

**Romana Bešter and Mojca Medvešek**

## Intercultural competence in teachers: the case of teaching Roma students

**Abstract:** The authors first present the concepts of intercultural learning and intercultural competence. Following this, a theoretical model of intercultural competence development, as formulated by Deardorff (2006, 2009), is employed to explore the intercultural competence of teachers who teach Roma pupils in Slovene schools. Drawing on an analysis of reflective diaries written by 21 teachers, the authors conclude that the majority of the participating teachers demonstrate a lack of knowledge and understanding of cultural differences and often do not go beyond the ethno-centric perspective. In the absence of critical reflection on their values, expectations, thoughts and behaviour, the teachers often implicitly (and unconsciously) contribute to the preservation of the existing unequal social relations between majority and minority groups. However, to raise awareness of such behaviour and to overcome the status quo, broader systemic changes aimed at supporting the development of teachers' intercultural competence and the implementation of the principle of interculturalism in education will be needed.

**Keywords:** intercultural competence, intercultural education, Roma, reflective diaries, teachers

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## Introduction

To prevent and overcome divisions and to create suitable conditions for the equal coexistence of all in ethnically and culturally diverse societies, there is an urgency for democratic thinking, mutual respect, a transcendence of the ethno-centric perspective and the prevention and eradication of discrimination and unequal power relations between different social groups. In order to achieve this, it is important that the educational system is also orientated towards these goals and values. School is a public space in which pupils from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds meet, and as such, it is a testing ground for developing a positive assessment of these diversities and, at the same time, an appropriate institution for equipping pupils for life in a pluralistic society (Delors 1996). In this regard, there are two crucial factors: that the whole school system is based on and encourages the intercultural approach and that teachers and other school employees are suitably trained for work in an intercultural environment.

Interculturalism or an intercultural approach to education can be interpreted as: »a pedagogical-didactic principle, which directs the planning, implementation and evaluation of education in a way that supports the transformation of the existing hierarchical relations between the dominant ethnic/cultural majority and subjugated ethnic/cultural minority groups within the educational system and in this manner contributes to the equality of actual opportunities for education, the preservation of diverse identities and the development of a supportive attitude to ethnic and cultural minorities« (Skubic Ermenc 2010, pp. 272–273).

For teachers to be able to implement the principle of interculturalism in education, they must achieve a very high level of professional expertise in the subject they teach. Moreover, they have to keep in mind and know how to treat the ethnic, religious, cultural and other differences they encounter in the classroom, which means that they must be in possession of a highly developed intercultural competence. The decision by some teachers to adopt an “ethnically or culturally blind” ideology in the classroom is based on the belief that the phenomena of racism and discrimination will die out if they are ignored. Research findings show exactly the opposite – pupils’ educational opportunities may be limited if teachers

do not take into account these pupils' ethnic, linguistic and cultural origin (Milner 2007, p. 392).

This article first presents the concept of multicultural learning and multicultural competence, and on the basis of the chosen theoretical model, it offers an assessment of the intercultural competence of teachers from different Slovene schools who teach Roma children. The assessment will draw upon the analysis of the reflective diaries of teachers within the project: "The Increase in Social and Cultural Capital in Areas with a Roma Population".<sup>1</sup>

## Intercultural education

There are various definitions of the concept of intercultural education as well as different names for it. Two frequently used terms are multicultural and intercultural education. The difference between these terms is not always clear-cut and their use not very consistent (Hill 2007, pp. 248–249). The terms often have a similar though not quite the same meaning; sometimes, they are used synonymously while, at other times, they are seen as two different ideas. The term multicultural (also multi-ethnic) education is used mainly in the USA while the use of the term intercultural education is tied mostly to the European context (Walkling 1990, p. 82). Differentiation between the two terms commonly emphasises that multiculturalism describes the existence of cultural diversity in society whilst interculturalism focuses on the interaction between different cultural groups within a multicultural environment (Hill 2007, p. 250).

Hill (*ibid.*, p. 247) argues that multicultural education was initially founded on the belief that the dominant majority culture was the only relevant one; conversely, the "culture" of immigrants was described as more or less insignificant for the continuing life of immigrants in the reception country as well as being of no benefit to that country. Such an understanding was the political response to the question of how to assimilate migrants in the reception country. A new approach to multicultural education developed out of the civil rights movement in the USA in the 1960s and 1970s (*ibid.*; May and Sleeter 2010, p. 4). Banks (2007, p. 1) defines multicultural education as a concept, a reform movement and a process, the aim of which is to correct the educational system so that, irrespective of pupils' ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious appurtenance, they are offered equal opportunities and chances of achieving academic success. The focus of multicultural education is on promoting understanding among different cultures, which is to be achieved through greater recognition of and respect for ethnic, cultural and other differences. The approach adopted by multicultural education is "a problem-solving one" (May and Sleeter 2010, p. 4) whereby the root of conflict is viewed as misunderstanding (or unfamiliarity with) cultural differences (May and Sleeter 2010, p. 4). At first glance, the prescription for conflict prevention and the encouragement of tolerance and mutual respect between "culturally" diverse groups is thus

