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# Bridging cultures: exploring the links between multicultural competence, intercultural communication anxiety and social empathy\*

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## ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to investigate the correlations between preschool teachers' perceptions of multicultural competence, Intercultural Communication Anxiety, and social empathy (SE) skills. Utilising a quantitative research design within a descriptive-relational screening methodology, the study involved a randomly selected sample of 400 preschool teachers. The findings, analyzed through a structural equation model, revealed that SE skills significantly predict teachers' multicultural competence perceptions via the mediating role of Intercultural Communication Anxiety. Two key elements emerged from the analysis: first, Intercultural Communication Anxiety mediates the relationship between SE and multicultural competence; second, the direction of this mediation is significant. The model suggests that teachers with high SE skills exhibit enhanced knowledge, skills, and awareness of multicultural competence, contingent upon their levels of Intercultural Communication Anxiety.

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## KEYWORDS

Multicultural competence perception; social empathy; intercultural communication anxiety; learning environments

## Introduction

There is a discernible rise in the number of pupils from varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds enrolling in compulsory education in many parts of the world (Tualaulelei 2021). Therefore, the twenty-first-century teacher must be proficient in intercultural communication and adept at navigating and leveraging the differences among students in the classroom. Effective classroom management should account for all external and internal factors that might impact education. Teachers, therefore, need to be cognizant of various direct and indirect variables influencing the educational environment. This awareness does not imply that teachers should assume the roles of psychologists, sociologists, or cultural anthropologists. Instead, teachers should be able to recognise, understand and integrate behavioural patterns and cultural symbols into the learning environment when it comes to intercultural education (Barrett et al. 2013).

These roles require a multifaceted and quite comprehensive set of competencies. These range from personal characteristics, skills, knowledge and abilities. At this point, the concept of empathy goes beyond these competencies and includes dimensions such as communication ability, pedagogical skills and content knowledge (Zlatković and Petrovic 2011). Research shows that when successful teacher profiles are analyzed, some personality traits play an important role in this success. Identifying the relationship between various teacher roles and certain personality traits is critical for teachers' roles, especially in contexts where different teaching methods and techniques

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need to be used, such as in multicultural educational settings. In order to create a positive climate in the learning environment, qualities such as empathy and stability are particularly important in teachers (Stojiljković, Stojanović, and Dosković 2011). This study is novel in that it integrates three constructs – multicultural competence, intercultural communication anxiety, and social empathy – into a unified model, offering a new theoretical lens to understand teacher behaviour in multicultural settings.

## Theoretical framework

When it comes to intercultural communication, anxiety and uncertainty naturally arise and these concepts shape how one adapts to a new multicultural environment. In an attempt to explain this context, William Gudykunst developed the Anxiety/ Uncertainty Management (AUM) Theory, which focuses on how effective intercultural communication and adaptation is achieved (Nishida 2015). Reducing uncertainty and anxiety in the process of intercultural adaptation has a significant impact on the outcomes of the adaptation process (Hammer et al. 1998). This theory has been addressed in a variety of contexts: university health communication (Gyamfi Prince 2021) and organisation-public relations (Ni and Wang 2011). According to the theory, strategies such as information seeking, trust and relaxation work to reduce anxiety and uncertainty (Gyamfi Prince 2021). The theory is discussed from various perspectives such as application in high-context cultures (Sun et al. 2023), intercultural communication anxiety and ethnocentrism (Neuliep 2012). In addition to the AUM Theory, this study is also informed by Deardorff's Process Model of Intercultural Competence (2006) and Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (1993), providing a comprehensive understanding of how attitudes, skills, and empathy interact in intercultural settings.

According to the AUM Theory, which provides an important framework for examining the effectiveness of intercultural communication (Nishida 2015; Yoshitake 2002), the management of uncertainty and anxiety has a critical role in the development of intercultural adaptation and effective communication (Hammer et al. 1998). Within the framework of this theory, studies conducted in a wide variety of contexts such as exchange students' experiences (Zurita et al., 2016), university educational environments (Rajan and Subramaniam 2021) and classroom teaching (Zhang 2009) have concluded that uncertainty, ethnocentrism and anxiety negatively affect intercultural communication, whereas emotion seeking, awareness of emotions and empathy support desirable behaviours in intercultural communication (Neuliep 2012; Nadeem et al. 2023).

