**Intercultural education and mother tongues of immigrant children: The case of Slovenia**

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**Abstract**

PURPOSE. Intercultural education has become an important topic and one of the priorities for schools and education systems worldwide. Teachers should acquire knowledge about inclusion and intercultural education during their university education, but despite evidence that principals, teachers and schools feel ill-equipped to teach and engage in intercultural education, it in many countries, including Slovenia, this is not the case. For this reason, in this paper, we present an intercultural model of education that offers teachers concrete support in the inclusion of migrant children.

APPROACH. In addition to the comprehensive model of intercultural education, the article also presents some changes in legislation based on an analysis of educational regulations on inclusion and the development of intercultural education in Slovenia in recent years, which have a direct impact on the inclusion of immigrant pupils and students. The article also points out that teaching of mother tongues and cultures lessons for immigrant children is a very important part of intercultural education. Mother tongue and culture lessons in schools can be an opportunity to develop intercultural dialogue, and intercultural competence of all students, teachers and parents. Figures in Slovenia show that the number of schools offering mother tongues and cultures for children with a migrant background is slowly growing, but there are fewer languages to choose from.

FINDINGS. Teachers do not feel competent in the area of inclusion of migrant students, intercultural education and teaching in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms. This article therefore presents an intercultural model of education that offers teachers concrete support and actively involves all stakeholders in the integration process: teachers, students, parents, migrants and their organizations, and local communities.

KEY MESSAGE. As classrooms are becoming more culturally and linguistically diverse as a result of migration, systemic solutions and a holistic approach are needed to integrate immigrant pupils into the education system. The article focuses on the case of Slovenia, but the proposed holistic model is also transferable to other national contexts.

**Keywords:** intercultural education model, integration, inclusion, migrant children, Slovenia

**Points of interest**

**•** Teachers from Slovenia and across Europe seem to experience personal and professional challenges in working with culturally diverse classes, since they do not acquire knowledge about inclusion and intercultural education during their initial pedagogical education.

• In our opinion, one of prerequisites for an inclusive school is well-trained and qualified teaching staff that has a positive attitude towards the particularities of individuals and has sufficient knowledge to respond constructively to them.

• The proposed intercultural model of education actively involves all stakeholders in the integration process and consists of seven criteria: 1) interculturality as a principle, 2) systemic support for inclusion, 3) intercultural competence, 4) multiperspective curriculum, 5) intercultural dialogue, 6) cooperation with migrant parents, and 7) cooperation with local community.

• The article also points out that an important part of intercultural education is teaching mother tongues and cultures of migrant children.

**Introduction**

Intercultural education is not an unknown topic in Europe. The first appearance of the term dates back to 1983, when European ministers of education at a conference in Berlin, in a resolution for the schooling of migrant children, highlighted the intercultural dimension of education (Portera, 2008). In literature and public discourse, the term intercultural education is often used alongside the term multicultural education, sometimes synonymously. However, some scholars emphasize the difference between the terms, pointing out that “multicultural” can be formulated as a form of awareness of cultural diversity and human rights, while “intercultural” focuses on the interaction and process, the exchange between people of different cultures. It implies a sense of respect and openness to change; and often leads to a transformation of those who are engaged in the process. One of the aims of intercultural education is to promote intercultural dialogue, meaning open and respectful dialogue that takes place between individuals or groups “with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage on the basis of mutual understanding and respect” (Council of Europe 2008, 10). Such backgrounds form cultural identities, not limited to ethnic, religious and linguistic ones, as culture is a broader concept including several layers such as “experience, interest, orientation to the world, values, dispositions, sensibilities, social languages, and discourses” (Cope & Kalantzis 2009, p. 173). As cultural identities are multi-layered, so is cultural diversity, and therefore it becomes a challenge for educators and researchers to address it.

Policy initiatives (for example, Year of intercultural dialogue, 2008; Green paper “Migration and mobility: challenges and opportunities for EU education systems, 2008) also try to find a balance between cultural diversity and social cohesion (Kirova & Prochner, 2015; Eurydice, 2019). Multicultural education (Grant & Sleeter, 2007; Nieto & Bode, 2008; Banks, 2010; Bennett, 2011) and intercultural education (Portera, 2004, 2011; Gorski, 2012; Rey-Von Allmen, 2011) have been contested concepts in educational research and practice. “Not only do interpretations of the concepts and ideologies vary, but the implementation in school settings also differs” (Ragnarsdóttir & Blöndal, 2015, p. 35). Development continues in line with socio-political and educational circumstances in individual countries. Many authors see advantages and weaknesses in both multi- and intercultural education and try to build bridges between the two systems (Palaiologou & Dietz, 2012; Portera & Grant, 2017), but there is also an increasing number of book publications aimed toward the development of intercultural education (Koegeler-Abdi & Parncutt, 2013; Hahl et al., 2015; Vižintin, 2022).

