic school	276	3.326	1.177	0.071	0.354
item6	mainstream school	108	3.194	0.990	0.095	0.310
	multiethnic school	276	3.275	0.928	0.056	0.283
item7	mainstream school	108	4.583	0.725	0.070	0.158
	multiethnic school	276	4.417	0.741	0.045	0.168
item8	mainstream school	108	4.454	0.778	0.075	0.175
	multiethnic school	276	3.989	0.928	0.056	0.233
item9	mainstream school	108	4.222	0.950	0.091	0.225
	multiethnic school	276	3.935	1.110	0.067	0.282
item10	mainstream school	108	3.287	1.005	0.097	0.306
	multiethnic school	276	3.601	0.958	0.058	0.266
item11	mainstream school	108	3.704	0.846	0.081	0.228
	multiethnic school	276	3.975	0.871	0.052	0.219
item12	mainstream school	108	3.037	0.976	0.094	0.321
	multiethnic school	276	3.649	0.970	0.058	0.266
item13	mainstream school	108	3.306	0.990	0.095	0.300
	multiethnic school	276	3.917	0.893	0.054	0.228

Conversely, items 3, 5, and 6 did not show significant differences between the two school types, suggesting similar perceptions across both mainstream and multiethnic school students on aspects related to cultural reflection, values and specific educational experiences.

To visually represent the key differences in students' perceptions between mainstream and multiethnic schools, (**Figure 1** summarizing the mean scores for selected ICIES items. These items—intercultural engagement (Items 1, 3, 7), ethnic appreciation (Items 8, 9), and school unity (Item 13)—demonstrate statistically significant differences based on independent samples *t*-tests ( $p < 0.05$ ).



**Figure 1.** Differences in students' perceptions between mainstream and multiethnic schools.

These findings underscore the potential impact of school diversity on fostering intercultural competence and inclusive behaviors among students. Students in multiethnic school environments perceive greater opportunities for intercultural

learning and demonstrate higher levels of comfort and inclusivity compared to those in mainstream school settings. This highlights the importance of considering ethnical structure and diversity initiatives in promoting positive intercultural interactions and inclusive educational environments.

Overall, the results of the independent samples *t*-tests provide valuable insights into how school contexts influence students' perceptions of intercultural competence and inclusion, offering implications for educational policies and practices aimed at enhancing multicultural understanding and collaboration within school communities.

## **6. Discussion**

The present study investigated perceptions of intercultural competence and inclusion among students in mainstream versus multiethnic schools in West Romania. Our findings provide valuable insights into how ethnical structure influences students' perspectives on intercultural interactions and inclusive behaviors.

Our results indicate significant differences between students from mainstream and multiethnic schools across various dimensions of intercultural competence and inclusion. Specifically, students from multiethnic schools consistently reported higher levels of perceived opportunities for intercultural educational activities and extracurricular projects compared to their counterparts in mainstream schools. For instance, students in multiethnic schools reported higher levels of comfort in diverse settings (Items 8, 9) and greater opportunities for intercultural activities (Item 1). These results highlight the role of diverse school environments in fostering intercultural competence and underscore the necessity of targeted policy interventions to address these disparities, particularly in mainstream educational settings. This finding aligns with prior research suggesting that exposure to diverse cultural backgrounds within school environments enhances students' awareness of and engagement with intercultural learning opportunities (Acquah and Szelei, 2020; Grant and Sleeter, 2012).

Moreover, students from multiethnic schools exhibited greater comfort in working with peers from different ethnic backgrounds and demonstrated more inclusive attitudes and behaviors. They reported feeling less discomfort in diverse settings and were more likely to engage in collaborative activities across cultural boundaries. These results are consistent with studies highlighting the positive impact of multicultural school environments on fostering inclusive behaviors and reducing stereotypes and biases among students (Jackson, 2018; Tatum, 201).