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the project, see <http://www.khetanes.si/>.

simple: the introduction of activities and material in the curricula that promote familiarity with and respect for other cultures. Culture, often equated with or reduced to ethnicity, is here understood as a characteristic shared by individuals of a particular cultural group and a set of stable practices that can be described and taught (May and Sleeter 2010, p. 4). Such “containment of differences constructs ‘cultural diversity’ as an ‘object of knowledge’, compelling it to be encountered as a category to be discovered, *observed, evaluated*” (Bhabha, in Sharma 2010, p. 114). This multicultural approach, called liberal multiculturalism, has since the 1980s been the subject of a great deal of criticism. Advocates of “critical multiculturalism” contend that focusing on the content of cultural differences between various groups and glorifying the visual characteristics of “other cultures” objectivise the difference and actually contribute to the preservation of the status quo rather than to bringing different cultures closer to each other and transcending differences. Homi Bhabha (in Sharma 2010, p. 114) stresses that the focus should be shifted from the characteristics of “other cultures” to the conditions in which individual “cultures” or “identities” emerge. Advocates of critical multiculturalism emphasise the necessity of taking into account the relations and positions of power/powerlessness, domination/non-domination, which facilitate the appearance and preservation of specific differences and inequalities between groups and limit intercultural interaction (see May and Sleeter 2010, p. 4). Berlak and Moyenda (in *ibid.*, p. 10) single out the central characteristic of critical multiculturalism as: “naming and actively challenging racism and other forms of injustice, not simply recognizing and celebrating differences and reducing prejudice”.

In Europe, intercultural education appears as an alternative to multicultural education. Whilst multicultural education is often conceptualised as pedagogy directed at helping and abolishing the “deficits” of underprivileged pupils, most experts in multicultural education are convinced that it should not focus only on underprivileged groups and that it must also address all pupils (Flynn 2010, p. 166). The goal of intercultural education is the restructuring of educational institutions in such a way that they will be able to convey the necessary skills, knowledge and ways of thinking to all pupils, even those who are not in a worse starting position, with the aim of effective functioning in an increasingly ethnically and culturally diverse society (Banks 1993, p. 22). Even among Slovene experts, there is a growing belief that interculturalism in pedagogy cannot be limited to the provision of special rights and the implementation of measures for those who are in any way in a disadvantaged starting position; rather, intercultural education should be directed at the population as a whole (Skubic Ermenc 2003).

According to Fennes and Hapgood (in Huber 2012, p. 24), intercultural education should be based on readiness to form productive relations with other cultures, acquire greater awareness about one’s own culture and explore new forms of coexistence and cooperation with other cultures. This includes not only a collection of knowledge and skills (such as how to communicate verbally and non-verbally, how to greet or how to eat) but also a state of mind that develops a greater capacity for tolerance and an openness to different values and behaviours. It does not necessarily mean the acceptance and adoption of different values, but

achieving a greater flexibility of seeing other cultures “as they are in the context of another cultural filter, not through one’s own ethnocentred frame” (Fennes and Hapgood in Huber 2012, p. 24).

It involves transcending the ethno-centric perspective. Intercultural education is based on seeing culture as a changing category, which does not exist as an independent phenomenon, but is constantly (re)producing itself in relation(ship) s to/with other cultures. It is based on the assumption that cultures are equal and that they encourage critical thinking about the unequal social position and power relations between individual social/cultural groups in education and the wider society and on the possibility of going beyond this state of affairs (cf. Skubic Ermenc 2010, p. 272). Intercultural education can also be linked to the ideas of “culturally relevant pedagogy”, as defined by Ladson-Billings (1995, p. 160), who singles out three key criteria on which such pedagogy should be based: a) students must experience academic success; b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence (they have to have the possibility of preserving their cultural identity and at the same time achieve academic success); and c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order (which means that it is not enough for pupils to achieve individual success whilst preserving their cultural identity, but through critical thinking and behaviour, they must strive for the collective empowerment of marginalised groups and the abolition of social injustice). For pupils to be able to experience, acquire and achieve all this, their teachers must possess, know and master all of the above.

## **Intercultural competence**

For the implementation of intercultural education in practice, teachers with intercultural competence are needed. However, there seems to be no unified definition of this concept (see, e.g. Bennett 1993, 2004; Byram 2000; Graf 2004; Salo-Lee 2006; Spitzberg and Chagnon 2009; Vrečer 2011; Ward and Wilson 2014). This paper is based on the framework/model of the development of intercultural competence formulated by Darla K. Deardorff (2006, 2009). Deardorff defines intercultural competence as the ability to behave and communicate in an effective and appropriate manner in intercultural situations. She describes the development of intercultural competence as a process in which attitudes – such as respect for other cultures and values, openness, curiosity and discovery – combined with knowledge and the skills of observation, listening, evaluating, analysing, interpreting and relating lead an individual to develop adaptability, an ethno-relative worldview and empathy, which is externally expressed as effective and appropriate behaviour and communication in intercultural situations.