In this article, we explore the concept of intercultural education; present an intercultural model of education aimed at the successful integration of migrant children and the development of intercultural competences among students, teachers and the majority population; and shed light on teaching tongues and cultures of migrant children as an important part of intercultural education.

The paper introduces some findings of Eurydice report (2019), considering intercultural education and mother tongues and cultures for immigrant children in Europe. There are only a few countries where intercultural education is a principle underpinning the whole curriculum. In most countries intercultural education is taught as a cross-curricular theme. Slovenia is one of the countries where it is incorporated in specific subjects, citizenship education in particular, but the experiences have shown that it is not sufficient. Moreover, some of the studies show that teachers from Slovenia and across Europe experience personal and professional challenges in working with culturally diverse classes, also due to the reason that the teacher training institutions (in Slovenia) do not provide development of intercultural competencies and the curriculum does not include topics such as intercultural education, integrating cultural diversity in the curriculum, teaching Slovene as a second language or the integration of migrant children (Milharčič Hladnik & Kožar Rosulnik, 2021). That is why an intercultural model of education, presented in this article, was developed (Vižintin, 2014, 2022).

Despite the perception that Slovenia is failing in the field of intercultural education, there have emerged some positive and important changes in recent years, such as legislation on inclusion and intercultural education, implementation of several national and international projects to strengthen the social, civic and intercultural competences of educators, and publishing many new didactic materials, that will be highlighted in this paper.

The last part of the article deals with the issue of migrant children's mother tongues and cultures as an important part of intercultural education. The article is based on the assumption that it is counterproductive not to allow migrant and minority children to speak their mother tongue and to simply replace it with the language of the instruction. Rather, it is necessary to develop and learn both languages: the language of the instruction and the mother tongue (and also other languages). Furthermore, many linguists researching the influence and importance of migrants’ retention of their mother tongue after migrating to another country believe that the mother tongue plays a key role in the development and preservation of the original culture and identity, as well as being an important basis for learning foreign languages.

**Understanding intercultural education**

The contemporary societies are mobile societies characterized by change and diversity. Therefore, the issue of cohabitation together is increasingly approached in the modern society. We belong to different cultures, ethnic groups, various linguistic cultures and religious backgrounds. Given this diversity, coexistence is a must. We believe intercultural education is one of the basic tools we have nowadays to help us take advantage of the opportunities offered by multicultural societies.

Given the ambiguity of the use of the concept of multi- and intercultural education, we would like to emphasize that we agree with Rey-Von Allmen (2011), and Portera (2011) that the prefix “inter” brings added value by emphasizing cooperation between and among different groups, which is why we decided to use the term intercultural education (rather than multicultural). Accepting the fact that our culture is diverse lays the foundations for the further development of the intercultural competence of all communities, intercultural dialogue between them, an intercultural society, and finally an educational process that develops intercultural competence and education. Rey-Von Allmen (2011, p. 35) emphasizes that, each life, each relationship is dynamic, each culture is diverse, adjusting to changes, and being transformed. She sees “intercultural as a dynamic process to invite these people and groups, not to live side by side in juxtaposition (as in ghettos), but to cooperate, to live together equitably and harmoniously.”

The Eurydice report (2019, pp. 144–145) shows that intercultural education is part of the national curriculum in all education systems except Portugal, where it is promoted through a number of initiatives and projects across the country. However, from 2018/19, it has become part of the national curriculum. In Italy and Sweden, it is a principle that underpins the entire curriculum. In Germany (Brandenburg), Spain (Comunidad Autónoma de Cataluña), Austria and Finland, intercultural education is taught as a cross-curricular theme, and mention is made of the specific subjects that should address it. In France, Slovenia and the United Kingdom (England), intercultural education is taught through specific subjects, citizenship education in particular. The teacher competence framework for initial teacher education includes competences related to intercultural education in all education systems, with the exception of Finland (which does not have a competence framework) and Sweden. The competences mentioned are usually quite broad, but some focus on specific topics such as discrimination issues. In all education systems, except in the United Kingdom (England), continuing professional development courses are organised or supported by top-level authorities and they cover different aspects of intercultural education.