## Social empathy

Social empathy, which applies the phenomenon of empathy to social systems to understand better the experiences of different people, communities, and cultures (Segal 2011), aims to understand larger social groups and the conditions that shape their lives (Segal et al. 2017). In part developed based on the social work model of empathy (Gerdes and Segal 2009) and the social empathy paradigm addressing poverty (Segal 2007a, 2007b), social empathy is 'the ability to understand people from other groups by perceiving or experiencing their life situations and, as a result, to gain insights into differences, particularly inequalities in social conditions and social structures that may contribute to inequalities' (Segal et al. 2017, p. 48). Consisting of individual empathy, contextual understanding, and social responsibility, the model addresses inequalities and other social justice issues for more effective social policies and social work practices (Segal 2011). Social empathy consists of three main components: (1) fully experiencing empathy; (2) gaining deep insight and knowledge about historical and socioeconomic contexts, especially inequality and inequity; and (3) embracing the importance of social responsibility. The experiences, knowledge and beliefs acquired in the context of these components come together and lead people to act in ways that promote social justice (Segal 2011). Just as interpersonal empathy has multiple facets, social empathy has two

facets. The first is macro-self-other awareness/perspective taking (macro perspective taking). Macro perspective taking is defined as the ability to imagine what it might be like to be a member of a different social group, taking into account the political, economic and social context. The other aspect is contextual understanding of systemic barriers (contextual understanding), which represents an understanding of the historical, political, social and economic barriers that groups different from themselves face in society (Segal et al. 2017). Social empathy contributes to creating communities and social policies governed by empathy; a better understanding of social and economic inequalities can lead to actions that affect positive change, social and economic justice and overall well-being (Segal 2006, 2007a, 2007b).

### **Teacher self-efficacy**

Another critical factor in educational success is teacher self-efficacy (Shindler 2016). Bandura (1977) defined self-efficacy as an individual's belief in their ability to perform specific tasks. This self-confidence is a powerful determinant of task performance (Albeson 1979), as disciplinary knowledge alone is insufficient for effective implementation (Bandura 1977). Teachers' self-efficacy affects their desire to engage students, implement effective instructional practices, and work in challenging environments (Tschannen-Moran and Hoy 2001). High teacher self-efficacy is associated with positive learning outcomes for both teachers and students, predicting teachers' understanding of their students and their ability to respond to students' needs (Caprara et al. 2006; Hoy and Spero 2005).

High teacher self-efficacy is associated with positive learning outcomes for both teachers and students. Teacher self-efficacy predicts teachers' ability to understand their students. (Caprara et al. 2006) and directly associated with the teacher's ability to actively respond to children's needs (Hoy and Spero 2005). High teacher self-efficacy was associated with the development of meaningful interactions and learning opportunities in the classroom (Reyes et al. 2012; Rimm-Kaufman and Chui 2007). Identification and analysis of teacher self-efficacy in culturally sensitive instruction and incorporation of the essential components of culturally sensitive instruction in classroom activities are critical since they could help illuminate the factors that affect teacher skills and motivation. A deep understanding of these factors would lead to better understanding of teacher requirements to provide meaningful and practical learning experiences to an increasingly diverse child population; and thus, eliminate the obstacles created by personal traits of the teacher to the achievement of the educational goals by all children (Cruz-Aguayo and Schady 2020). Therefore, the extent of teacher self-efficacy perceptions about the implementation of these strategies should be determined (Fitchett, Starker, and Salyers 2012).

### **Communication anxiety**

Communication anxiety is another significant aspect of teacher personality traits in multicultural teaching environments. Anxiety affects interpersonal and verbal communication skills, with cultural beliefs and practices influencing the development and expression of anxiety (Kirmayer, Young, and Hayton 1995; Scott, Eng, and Heimberg 2002). High Intercultural Communication Anxiety can hinder effective communication, especially in intercultural settings, making it essential to investigate this barrier (Trisasanti et al. 2020). As classrooms become increasingly multicultural due to global mobility, teachers must ensure equitable instruction for all students. Investigating intercultural communication issues and the factors affecting them is crucial for eliminating communication barriers and maximising learning benefits (Monthienvichienchai et al. 2002). Thus, the investigation of intercultural communication issues, an obstacle to the intercultural communication of the teachers and determination of the factors that affect these issues and correlations between these factors in the learning environment are valuable to eliminate intercultural

communication problems in the learning environment and maximise the benefits of the learning experience for the children in the long term.