Drawing from Deardorff’s model and its upgrade (see Boecker 2008), the development of intercultural competence consists of four parameters: 1) attitudes to others/those who are different; 2) knowledge and understanding as well as specific skills; 3) intercultural reflection (which represents the desired internal

outcome) and 4) constructive interaction (which represents the desired external outcome). The more positive attitudes individuals have towards cultural diversity, the more knowledge they gain (meanwhile developing the required skills) and the more often they reflect on their actions in intercultural situations, the more probable it is that they will achieve a higher level of intercultural competence. It can be assumed that all four dimensions influence each other. Every example of intercultural interaction (again) influences, either negatively or positively, the in

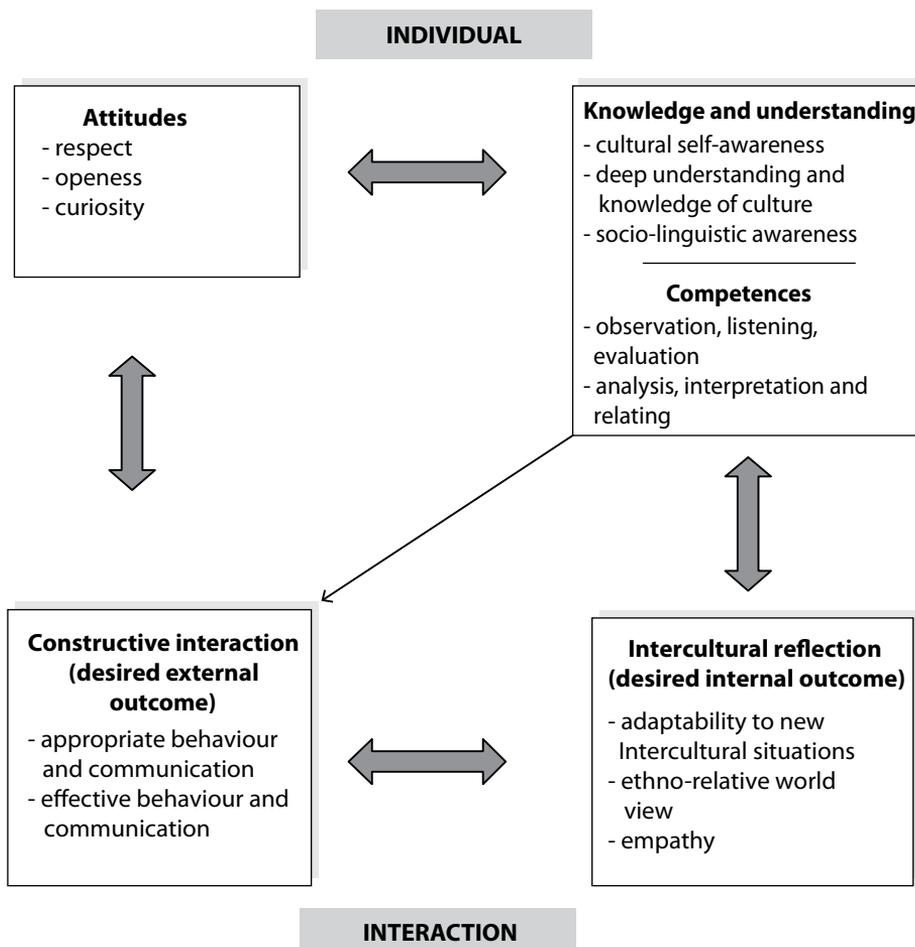


Figure 1: Process model of intercultural competence (adapted from Deardorff 2006, 2009; Boecker 2008)

dividual's attitudes, knowledge, skills and reflection (Boecker 2008, p. 7). Acquiring intercultural competence can thus be illustrated as a learning spiral; it requires lifelong learning and is part of one's personal development (Boecker 2008, p. 7).

In Slovenia, intercultural competence among teachers has not received much

attention within the educational process. There is also an absence of studies involving a comprehensive, in-depth measurement of intercultural competence among teachers. Individual studies have looked at, for example, the opinions and assessments of teachers regarding what competence those teaching a subject aimed at intercultural learning should possess. According to respondents, the most important positive attitudes included: tolerance, patience, an ability to motivate others and problem solving (Hočevár 2010, p. 6). In this study, 82% of the teachers surveyed replied that they would be willing to attend a workshop on acquiring intercultural competence. In contrast, in the TALIS study (OECD 2009, p. 153), Slovene teachers showed relatively little interest in attending training on the theme of “teaching in intercultural environments”. In her study, Kiswarday (2015, p. 142) sought to establish how teachers judged their own competence in providing help and support to pupils originating from other cultural/linguistic environments. The teachers reported a relatively low evaluation of their competence. In a study carried out by the Slovenian Institute for Adult Education, in which a questionnaire was used to obtain a self-assessment by adult education teachers of intercultural competence, the opposite result was obtained. The results indicated that a great majority of those taking part judged that they possessed many of the intercultural competences delineated in the questionnaire; however, the researcher herself doubted the validity of the responses and believed that the participants failed to engage in self-criticism (Vrečer 2011, p. 175). A study by Skubic Ermenc (2006), in which she tried to establish the extent to which the principle of interculturalism was being implemented in teaching, showed that there were many shortcomings in the knowledge and sensibility of teachers, which also indicates a lack of intercultural competences.