But intercultural education that is only taught through specific subjects is not enough. Intercultural education is much more complex. The emphasis should be on intercultural education as part of the regular curriculum, where interculturality is a principle and not a special pedagogic discipline (Ermenc Skubic, 2010; Portera, 2011). Intercultural education is a pedagogical framework that recognizes and values cultural diversity and promotes interaction and dialogue between different cultures within educational settings. Its main goal is to create inclusive learning environments in which cultural differences are respected and appreciated while promoting intercultural understanding, cooperation, and social cohesion (Strive, 2023). Future teachers should acquire knowledge about inclusion and intercultural education during their studies. But unfortunately, this is not a case in many countries, including Slovenia, so their intercultural activities depend too much on individuals and their intercultural competence.

***Intercultural model of education***

The intercultural model of education was designed to support and guide teachers in the inclusion of migrant children. The aim was to create a system that better supports and more successfully integrates migrant children and also contributes to the development of intercultural competence in the majority population (Vižintin, 2014, 2022). This model recommends that teachers should be attentive to the implementation of intercultural education and encourages teachers to more actively participate in primary and secondary schools. Teachers should realize that they are responsible for acquiring and passing on new perspectives and knowledge to their pupils, and that their actions play an important role in creating an inclusive (or non-inclusive) society.

This model attempts to offer teachers concrete support in the integration of migrant children. To make the integration of migrant children more successful and effective, it is not enough to focus only on certain aspects (such as learning the language of the receiving country or grading). We need to develop a comprehensive system that actively involves all stakeholders in the integration process: Students and parents (both with and without a migrant background), teachers (including those who have personal experience with integration), migrants and their organizations, local community representatives and national organizations that influence the educational process and advocate for an integrated society. The intercultural model of education is composed of seven criteria: 1) interculturality as a principle, 2) systemic support for inclusion, 3) intercultural competence, 4) multi-perspective curriculum, 5) intercultural dialogue, 6) cooperation with migrant parents, 7) cooperation with local community.

Interculturality as a principle (1) requires that interculturality becomes one of the fundamental standards used to evaluate the quality of the whole school: at all levels, for all subjects, and all other aspects of learning. Systemic support for inclusion (2) uses legislation and examples of good practice developed and implementable within a particular education system. The best approach is to develop a protocol that describes the process of inclusion beginning with the enrolment of migrant children. With such a protocol, teachers would know exactly what activities and forms of support are needed, starting with intensive language classes, what is required of each individual in the system and how long the period of inclusion should last.

Teachers play a crucial role in the implementation of intercultural education. Those who have already developed their intercultural competence (3) are in the best position to develop the same competence in their pupils. Comprehensive training and support for teachers is essential to improve their intercultural competencies and enable them to create an inclusive learning environment. Teachers should be aware of the impact of their own attitudes and expectations towards their pupils. And also that learning the language of the receiving country and the inclusion of migrant students into the new environment is a process that often takes many years. As active citizens, teachers should respond to prejudice and discrimination in their own (school) environment. They also need to critically discuss examples of systemic and sometimeshidden discrimination in teaching materials and in everyday school life.

The development of inclusive and culturally responsive curricula (4) is crucial for intercultural education. Curricula should reflect the diverse backgrounds and experiences of both local and migrant students, and include content that promotes cross-cultural understanding and respect. This may include integrating multicultural literature, historical perspectives, and contributions from various cultures into the curriculum, to foster empathy and appreciation for different ways of life. Teachers should also take a critical look at existing school material if it is Eurocentric or only conveys the perspective of the majority population. They should develop their own teaching material that respects multiculturalism, multilingualism, and multiconfessionalism in the classroom and at school. Teachers should work with migrant children and their parents to develop an intercultural dialog (5) that respects multiculturalism in their school. They should prepare intercultural lessons and events with migrant pupils and their parents that are aimed at the whole school population. Moreover, teachers should support lessons in the mother tongue and culture of migrant children, and encourage reading in both the mother tongue and the language of instruction.

The last two criteria of the intercultural education model emphasize that teachers cannot do everything on their own. As the school is only one part of a larger social system, it should cooperate with migrant parents (6) and the local community (7). The involvement of parents and the wider community is crucial to the success of intercultural education. Building partnerships and joint initiatives between schools, families, and community organizations can foster mutual understanding, trust, and support. Parent education programs, cultural events, and community outreach initiatives can further promote intercultural dialogue and collaboration between all groups in the community.

These seven criteria of the intercultural model overlap and complement each other. The inclusion of different perspectives enables the development of intercultural education that focuses on the active role of teachers and their ability to work within an intercultural education process (Vižintin, 2014, 2022). This model is teacher-centred and assumes an active role for teachers.