Certain studies were conducted on effective instruction based on intercultural Intercultural Communication Anxiety among undergraduate students' (Abayadeera, Mihret, and Hewa Dulige 2018), their competences (Lin 2012), prejudices (Spencer-Rodgers and McGovern 2002), social communication tendencies, and emotional intelligence (Fall et al. 2013; Neuliep and Ryan 1998). In a study, Intercultural Communication Anxiety, intercultural Intercultural Communication Anxiety, and intercultural communication willingness of the lecturers and the correlations between these variables were investigated (Roach and Olaniran 2001). Certain studies conducted in Turkey measured the factors that affected intercultural Intercultural Communication Anxiety and socio-cultural adaptation (Ata 2019), and intercultural Intercultural Communication Anxiety and satisfaction levels of undergraduate students (Seyitoglu, Guven, and Kocabulut 2015).

Studies investigated the correlations between SE and various variables. These studies focused on self-efficacy perceptions about SE (Nakagawa et al. 2015), social justice (Hellman et al. 2018), and SE attitudes (Segal et al. 2011). An experimental study conducted with a different methodology (Frank et al. 2020) aimed to determine whether SE develops before or after different cultural experiences. Most of these studies were conducted with undergraduate students in various colleges. Certain other studies were conducted in primary education. It was observed that these studies focused on the correlations between SE behaviour of the children and other variables (Armstrong 2011), the differences between emotional indicators (Laugen et al. 2024a), and the impact of digital storytelling on SE scores (Bratitsis and Ziannas 2015). However, many of these studies lack a critical comparative analysis and often fail to integrate these constructs within a unified theoretical framework. This study addresses that gap by employing a more integrative and analytical approach.

Studies on multicultural competence perceptions of teachers, culturally sensitive classroom practices (Siwatu 2011), the impact of the socio-cultural class factors on intercultural classroom practices of the teachers (Romijn et al. 2020), intercultural skill levels (Fanous et al. 2020), negative stereotypes (Chwastek et al. 2021) and multicultural beliefs addressed the correlation between teacher self-efficacy and motivation. Literature review revealed studies that aimed to determine multicultural competence perceptions of teachers (primary school, secondary school, high school) based on various variables (Başbay, Kağnıcı, and Başbay 2018; Bulut and Başbay 2014; Cifci et al. 2021; Dolapçı and Kavgacı 2020a, 2020b; Karadeniz 2021). Furthermore, studies were conducted with pre-service teachers to determine multicultural efficacy perceptions (Demir and Basarir 2013; Polat and Ogay Barka 2014). Similar to the present study, two studies were conducted with pre-school teachers. One of these investigated multicultural efficacy perceptions of preschool teachers based on four dimensions: awareness, knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Acar-Ciftci 2016). The other study discussed multicultural efficacy perception levels of the teachers based on several variables (Çapçı and Durmuşoğlu 2022).

## **The relationship between intercultural communication anxiety and empathy**

Research shows a complex relationship between empathy and communication anxiety. Empathy and anxiety show a small positive correlation overall, with a stronger relationship between subtypes of empathy (Nair, Kirmani, and Spence 2023). Anxiety can reduce empathic responses, but perspective-taking strategies can mitigate this effect (Negd, Mallan, and Lipp 2011). Highly empathic individuals may experience more vicarious anxiety when observing others in distress (Shu, Hassell, and Weber 2017). Anxiety is inversely related to perceived competence, partly mediated by achievement goal orientations (Putwain and Symes 2012). Mindfulness practices can increase empathy and reduce anxiety (Fulton 2012). Neuroimaging studies reveal overlapping neural correlates for empathy and anxiety, particularly in regions associated with emotional processing and self-reflection (Knight, Depue, and Orr 2019).