### **Purpose and goals of the research**

The purpose of this article is to assess whether the elements defined by Deardorff as pre-conditions for the development of intercultural competence can be deduced from the diaries of teachers teaching Roma children. Experience and research in Slovenia (Krek and Vogrinc 2005; Jazbec, Čagran and Lipavič Oštir 2013, Peček et al. 2013, p. 77) show low levels of integration and success among Roma children in the education system. There are many complex and interconnected reasons for this. Many Roma children come from socially and economically deprived families (which can be attributed to the marginalisation of and discrimination against the Roma in the mostly Slovene environment). For many, the environment in which they live does not offer suitable conditions and encouragement for learning and performing the tasks demanded of them by the school system. The pre-school socialisation of Roma children usually takes place in a different cultural environment than the pre-school socialisation of non-Roma children, and above all, a large proportion of Roma children are not included in formal pre-school care. Consequently, upon starting school, Roma children most

often do not satisfy the requirements and expectations that are placed on them by the school system as these are based on the values and norms of the majority culture. Frequently – even in school – they encounter a lack of understanding, prejudice and a negative attitude from the non-Roma population (teachers, parents and pupils) who do not recognise the equality or equal value of Roma culture and do not see the importance of the knowledge and experience possessed by Roma families.

Moreover, it seems that a considerable proportion of teachers are not trained for work in ethnically/culturally heterogeneous classrooms and for the implementation of the concept of inclusion, as defined by Lesar (2013, 85): “it is primarily schools that should adapt to the diversity of their pupils instead of expecting that all the children will be able to adapt to the frequently notably rigid functioning of schools”. In assessing the extent to which teachers and schools are encouraged to adapt their work to the diversity of the schooling population, Lesar found that there was actually no legislative foundation for this as the Slovene legislation pertaining to education clearly shows “an individualistic understanding of the reasons for ‘special needs’ and a tendency towards assimilation” (p. 85). She found that certain data indicate that Slovene schools are oriented towards exclusion. Through the analysis of diaries, the authors of this article thus wanted to examine whether the attitudes and pedagogical approach of teachers who took part in our research contribute towards the preservation of the described state of affairs, or towards overcoming it, and the extent to which the teachers were aware of their role and responsibility within this process.

## **Methodological approach**

Because intercultural competence is a complex concept, it is difficult to evaluate or measure it (Deardorff 2014; Byram et al. 2002). Using only one measuring tool or method is not sufficient to comprehensively measure all the dimensions of intercultural competence. Most authors thus recommend the use of a number of methods, both qualitative and quantitative, based on self-assessment as well as assessments by external assessors/observers. Among the suggested methods are: analysis of diaries, portfolios, direct observation with participation and interviews (Fantini 2009). Our research analysed diaries written between March and May 2011 by 21 female teachers from nine primary schools and one secondary school in various locations around Slovenia (Semič, Črenšovci, Kuzma, Radenci Maribor, Črnomelj, Novo mesto, Kočevje, Trebnje, Grosuplje). The teachers involved had a varying number of years of teaching experience; they included both beginners and teachers with over twenty years of experience.<sup>2</sup> Eleven of the teachers taught in lower primary schools where all subjects are taught by the same teacher, and 10

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<sup>2</sup> Five teachers had between 1 and 5 years of work experience, four teachers between 6 and 10, three teachers between 11 and 15, two teachers between 16 and 20, and seven teachers had over 20 years of teaching experience.

taught specific subjects. The range of subjects taught was quite wide, including Slovene, maths, geography, history, natural science, biology and chemistry. Some teachers were also involved in giving additional assistance to Roma children. The purpose of writing a diary was to note down impressions and thoughts about everyday work with Roma children and their parents and to promote reflection on their work. The diaries consisted of two parts: the first was dedicated to a general description and thoughts about the experience gained from working with Roma children; the second consisted of on-going entries over a three-month period. According to the instructions, the teachers were supposed to record their impressions and thoughts about the events in the classroom and school, about mutual relations and about the children's behaviour in the classroom. Another important theme was the teachers' contacts with parents. The diaries were also supposed to contain teachers' reflections on their pedagogical approaches. It was left up to the teachers themselves how often they wrote entries in the diary. In the analysis, we evaluated the content of the diaries in relation to the four levels (writing genres) defined by O'Hanlon (in Polak 1995, pp. 19–21). Following this, the content was analysed with regard to the elements representing the building blocks of intercultural competence.