**Figure 1**

*Intercultural model of education (Vižintin, 2022, p. 72)*



Teachers need to know how to overcome prejudice, engage and teach in a truly diverse society so that they can participate as active citizens in their work environment. Since educators have been shown to feel ill-equipped to teach and engage in intercultural education, content about migration as an ongoing process, a diverse society, integration and inclusion must be included in academic programmes. Teachers who are already teaching can acquire a lot of knowledge about intercultural education themselves – but they need to pursue the objectives of the concept of lifelong learning (with the support of the Ministry of Education), with multi-perspective curricula and teaching materials (multi-perspective curriculum), in which concrete learning objectives and teaching content would encourage them to address such topics in the educational process. In this way, teachers will be better equipped with the knowledge and skills to engage. This will make them less anxious, more confident and better prepared for the inclusion of migrant children into the existing school system.

**Improvements in Slovenian integration of immigrant children**

Despite some obstacles to the successful integration of migrant children into the Slovenian education system, which this article reveals, important steps have been taken in the right direction in recent years (Vižintin & Kern, 2022). First of all, we would like to highlight some important changes in legislation (for the implementation of Slovenian language courses, the language of instruction). Secondly, there have been a number of projects to promote the integration of migrant children and intercultural education in the national context. We will present one of the most successful, a five-year national project Only (with) Others Are We / Le z drugimi smo (2016–2021). Thirdly, a considerable amount of new didactic material to support intercultural education has been published recently, which we will briefly present.

***Legislation***

The right of migrant children to inclusion in the Slovenian educational system is established by the Organization and Financing of Education act (2007, 2021) – and more specifically, the Basic School Act (2006, 2016) and the Rules on Knowledge Assessment and Grading and Students’ Progress to a Higher Class Standing in Elementary Schools (2013), which address primary school education. The framing legislation of secondary school level education is covered by the General Upper Secondary School Act (2007, 2019) and the Vocational Education Act (2006, 2019). In addition to other legislation regarding primary school education, the Rules on Knowledge Assessment and Grading and Students’ Progress to a Higher Class Standing in Elementary Schools (2013, Article 15) enable the systematic implementation of the described legislative instructions and allow for a two-year period in which there is an adapted method of assessment and grading of migrant children that relates to the individualized programmes designed for these pupils.

An important change occurred in 2019 with the ratification of the new Regulations on Norms and Standards for the Implementation of the Primary School Programme (2019), which provide a concrete framework for the implementation of Slovenian language courses. The document (Article 43.c) stipulates additional hours of Slovenian language courses for foreign students who enrol in primary school during the first assessment period of the year. The additional hours are set as follows: 120 hours for up to 4 students, 160 hours for between 5 and 8 students, 180 hours for between 9 and 17 students. The employment status and pay of educators who teach these courses is also stipulated in the new legislation.[[2]](#footnote-2) The document was updated in 2021.

There have also been a number of important and positive developments in secondary education legislation. On September 1, 2018, the new Rules on Slovenian Language Courses for Secondary School Pupils (2018) came into effect – before this change, Slovenia was an exception among European countries and did not “support teachers in assessing newly arrived migrant students' skills in the language of instruction” (Eurydice 2019, 143). The new Rules on Slovenian language courses for secondary school pupils (2018, Article 3) defines a condensed and intensive Slovenian language course for the first semester of the school year, while the articles on adapted and gradual assessment of proficiency allow for the development of personalized syllabi. The intensive language course takes place during regular class hours.

The amended Rules on Slovenian language courses for secondary school pupils (2020) include provisions that allow all schools, regardless of the number of enrolled pupils, to implement the language course. For schools with a small number of pupils, the course is structured as follows: 90 hours for up to 3 pupils, 120 hours for 4 to 6 pupils, and 160 hours for 7 to 12 pupils. For classes exceeding this size, each pupil over the age of 12 receives additional 15 hours beyond the initial 160 hours. At the end of the course, students take an exam at A2 level according to the Common European Language Framework. The exam takes place at the school where the examinee is enrolled at the time. Students enrolled after the introduction of the course can take the exam in the following school year. Foreign students are required to attend the course after their enrolment. The school is responsible for issuing a certificate to students who pass the exam. Other articles in the regulations stipulate that schools are also responsible for organizing additional compulsory lessons for students who have not passed the exam.

Progress is visible, there are still many challenges to overcome before we can claim that the Slovenian education system is inclusive and intercultural (Vižintin, 2018; Lund et al., 2019; Zorman & Zudič Antonič, 2019; Ermenc Skubic, Štefanc & Mažgon, 2020; Dežan & Sedmak, 2020; Milharčič Hladnik & Kožar Rosulnik, 2021; Klun, Alali & Gombač, 2022). Legally mandated and financially supported Slovenian language courses have a positive impact on the systemic support that Slovenian schools provide to migrant children, but inclusion is not just about learning the language of a new environment.

At the same time, it will take several years before successful pedagogical practice becomes commonplace. Teachers who undergo further training and develop their intercultural competence, by raising awareness that integration is influenced by each individual in society and by all of us together, remain a crucial element in this process.