Intercultural communication apprehension (ICA) is associated with decreased satisfaction and effectiveness in intercultural interactions (Roach and Olaniran 2001; Neuliep 2012). Higher levels of empathy and mindfulness are linked to improved intercultural communication effectiveness (Cetişli et al. 2016; Nadeem et al. 2023). Ethnocentrism is positively correlated with ICA and negative attitudes towards out-groups (Kuru Alici and Kaya 2022; Neuliep 2012). Anxiety and uncertainty management theory suggests that reducing uncertainty and anxiety is crucial for successful intercultural communication (Laugen et al. 2024b).

## **The relationship between intercultural communication anxiety and multicultural competence**

Research on the relationship between intercultural communication competence (ICC), which has a multidimensional structure and includes factors such as communication effectiveness, adaptation and cultural knowledge, and anxiety, reveals an intertwined relationship between these concepts (Redmond and Bunyi 1993). According to research, the desire to communicate intercultural is influenced by ICC and intercultural communication anxiety (ICA) (Roach and Olaniran 2001; Wang and Cionea 2024). In studies conducted with international students, attitudes towards these students and the tendency to interact with them are negative due to intercultural anxiety. On the other hand, knowledge of the host culture, intercultural sensitivity and intercultural attitudes are also predictors of ICC (Ssemuđdu 2024; Wiseman, Hammer, and Nishida 1989). In sum, ICC, anxiety, and cultural adaptation are multifaceted and interrelated, and strategies are needed to improve ICC and reduce anxiety in intercultural contexts.

## **The current research**

All these studies bring us to the following point: perceptions of multicultural competence, intercultural communication anxiety and social empathy skills are intertwined. In this context, teachers possessing these skills will significantly affect human relations in the educational environment. The multicultural competencies (cultural awareness, knowledge and skills) that teachers will develop will support their ability to empathise with students from different backgrounds in the learning environment (such as empathic concern, perspective-taking and emotional resonance). It is important to identify the extent to which teachers possess these competencies to minimise intercultural communication concerns such as understanding emotions, language barriers, non-verbal misunderstandings and differences in cultural norms. Teachers who can overcome these challenges and create inclusive learning environments have high multicultural competence despite all differences.

A critical review of the literature reveals gaps and limitations in studies examining teachers' intercultural communication apprehension, perceptions of multicultural competence, and levels of social empathy. Although there are studies that examine these constructs independently (Segal 2011; Zlatković and Petrović 2011); very few of the studies are aimed at explaining the relationships between these constructs. Research conducted with undergraduate students or pre-service teachers is noteworthy (Hellman et al. 2018; Nakagawa et al. 2015). Although there are studies examining the relationship between teacher self-efficacy and student outcomes (Caprara et al. 2006; Hoy and Spero 2005), contextual and cultural factors are often ignored. Studies on communication apprehension relate it to verbal and non-verbal communication (Kirmayer, Young, and Hayton (1995); Scott, Eng, and Heimberg (2002)), which does not provide sufficient evidence on the relationship between multicultural competence perception and components such as social empathy, especially in learning environments.

In conclusion, social empathy, perception of multicultural competence and intercultural communication apprehension were independently investigated in the literature. However, apart from these studies, no study blends all these components. This study is important to fill this gap in

the literature. In addition, revealing these relationships is important in designing a nurturing, inclusive and effective teaching in learning environments. Teachers' ability to manage intercultural communication concerns correctly will support them in understanding children with different backgrounds better and being more empathetic. The study will also contribute to the development of educational policies. Improvement in teachers' personality traits, attitudes and empathy skills can contribute to more equitable and effective educational practices.

## Method

This study utilised a descriptive-relational model, a quantitative research approach that examines the relationships among variables without manipulating the study environment. This methodology is appropriate for identifying and describing the correlations between multicultural competence perceptions, Intercultural Communication Anxiety, and social empathy skills among preschool teachers.

## Participants

The study sample consisted of 400 preschool teachers selected through a random sampling method. Participants were drawn from various schools to ensure a diverse representation. The demographic characteristics of the participants, including age, gender, teaching experience, and educational background, were recorded to provide a comprehensive understanding of the sample (Table 1). Participants worked in both monolingual and multilingual classrooms across urban and rural settings. Nearly 65% of the teachers reported having at least one child from a different cultural or linguistic background in their classroom, reflecting the multilingual educational context of the study.