### **Analysis of the diaries with regard to the writing genres**

O'Hanlon (cited in Polak 1995, pp. 19–21) formulated a basic hierarchical model consisting of four writing genres, with which she sought to illustrate the gradual nature of the development of teachers' reflection on their work. These four genres are: 1) report writing (describing facts and events), 2) interpretive writing, 3) deliberative writing (reflexivity) and 4) integrated writing (integration of the personal and professional). Each level (genre) is based on the previous one and upgrades it. The lowest level (genre 1) includes only a description of the facts and events. The diary writer does not include any personal opinions, judgements or explanations, and from this kind of writing, we do not get any information about her emotional engagement and views. At the next level (genre 2), the writer includes in the diary her opinions and explanations on the basis of the objective data from the previous level, writes about her pedagogical intentions and activities and describes interaction and the atmosphere in the classroom. In doing so, she uses value terms. At this level, the writer does not distance herself from the interpretation. At the next level (genre 3), the writer includes in her diary a self-evaluation of previous planned events and ideas, including their hypothetical and actual consequences, thinks critically about her mistakes, comments on them, gives special attention to various personal and professional issues and tries to solve them intellectually. At level four (genre 4), the writer of the diary is oriented towards the causal background of what goes on in the classroom, describing the events through a professionally-critical and self-critical lens. This level of writing is rare as the writer has to be familiar with both the academic literature on the subject

and must have a significant amount of experience with direct pedagogical work, and above all, she has to possess the ability to relate her professional knowledge to her experience on the basis of critical reflection.

The results of the analysis of the writing genres are shown in Table 2. The greatest number of teachers, nine, (T3, T4, T6, T7, T8, T12, T13, T17, T21), wrote their diaries at the second level (genre 2), seven teachers at level three (genre 3) (T2, T5, T14, T15, T16, T19, T20), and five teachers (T1, T9, T10, T11, T18) stayed at level one (genre 1), i.e. they only reported and described the facts. Noteworthy, the reflections by those teachers who reached level three (genre 3) were not necessarily of a high quality or in-depth nature. In most cases, differences between the first and second parts of the diary were obvious. Ironically, the first part—in which the teachers were also asked to offer suggestions for working with Roma children in the form of advice for other teachers—often contained a higher writing level/genre and more reflection than the second part. In the latter—which was dedicated to describing their regular work and contact with Roma children and parents within the three-month period—the teachers often described the basic facts and events without any reflection on them. Very few teachers critically assessed their opinions, conduct or reactions to described events or situations or sought new approaches that went beyond the established procedures of the school. Reflection that does not include judgement or criticism of activities and professional values has no special worth as it strives for the preservation of existing behaviour patterns.

### **Analysis of the diaries from the perspective of intercultural competence**

The analysis of the content of the diaries was based on the coding of the text with regard to the selected themes and sub-themes. The themes and sub-themes were chosen on the basis of the model shown in Figure 1.

<b>1.</b>	<b>Attitudes (a positive attitude to others, positive standpoints with regard to cultural diversity)</b>
1.1	Respect for other cultures
1.2	Openness (readiness to have contact with other cultures, avoiding ethno-centric judgements)
1.3	Curiosity (motivation and readiness to learn about other cultures, readiness for additional education and training)
<b>2.</b>	<b>Knowledge and comprehension</b>
2.1	Cultural self-awareness (awareness of which cultural elements influence our attitudes, conduct, manner of communication)
2.2	Deep understanding and knowledge of culture (familiarity with the cultural elements that influence attitudes, conduct, the manner of communication of the members of other cultures; understanding different worldviews; understanding the historical, political, religious context)
2.3	Socio-linguistic awareness (awareness of the relationship between language and meaning within the social context)
<b>3.</b>	<b>Skills</b>
3.1	Observation, listening, evaluation
3.2	Analysis, interpretation, connecting cultural elements
3.3	Ability to notice, prevent and solve conflicts at an early stage
<b>4.</b>	<b>Intercultural reflection (desired internal outcome)</b>
4.1	Readiness to adapt to new intercultural situations (manners of communication and cooperation, worldviews, ways of life, norms, value systems)
4.2	Ethno-relative worldview; ability to change, relativise and broaden one's worldview and framework of understanding and acting
4.3	Empathy
<b>5.</b>	<b>Constructive interaction (desired external outcome)</b>
5.1	Appropriate interaction (the key aspects of cultural identity, the key norms and values of all those involved are taken into account; ability to envisage and constructively deal with potential and actual problems and conflicts at an early phase of interaction)
5.2	Effective interaction (those involved achieve their individual, collective, transactional and/or relational goals)

Table 1: Themes and sub-themes used in the analysis of the reflective diaries

In Table 2, a plus sign marks the presence of diary statements representing/ belonging to a sub-theme. A minus sign marks the presence of statements showing a negative attitude within a sub-theme. The presence of both signs means that there are ambivalent statements or attitudes.