***A five-year long national project Only (with) Others Are We / Le z drugimi smo (2016–2021)***

In 2016, two extensive, five-year, nationally funded projects were launched in parallel in Slovenia to strengthen the social, civic and intercultural competencies of educators. The projects entitled Only (with) Others Are We (2016–2021) and the Challenges of Intercultural Cohabitation (2016–2021), were both co-financed by the Ministry of Education, Science, and Sport of the Republic of Slovenia (MESS), and the European Social Fund (ESF) and offered free participation to educators. Both projects have also successfully initiated legislative changes through their activities and close cooperation with the MESS.

The project Only (with) Others Are We (2016–2021) was a national project, carried out by the Slovenian Migration Institute of the ZRC SAZU and the Educational Research Institute, which also involved numerous external collaborators. The five 16-hour seminars were attended by 10,208 teachers, educators, administrators and other experts from pre-school level onwards, who discussed the topic of respecting differences and building cooperative interpersonal and intercultural relations in school and in the wider society (in pre-schools, primary and secondary schools, adult education, etc.). The programme was conducted in all Slovenian regions and for Slovenians living in neighbouring countries, in larger regional centres, national training programmes in Ljubljana, preschools, primary and secondary schools, in adult education centres whose staff asked to participate in the seminars, and in 90 educational institutions that were previously part of the Challenges of Intercultural Cohabitation project (2016–2021).

At the end of the project, an online classroom with lectures, workshops, and recommended readings remained freely accessible. The Only (with) Others Are We project benefited from the mobility of its lecturers and experts who visited pedagogical collectives in preschools and schools. Thus, they also reached teachers who might not have signed up for additional training on their own initiative. The five seminars were held 326 times by project staff at more than 100 Slovenian locations as well as a school in Italy that uses Slovenian as the language of instruction. Despite the coordination of this excellent programme, we emphasize that project-based solutions are not enough. What we need are legislative changes as well as intercultural curricula and teaching materials to be used both at the university level (for the training of future teachers) and at the pre-school, primary, and secondary school level, where educators train future active citizens and participants in an intercultural society.

***Didactic material***

Manuals for the preparation of intercultural educational sessions and the development of intercultural competence for educators and pupils alike have been published as part of various projects (for example, Zudič Antonič & Zorman, 2014). The use of such didactic and scientific material helps teachers to empower themselves and deliver intercultural education events as part of the standard pedagogical process (the curriculum). Scientifically based material written is crucial for the development of intercultural competence (for example, Toplak, 2019; Mlekuž, 2021). Such material is particularly useful for educators and pupils in the upper grades of primary school and for educators and pupils in secondary school.

Several Slovenian publishing houses regularly publish multilingual picture books. Some multilingual books are published by and for minorities, others are aimed at migrant children and other minority groups (for example, Hanuš, 2011a, b[[3]](#footnote-3)). Among the dictionaries for children, the picture book dictionaries and the accompanying workbook (Majcenovič Kline, 2016) are particularly noteworthy.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Multilingual picture books and (children’s) dictionaries recognize Slovenia's multilingualism and highlight the different mother tongues of migrant children. Teachers in preschools and primary schools read them with children and their parents in class or organize intercultural events outside of official school hours. These picture books are an excellent starting point for intercultural school lessons and for the development of intercultural competence of all inhabitants of Slovenia, the development of intercultural dialogue between different communities, and, consequently for the development of intercultural education.

After 2009, there were important developments in the content of the teaching material for the acquisition of Slovene as a second/foreign language, the language of instruction in most Slovenian schools.[[5]](#footnote-5) Before these changes, the teaching material was mainly available for pupils, adults, and the children of Slovenian emigrants who attended remedial classes in Slovenian language and culture abroad. Teachers in Slovenian schools adapted this material, or created their own, in order to teach migrant children. In 2022, there is a wide range of teaching material for different age groups aimed at migrant children enrolled in the Slovenian education system and are learning Slovenian as a second language. Repeated reprints of books such as *Poigrajmo se slovensko / Let’s Play Slovenian* (Vučajnk, Upale and Kelner, 1st ed., 2009, 2011, 2014, 2017, 2021)[[6]](#footnote-6) show how necessary these materials are.