The findings underscore the importance of school diversity initiatives in promoting intercultural competence and fostering inclusive educational environments. Educational policymakers and practitioners should consider strategies to enhance cultural diversity within schools, such as curriculum adaptations, teacher training on cultural responsiveness, and fostering cross-cultural interactions among students (Ainscow, 2020; Truong et al., 2014). By creating supportive contexts for intercultural learning, schools can better prepare students for future social and professional interactions in an increasingly diverse global society.

The ICIES has demonstrated strong reliability and validity in assessing intercultural competence and inclusion within the Romanian educational context. However, its cultural specificity may limit its applicability to non-Romanian educational settings. Future adaptations should include cross-cultural validations to incorporate diverse cultural norms and linguistic nuances, ensuring the scale's broader relevance. Additionally, modifications tailored to specific regional educational policies could enhance its utility in diverse global contexts.

## **7. Conclusions**

This study provides important insights into the role of ethnical structure in shaping students' perceptions of intercultural competence and inclusion in West Romania. Specifically, it highlights the significant differences between mainstream and multiethnic schools in fostering intercultural engagement, ethnic appreciation, and inclusive behaviors. Students in multiethnic schools reported higher opportunities for intercultural learning, greater comfort in diverse settings, and more inclusive attitudes, underscoring the positive impact of diverse educational environments on reducing biases and promoting collaborative cross-cultural interactions. These findings align with existing research, emphasizing the transformative potential of multicultural school settings in fostering global competencies and social cohesion (Grant and Sleeter, 2012; Marici et al., 2024; Tatum, 2017).

The findings of this study have important implications for both policy and practice. Policymakers should prioritize initiatives that promote cultural diversity within schools by implementing curriculum reforms that integrate multicultural education, offering professional development programs to enhance teachers' cultural responsiveness, and supporting school-based projects that foster intercultural collaboration among students. These measures can help create educational environments where students from diverse backgrounds feel empowered, respected, and prepared to thrive in an interconnected world (Ainscow, 2020; Truong et al., 2014).

Educators can also use these findings to develop holistic interventions that address intercultural competence by integrating both academic and extracurricular activities. Strategies such as collaborative group projects, cultural exchange programs, and inclusive classroom discussions can be instrumental in fostering dialogue, reducing intergroup biases, and building a cohesive school community.

The ICIES findings further provide actionable insights for enhancing inclusivity in educational settings. Teacher training programs should emphasize practical approaches for promoting intercultural dialogue and collaboration, while policymakers can use these results to design inclusive curricula and extracurricular activities that strengthen cultural awareness. By adopting these strategies, schools can cultivate inclusive communities that empower all students and foster social cohesion.

This study offers significant contributions but is not without limitations. First, the research was geographically confined to West Romania, which may restrict the generalizability of its findings to other cultural contexts or educational systems. To

address this, future studies should replicate the research in diverse regions and countries to validate and expand upon the results. Additionally, this study focused solely on student perceptions, which, while valuable, represent only one dimension of the educational experience. Future research should incorporate the perspectives of teachers, parents, and administrators to provide a more holistic understanding of how intercultural initiatives are designed, implemented, and experienced within school communities.

Another limitation is the cross-sectional design, which captures a single point in time and does not allow for causal inferences or an understanding of the long-term effects of multicultural educational environments on students' academic, social, and professional development. Longitudinal research is needed to examine how sustained exposure to diverse educational settings influences students over time. Furthermore, adopting mixed-method approaches could yield richer qualitative insights into students' lived experiences and the mechanisms driving the observed differences between mainstream and multiethnic schools.

Future research should prioritize longitudinal designs to track changes in students' perceptions over time, offering insights into the enduring impact of multicultural education on their development. Cross-national comparative studies are also recommended to investigate how cultural and policy variations influence intercultural competence, enabling a broader and more nuanced application of the ICIES across diverse educational systems.

In conclusion, this study highlights the critical role of school diversity in fostering intercultural competence and inclusivity. By addressing the identified limitations and expanding the scope of future research, scholars can deepen our understanding of the dynamic interplay between school environments, intercultural engagement, and inclusive educational practices. These efforts will support the development of evidence-based strategies to enhance educational equity, social integration, and cultural understanding in increasingly diverse societies.

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