On the basis of the analysis, the diaries can be divided into three groups. The first group comprised eight teachers (T5, T6, T7, T13, T14, T15, T16, T21) who, in their entries, demonstrated a positive attitude towards cultural diversity, a certain (although often limited) knowledge about and understanding of cultural contexts as well as skills (observation, listening, evaluation, etc.) that facilitate internal intercultural reflection (desired internal outcome). This was also occasionally shown in their external constructive interaction (desired external outcome) with pupils and parents. The second group was made up of six teachers (T2, T8, T10, T12, T19, T20) who, on the basis of the attitudes, knowledge and skills expressed in their diaries, showed a certain level of internal intercultural reflection (desired

T1	Teachers																				
	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6	T7	T8	T9	T10	T11	T12	T13	T14	T15	T16	T17	T18	T19	T20	T21	
Writing genres	1	3	2	2	3	2	2	2	1	1	1	2	2	3	3	3	2	1	3	2	
Theme																					
1. Attitudes	+		-/+	-	+	+	-	+	+	+	+	+	-/+	+	+	-/+	+	+	+	+	
2. Knowledge	+		-/+	-	+	+	+	-/+	+	+	+	+	-/+	+	+	-/+	+	+	+	+	
3. Skills		+	-/+	-	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	-/+	-	+	+	+	
4. Intercultural reflection		+	-	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	-/+	+	+	+	+	
5. Constructive interaction		+		+	+	-	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	

Table 2: Results of the analysis of the diaries

internal outcome), but their diaries offered no examples of constructive interaction (desired external outcome) with pupils or parents. The third group comprised seven teachers (T1, T3, T4, T9, T11, T17, T18) who, on the basis of their diary entries, did not seem to have the attitude or knowledge and skills that would facilitate internal intercultural reflection and, consequently, an external constructive interaction with pupils or parents. The diary of one teacher included only a narrow description of the learning outcomes of individual pupils and did not allow us to ascertain the presence of the necessary elements for the formulation and development of intercultural competence, as defined by the model.

The classification of individual teachers into the three groups with varying degrees of pre-disposition towards the development of intercultural competence does not reveal any connection with individual schools or regions, nor with the length of teachers' teaching experience. What is apparent, however, is a greater predisposition towards intercultural competence in those teachers whose diaries demonstrated a higher writing genre (genre 3). In addition, the writing of the teachers who included more self-reflection in their diaries showed a greater degree of satisfaction with their work. Those teachers who remained at the level of description – in terms of the behaviour and learning outcomes of pupils – more often expressed a sense of failure and helplessness in their relationship with pupils and their parents.

The most common diary entries made reference to attitudes towards others and statements belonging in the third group of themes – skills. There were considerably fewer statements belonging to the second group, which included knowledge, understanding and cultural self-awareness, familiarity with the context of other cultures and socio-linguistic awareness. Some teachers explicitly wrote that they respected all cultures and that they were without prejudice, but the remainder of their diary cast doubt on this statement. Even a categorical claim that someone is without prejudice raises doubts about both his or her understanding of prejudice and his or her ability to reflect more deeply and transcend ethno-centric and racist attitudes. Other teachers showed greater levels of openness, sensitivity to intercultural differences and readiness to face up to prejudice and stereotypes: *»We all come across stereotypes and prejudice. It is important to be aware of them and to try to eliminate them. [...] When stereotypes appear in the classroom, we must not ignore them. It is necessary to talk about them and present pupils with the facts that undermine the stereotype.«* (Diary entry for T5)

This teacher also showed a greater degree of success in her communication and work with Roma children and parents. She was aware of the importance of building a relationship with both the children and their parents and established contact with Roma parents not only when something went wrong but also called them to praise their child. Moreover, she visited the Roma children in their settlement as she believed that *“visiting them just like that, without a reason, contributes to the establishment of a good relationship”*, which also indicates that she was open and ready to form contacts with other cultures. Her diary entries showed that she was aware of the importance of adjusting the teaching process and material covered to pupils' life experience (*“It is necessary to draw from their*

*experience and living environment*”), which is also one of the elements of the intercultural approach to education (cf. Skubic Ermenc 2006). In addition, the teacher was aware of the socio-linguistic problems that Roma children face in school. She singled out an example when Roma children were asked about their hobbies. In connection with this, she wrote the following reflection: “*First of all, what is the association of the word hobby; what exactly are we asking? Perhaps it is better to ask what his schoolmates do in the afternoon when they’re not in school. What are they involved in? Where do they go?*”

A number of teachers focused, in their diaries, on the importance of treating all pupils equally. A positive example of the interpretation of equal treatment was a teacher who included in study support sessions all pupils who needed additional help, not just Roma pupils. This paid off in terms of closer relations in the class and the pupils’ greater levels of well-being. She also sought to develop an honest, respectful and equal relationship with parents:

*“It is good to know the parents and to find out what they are more receptive to – whether they are encouraged by criticism or praise and encouragement. It is good if the parents see you as a confidant. For this, it is necessary to take some time, to listen to them in spite of the difficulty communicating in another language, to help with the filling in of forms. They very much like being given advice and explanations of why something is being done with their child (such as everyday revision before school, individual work, etc.) and the feeling of being understood. The fact is that if your cooperation with the parents is positive, the possibility of the child progressing successfully is much greater.”* (Diary entry for T15)