The teaching material published by the Centre for Slovene as a second and foreign language is accessible (and has been for some time) and includes textbooks for different levels (and for adults), as well as instructions in English, German, and Italian. *A, B, C…1,2,3, go* (Pirih Svetina & Ponikvar et al., 1st ed., 2003) is one of the better known of these textbooks. The amount of this type of material is increasing every year, with a particular focus on adult education. Some of these books attempt to make the experience easier for users by providing instructions and explanations in the learners’ mother tongues (for example, Lečič, 2013).[[7]](#footnote-7)

Some research has shown that students who have a strong foundation in their mother tongue are more successful in learning a second language. The mother tongue provides a framework for understanding how language works, including grammar, syntax, and vocabulary. On the other hand, however, there is a conspicuous lack of material based on the assumption that migrant children could learn Slovene most effectively using their own mother tongue. Given the fact that most migrant children in Slovenia come from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Macedonia, and in somewhat smaller numbers from Croatia and Serbia, one would expect material for Slovenian language acquisition written in the Bosnian, Albanian, Macedonian, Croatian, and Serbian languages. In this context, most of the multilingual material published in recent years is aimed at Albanian-speaking migrants, both children and adults (for example, Dralle & Fenner, 2010).

However, the mother tongues of migrant children are often overlooked, whether to support them learn the language of their new environment or to preserve their mother tongue (home language, Eurydice 2019). This applies not only to Slovenia, but many countries. Education in the language of origin (mother tongue lessons) is advocated in official documents in a minority of education systems and the entitlement to so-called home language[[8]](#footnote-8) teaching is always conditional, while learning the language of instruction is promoted in additional classes in almost all countries (Eurydice, 2019, pp. 97–101).

**Mother tongues (home languages) of immigrant children**

Immigrant children learn the language of instruction, something that most people take for granted. But, should they learn only the host country language or should they be encouraged to keep their mother tongue? Who is responsible for the further development of the immigrant children’s mother tongue? The children, the parents, the immigrant organisations, the schools in the receiving country or their country of origin? The answer to these questions largely depends on how governments, society and schools understand the concept of integration.

The Eurydice report (2019) Integrating Students from Migrant Backgrounds into Schools in Europe: National Policies and Measures shows that a monolingual paradigm prevails in most publically funded schools, with education systems teaching through one common language, and promoting this linguistic model. However, there are different reasons that may explain this paradigm. The first is the notion “one nation, one language”. In this context, education systems have been key players in promoting the common language across the country. Secondly, there is a general lack of awareness and information about the role of the mother tongue in second language acquisition and the damage that can be caused to children if their mother tongue is not valued. Thirdly, there is also a lack of information about what teachers can do to develop a multilingual approach. We believe in many benefits of maintaining mother tongue while learning the language of your new environment. Below we will highlight just a few of them.

In 2016, researchers at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in the Netherlands (Weber et al., 2016) recorded images of the brain for the first time while test subjects were learning a new language. They used an artificial language with real structures. The researchers found that it is crucial for the brain whether the grammatical properties of the new language (in this case the word order) are similar to the grammatical properties of the native language. If these are the same, the brain falls back on the familiar grammar when learning the new language. If, on the other hand, the word order of the new language differs from that of the mother tongue, the brain has to build up a new grammatical repertoire. For the first time, the researchers have shown that it is beneficial for the brain to be able to use the mother tongue when learning a new language. Overall, the study shows that people use the same brain regions for the grammatical structures of a new language as for those of their mother tongue.

In addition to the scientific findings on the greater effectiveness of learning a foreign language when using the mother tongue, we would like to point out the necessity of cultivating and learning the mother tongue with regard to the development of intercultural dialogue: “Both languages, the first and the second, play an (equal) role in the lives of migrants: Knowledge of the second language enables migrants to fully integrate in all aspects of society in the new country; knowledge of the first language enables them to maintain their identity and also means the ability to function fully in their native community and homeland” (Knez, 2012, p. 49). Taking into consideration students' linguistic and cultural realities has a positive impact on students' well-being and performance levels in school, particularly in relation to the language of instruction (Cummins, 2006; Garcia, 2009).

Despite the prevailing monolingual paradigm in EU countries, analysis of the Eurydice report (2019) shows that all education systems, with the exception of France, Portugal and the United Kingdom (England) have high-level education policies regarding the provision of home language teaching. The analysis shows that in almost all of these education systems, the main aim is to help migrant students to preserve their home language and culture and to improve their literacy skills. In practice, home language teachers come from abroad and so have received their teacher education in their home country (Spain (Comunidad Autónoma de Cataluña) and Italy). Elsewhere (Germany – Brandenburg, Austria, Slovenia, Sweden and Finland), home language teachers have either come from abroad or have been born and trained in the country in which they teach. In all but one of these five education systems, the supply of home language teachers is organised by the host country's public authorities at local level (Sweden and Finland) or at Land level in Germany (Brandenburg) and Austria. In Slovenia, schools can apply for public funding to provide home language lessons. These lessons are then organised by various stakeholders with the support of the schools. Three countries stand out: Austria, Finland and Sweden. In all three countries, the highest education authorities have developed a curriculum for teaching of home languages; and the public authorities provide home language teachers, some of whom have been educated and trained in the country where they teach. Furthermore, in Sweden, the initial assessment procedure includes the assessment of students' home language. In Finland, home language teaching is fully integrated into a comprehensive education policy that promotes bilingualism and multilingualism for all (Eurydice, 2019, p. 144).

In Slovenia, according to the data of MESS, in the 2013/14 school year, lessons of eight mother tongues and cultures were organized (Albanian, Bosnian, Chinese, German, Dutch, Macedonian, Russian and Serbian) in 11 schools and two other languages (Croatian and Ukrainian) were organized outside the schools. In total, ten mother tongues and cultures of immigrant children were taught in Slovenia in the 2013/14 school year (Straus, 2019).

The Slovenian perspective is based on reciprocity and intergovernmental agreements: The MESS, in cooperation with the National Education Institute of the Republic of Slovenia, finances Slovenian language teachers for Slovenian emigrants and their descendants in countries with signed reciprocity agreements. On the basis of the signed bilateral agreement, Slovenia expects these countries to cover the costs of teaching the mother tongue and culture in Slovenia themselves. Slovenia enables and supports implementation of the mother tongue lessons in primary and secondary schools by reimbursing the schools for the costs of using the premises for the (minimum) 60 lessons per school year, the purchase of teaching aids for the pupils/students and the material costs related to the implementation of the programme (in the 2014/2015 school year, the MESS was willing to spend 45 € per pupil, and the amount of co-financing remains the same in the 2023/24 school year) – while travel expenses and the costs of the teachers who teach the mother tongue lessons were not covered by the MESS. Slovenia has signed reciprocal agreements for the teaching of migrants' mother tongues with Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Germany, Montenegro, Russia, and Serbia. The classes in the mother tongues and cultures of migrants are generally structured as additional school lessons and usually take place in the afternoon after regular classes at the school premises or on the premises of migrant associations (Vižintin, 2019).

In recent years, the number of schools organising mother tongue and culture classes has been steadily increasing. In the 2022/23 school year, lessons were held in almost 50 schools throughout Slovenia, with almost 1,000 pupils attending. Of these, 33 schools taught Serbian, nine Bosnian and individual schools also taught Ukrainian, Romani, French, German, Hungarian, Macedonian and Russian. The invitation to primary and secondary schools to apply for co-financing of lessons of the mother tongues and cultures of immigrant children's countries is sent by the MESS to all Slovenian schools at the beginning of each new school year. However, despite the upward trend in implementation and the fact that Slovenia is one of the few countries[[9]](#footnote-9) in the European context that promote or financially support classes of the mother tongue of newly arrived migrant students (Eurydice, 2023), we estimate that participation and apparently support for the program is still low. Out of a total of more than 600 primary and secondary schools in Slovenia, classes were organised in 50 schools in the last school year (2023/24), which represents less than 10% of all schools.[[10]](#footnote-10) We also see it as an obstacle to implementation that teachers of mother tongues and cultures change over the years (also due to unstable funding), which has a positive effect neither on the continuity of teaching nor on the growing interest.

In order to understand the importance of preserving mother tongues and cultures, we would like to emphasize the emigrant-immigrant perspective. Slovenia is not only a country of immigration, but also a country of emigration (Lukšič Hacin, 2018; Vah Jevšnik & Milharčič Hladnik, 2022). Slovenia is very inclined about teaching the mother tongue and culture to Slovenian emigrant children. In Europe, there is a broad network of support, which is organized and financed by MESS in cooperation with the National Education Institute of the Republic of Slovenia. In the 2021/2022 school year, remedial Slovene lessons were held in 20 countries: Austria, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Croatia, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Germany, the Netherlands, Russia, Serbia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. Around 2000 participants, including more than 1000 children, attended the classes. A total of 37 teachers, financed by the Ministry, taught Slovenian (Slovenians abroad, 2022). The attendance of remedial Slovene lessons is voluntary and free of charge; classes usually take place once a week in the afternoon.

Slovenians abroad and newcomers to Slovenia are all migrants. But our attitude and public discourse towards their mother tongue is not the same. We Slovenes are so proud when the children and grandchildren of Slovenian emigrants still speak Slovenian when they visit their Slovenian relatives. But sometimes the general impression is that we have problems when immigrants in Slovenia speak their mother tongue among themselves and when they want to preserve their language.

If schools take intercultural dialogue (as a very important part of intercultural education) seriously, then they should support classes of the mother tongues and cultures of migrant (and minority) children in a variety of ways: in terms of space, personnel, implementation, promotion, and organisation. The school should work together with the relevant ministries, municipalities as the founders of schools, and other organizations to build an integrated system to support the implementation of these lessons.