A considerable number of teachers frequently emphasised difficulty relating to communication with Roma parents. A few of them said that they often invited parents to school in writing but that the latter did not respond. In spite of this, no deeper reflection could be discerned from the diaries about these teachers perhaps changing their way of seeking to establish communication with parents or at least trying to find out why Roma parents did not respond to invitations. One teacher expressed her opinion in the following way: “*Where are the parents? The school really wants to work with them, but they are irresponsible, inconsistent, unmotivated, uneducated. Why? Maybe because others do everything for them!*” (diary entry for T7). In some of the diaries, different examples were described. One of the teachers adapted her correspondences by writing them in capital letters because she discovered that Roma parents could not read lower-case letters. This adjustment made the communication significantly more successful. A number of teachers established contact with parents over the telephone. This proved successful in some cases but not in others; it seems that the degree of effectiveness was often linked to the teacher’s general attitude towards the Roma community. The above teacher who described Roma parents as irresponsible, inconsistent, unmotivated and uneducated had the following to say about contacts over the telephone: “*I also try to establish contact over the phone, but as soon as they see the school’s number, they don’t answer. Often, for the sake of peace, they refuse to give us their telephone number with the excuse that they don’t have a phone*” (diary entry for T7). Those teachers who tried to establish contact with Roma families

through (repeated) visits to Roma settlements were more successful in their communication with Roma parents.

*“If Roma parents are convinced that the teacher does not understand them or does not want to understand them, i.e. she is not on their side, they will not be prepared for any form of cooperation. This means that they will not respond to invitations to parents’ evenings, attend various workshops for parents or events. Personally, I believe that it is very useful to visit their settlements where we can see the parents and the children in their environment where they feel safe and relaxed. Many parents gladly invite school employees to their homes and talk to them openly, but there are also some who close the door and do not wish to talk.”* (Diary entry for T13)

Teachers’ visits to Roma settlements contribute not only to better communication with Roma parents but are also very important from the wider perspective of developing intercultural competence. Through communication, teachers widen their knowledge and understanding of intercultural differences, developing sensitivity to them. Teachers who had direct experience of meeting with the Roma in their settlements more often displayed signs of a deeper self-reflection than those who did not visit these settlements. *“Sometimes, it is good for us teachers to see how our pupils live and then we can perhaps understand them better.”* (Diary entry for T17)

A large proportion of the content of some diaries consisted of descriptions of disciplinary problems, mostly of the impossible behaviour of one pupil or a number of pupils and of the helplessness of the teacher to stop it. Teachers used different measures to prevent disturbing behaviour, from warnings and threats to informing parents (even though they knew that the pupil would most likely be physically punished), to informing the head teacher, the school education councillor or the Roma assistant. However, they did not question the effectiveness of these measures and did not seek alternative ways of solving or, even better, preventing disciplinary problems. They observed and presented the pupils’ behaviour through the prism of “problematic” pupils rather than from the perspective that there are reasons why children who feel excluded display difficult behaviour. Dubravka Hrovatič, with whose help we carried out a workshop for the teachers and who wrote the December 2011 diaries entitled *“Laying the professional foundations for the improvement of teaching practices in a multicultural environment”*, drew attention to the fact that many teachers, in seeking ways to achieve acceptable conduct from pupils, channel their energy into attempts to change others (i.e. pupils). The diaries show that only a small proportion of teachers decided to change their own conduct. Those who chose this strategy were significantly more aware of the importance of a strong teacher-pupil relationship. They did not direct their actions into criticising, judging, punishing, threatening or ignoring but showed a sincere interest, listened, talked about the differences and encouraged the pupils.

Especially interesting were teachers’ comments regarding the (non-)participation of Roma children in various activities (sports days, cultural days, natural science days, excursions, etc.). Almost all diaries touched upon this issue, with the majority of teachers writing that Roma children usually do not attend these

activities. However, the teachers' attitude to this differed considerably. Some teachers interpreted the children's absence from such activities as something that is typical of the Roma and did not devote any special attention to it. Perhaps they sought to obtain letters from parents excusing their children so that the matter was formally explained; but that was as far as their actions went. Other teachers wondered why this was happening and offered different explanations (parents' mistrust and fear that something might happen to their children; the financial hardship of Roma families, since these activities usually have to be paid for), sometimes expressing sympathy with Roma families, but they did not seek a solution to the issue. Some teachers made a special effort to enquire about the reasons for the absence of Roma pupils and thought about what they themselves could do to change this. They tried different adjustments, sometimes acting outside established school procedures – for example, they tried to explain to Roma parents and their children in a way that was understandable to them what a particular activity is, what exactly happens and what was expected from the children; or they made sure in advance that Roma pupils were included in specific groups of children where they knew they would be accepted, which would make it easier for them to participate in the activity.