One of the major problems with implementation is staffing for teaching. The school should work with the aforementioned stakeholders to establish a network of teachers, including both those from Slovenia and those from the migrants’ countries of origin and would be willing to teach. If such teachers are not available, the school should contact local migrant organizations to gather information about people in the local community who provide instruction in the needed mother tongues and cultures. Sometimes an individual who is already employed at a school has experience of migration or is a member of the relevant minority community and would be able to give instructions in the required mother tongues and cultures.

Schools should celebrate the multilingualism of their pupils, recognise the richness of their experiences and, as a result, promote inclusive learning environment. To achieve this, schools should promote classes and support migrant children and their parents in their efforts to attend classes in mother tongues and cultures. Mother tongue lessons in schools can be an opportunity to develop intercultural dialogue, to develop the intercultural competence among all pupils, teachers and parents.

**Conclusion**

Intercultural education is part of the national curriculum in most countries. In some countries it is a principle that underpins the entire curriculum, in others intercultural education is taught as a cross-curricular theme. In France, Slovenia and the United Kingdom (England), intercultural education is taught through specific subjects, particularly in citizenship education (Eurydice, 2019). But intercultural education is very complex and the focus should be on intercultural education as part of the regular curriculum, where interculturality is a principle and not a special pedagogic discipline.

The article highlights the most important positive changes that have taken place in the field of integration of migrant children and intercultural education in Slovenia: in legislation (for the implementation of Slovenian language courses, the language of instruction), a five-year national project Only (with) Others Are We / Le z drugimi smo (2016–2021) and a selection of new didactic material.

Teachers should acquire knowledge about inclusion and intercultural education during their university studies, but this is not the case in many countries. Their intercultural activities depend too much on individuals and their intercultural competence. This paper presents an intercultural model of education that aims to develop a comprehensive model for the inclusion of migrant children (Vižintin, 2014, 2022). The intercultural model of education consists of seven criteria: 1) interculturality as a principle, 2) systemic support for inclusion, 3) intercultural competence, 4) multiperspective curriculum, 5) intercultural dialogue, 6) cooperation with migrant parents, 7) cooperation with local community. These seven criteria of the intercultural model overlap with and complement each other. The model is teacher-centred and it anticipates an active role for teachers.

The article also points out that we should consider the teaching of mother tongues and cultures lessons for immigrant children as a very important part of intercultural education. The figures in Slovenia show that the number of schools organizing lessons has increased significantly in recent years, but many challenges still remain. What we need is the support of both countries of origin and receiving countries through stable funding, support in schools and among the majority population, cooperation schools with municipalities as school founders, immigrant associations, and other organizations, and raising awareness among parents of the importance of preserving their mother tongue. We should remember that every language is important and that our multilingualism starts with our mother tongue, even if we migrate.

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1. Corresponding author: klara.kozar-rosulnik@zrc-sazu.si [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Teaching 9 to 17 students consists of a quarter share of full employment status, 18 to 26 students a half share of full employment status, 27 to 35 students a three-quarter share of full employment status, and 36 to 44 students satisfies full employment status. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The third book *Carnival Costumes* in a book collection *O Jakobu in muci Mici* [*About Jakob and the Cat Mica*] was published in Slovenian, Albanian, Croatian, Macedonian, Romani languages (Hanuš 2011a), and in Slovenian, Italian, Hungarian, German, English (Hanuš, 2011b). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. They were published in the following languages: Slovenian-Albanian, English, Arabic, French, Croatian, Italian, Chinese, Hungarian, Macedonian, German, Russian, Spanish, Ukrainian, Serbian (Majcenovič Kline, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In addition to schools with Slovenian as the language of instruction, there are schools in Slovenia that have Italian as the language of instruction and Slovenian-Hungarian bilingual schools, the former intended for members of the Italian minority in municipalities near the Italian border, and the latter intended for members of the Hungarian minority in municipalities near the Hungarian border. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Textbook for introductory Slovenian courses for children between seven and ten years old. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Slovenščina od A do Ž: učbenik za začetnike* [Slovenian from A to Ž: Textbook for beginners] were published in Slovenian, English, Italian (2013), English, Serbian, and German. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. A language learned in childhood in the home environment. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In addition to Slovenia, Estonia, Lithuania, Austria, Sweden and Norway enable students with a migrant backgrounds to home-language teaching (Eurydice, 2023). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. These MESS statistics only reflect the proportion of teaching that is organized in schools. In some, rarer cases, mother tongue and culture classes are also organized by cultural associations, which are not included in the statistics. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)