It was evident from most of the diaries that the teachers would like to get to know their Roma pupils better and to have more knowledge about the Roma culture in general. The teachers expressed their willingness to learn about other cultures, but the question arises as to the extent to which this attitude was based on an essentialist understanding of culture. This approach to culture (as something given, inborn, unchanging), a failure to understand the reasons for the appearance of differences between ethnic/cultural groups (as “inherent” deficits of individual cultures) and a limited understanding of (in)justice signify or lead to a concealed racist attitude, which contributes to the reproduction of inequality among different social groups (cf. Kubota 2010, pp. 103, 106). The problem lies in the fact that teachers are often unaware of this. Their behaviour is fundamentally well-meaning, they have the desire to help Roma children to succeed in school and to become integrated into the majority school environment and the wider society. However, they often see Roma children as displaying shortcomings, “cultural” characteristics and “culturally”-based behaviour, which is generally unwanted and unacceptable in the wider society. This attitude fosters a belief among teachers that Roma children ought to be helped to adjust or become “civilised” as soon as possible. There is no reflection on their own cultural and ideological conditioning, the domination of the majority culture, the reasons for cultural differences, the power relations among different social groups, discrimination, etc. We could talk about *dysconscious racism*, as defined by King (1991). This is a form of racism that quietly accepts the norms and privileges of the majority culture, without any critical reflection on the injustice arising from the social and economic hegemony and the privileges of the majority society. Some diaries even displayed a (sometimes implicit) thinking in the direction that the Roma are privileged because they do not have to work or fulfil any duties; they only have (know, demand) rights and, on account of the social support system, live better than ever before: “*With social*

*support, without any effort, they are given the means to live better now than they have ever done before”* (diary entry for T7).

The teachers often mentioned that Roma children have no motivation or interest in learning and working and that their parents do not support their school work.

*“Their thinking goes like this: I’ll learn because I will be tested, and as soon as I get a grade, I no longer need the knowledge. They mostly revise at the last minute and are not used to doing regular school work. This way of thinking was imparted onto them by their parents, most of whom send their children to school only because of the legal obligation and the fine they pay if the children do not attend school.”* (Diary entry for T13)

Roma children were often described as pupils lacking certain dispositions, skills, abilities and previous knowledge.

*“When planning and carrying out additional study help sessions and lessons, one must take into account the following characteristics of Roma pupils: short attention and concentration span; they tire quickly; not trusting their own abilities; rejection of tasks that they find difficult; constantly asking for help and confirmation that they are doing the right thing; badly developed motor skills; low general knowledge and little experience; low tolerance; bad tempered.”* (Diary entry for T14).

This type of entry appeared even in the diaries of those teachers who otherwise expressed a certain degree of openness and readiness for learning about and taking into account cultural differences and adapting to these differences in the learning process. Such a way of thinking involves perceiving Roma children as “deficient”, which contravenes the principle of multiculturalism. In addition, as highlighted by Kubota (2010, p. 103), this way of thinking can indicate concealed racism. Constant reflection by teachers on their own way of thinking and acting is therefore necessary so that they can change this state of affairs and increase their intercultural competence, which is necessary for intercultural education.

## **Conclusion**

The analysis of 21 diaries of teachers who teach Roma children showed that most teachers try to encourage Roma children in their education and in achieving the best possible learning outcomes and that they are willing to help them in various ways. However, their starting positions (in the sense of their attitude to the Roma and the view of their position in society) often differ, and consequently, their actions lead to different results. Their familiarity with and understanding of intercultural differences are often deficient. Above all, they frequently do not transcend an ethno-centric attitude and worldview and usually do not appear as actively striving to surmount existing social relations of inequality between the majority population and minority groups. However, there are exceptions from which we can, at least on the basis of their diary entries, conclude that some teachers have a more highly developed intercultural competence. It is probably also the case that a teacher’s intercultural competence is mostly the result of

the individual's education, training, openness and efforts rather than of specific systemic incentives and support. If there is to be progress in surmounting intercultural inequalities and in providing equal opportunities, fairness and the equal participation of various social groups in culturally diverse schools (and the wider society), it is paramount that the development of intercultural competence and the realisation of the intercultural principle are not left up to or placed squarely on the shoulders of individual teachers. Teachers, irrespective of how highly developed their intercultural competence, cannot independently achieve the goals advocated by intercultural education. For the implementation of intercultural education, the school must be treated as a social system that consists of a range of components and variables (e.g. the attitudes and standpoints of the staff complement, the curriculum, school policies and culture, the hidden curriculum, teaching styles, placement in and connections with the local community, methods of knowledge evaluation, learning materials, learning styles and strategies, etc.), whereby new content must be added to every component (Banks 2010, pp. 22–25). As noted by Crozier et al. (2009, p. 547), teachers need the full support of headmasters in order to be able to implement effective intercultural education and to achieve long-term changes at the school level; moreover, outside school, they need the support of governmental policies together with government requirements for schools and faculties that educate future teachers who will treat this as a matter of priority.

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