**Table 1.** Participant demographics.

		<i>N</i>	%
Gender	Female	356	89.00
	Male	44	11.00
Age	under 35	264	66.00
	over 35	136	34.00
Place of birth/raised in	Rural	65	16.25
	District	145	36.25
	Urban	112	28.00
	Metropolitan Centre	78	19.50
Cultural diversity of the place of birth /grooming	Monoculture-homogeneous	182	45.50
	Multicultural-heterogeneous	218	54.50
Education	Secondary	3	0.75
	Associate Degree	4	1.00
	Undergraduate	364	91.00
	Graduate	29	7.25
Professional experience	0–5 years	131	32.75
	6–10 years	107	26.75
	11–15 years	103	25.75
	16–20 years	40	10.00
	21–25 years	12	3.00
	over 25 years	7	1.75
Education on multiculturalism	No	365	91.25
	Yes	35	8.75
Presence of a child from a different culture in the classroom	No	142	35.50
	Yes	258	64.50
Cultural diversity of the city of primary education	Monoculture-homogeneous	252	63.00
	Multicultural-heterogeneous	148	37.00
Cultural diversity of the city of secondary education	Monoculture-homogeneous	227	56.75
	Multicultural-heterogeneous	173	43.25
Cultural diversity of the city of tertiary education	Monoculture-homogeneous	77	19.25
	Multicultural-heterogeneous	323	80.75

## Data collection tools

### *Perceptions of multicultural competence scale (PMCS)*

The PMCS, developed by Başbay and Kağnıcı (2011), was used to measure teachers' multicultural competence perceptions. The scale includes 41 items across three sub-dimensions: skills (16 items), awareness (16 items), and knowledge (9 items). The scale's reliability and validity have been established, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.95 for the entire scale.

### *Social empathy scale (SES)*

The SES, developed by Segal et al. (2013) and adapted to Turkish by Bekil (2019), was employed to assess social empathy skills. The scale comprises 15 items divided into four sub-dimensions: macro perspective, cognitive empathy, awareness about self-others, and emotional response. The internal consistency coefficient for the scale was 0.83 in this study.

### *Intercultural communication apprehension scale (PRICA)*

The PRICA, adapted by Neuliep and McCroskey (1997) from the PRCA (1985), measures Intercultural Communication Anxiety in intercultural contexts. The scale consists of 16 items, with 8 positive and 8 negatively coded items. The reliability of the scale has been confirmed, making it suitable for the current study.

**Data collection procedure.** Approval for this study was obtained from Hacettepe University Ethics Commission with the number E-35853172-300-00001682730 and dated July 30, 2021. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, including the voluntary nature of participation and the confidentiality of their responses. Data were collected using online surveys due to the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuring safety and accessibility for all participants.

**Data analysis.** The Structural Equation Model (SEM) was employed to test the hypothesis and explore the mediating effect of Intercultural Communication Anxiety on the relationship between social empathy and multicultural competence perceptions. *Sem* allows for the simultaneous testing of multiple hypothesised *relationships*, providing a comprehensive understanding of the data. The analysis was conducted using LISREL 8.54 (Jöreskog and Sörbom 1996), and several fit indices were examined, including the Chi-square statistic, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI).

## Findings

The analysis focused on the direct and indirect effects of social empathy on multicultural competence perceptions, mediated by Intercultural Communication Anxiety. The standardised path coefficients, significance levels, and mediation effects were reported to provide a detailed understanding of the relationships among the study variables. The mediation effect of the Multicultural Efficacy Perception Scale score was investigated separately for the awareness (model 1), skills (model 2), and knowledge (model 3) dimensions. The analysis findings are presented in Table 2 and the models are presented in Figure 1.

As seen in Table 2, there was no mediator variable; the standardised path coefficient from SE to awareness was 0.38, the standardised path coefficient from SE to skill was 0.36, the standardised path coefficient from SE to knowledge was 0.34, and these effects were statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). Since path coefficients were positive, multicultural competence perception increased with the increase in SE. Model 1 demonstrated that the path coefficient from SE to Intercultural Communication Anxiety ( $\beta = 0.37$ ) and the path coefficient from Intercultural Communication Anxiety to awareness ( $\beta = 0.27$ ) were statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). When Intercultural Communication Anxiety was included in the model, the path coefficient from SE to awareness was

**Table 2.** Investigation of the mediation effect of intercultural communication anxiety on the correlation between social empathy and multicultural competence perception.

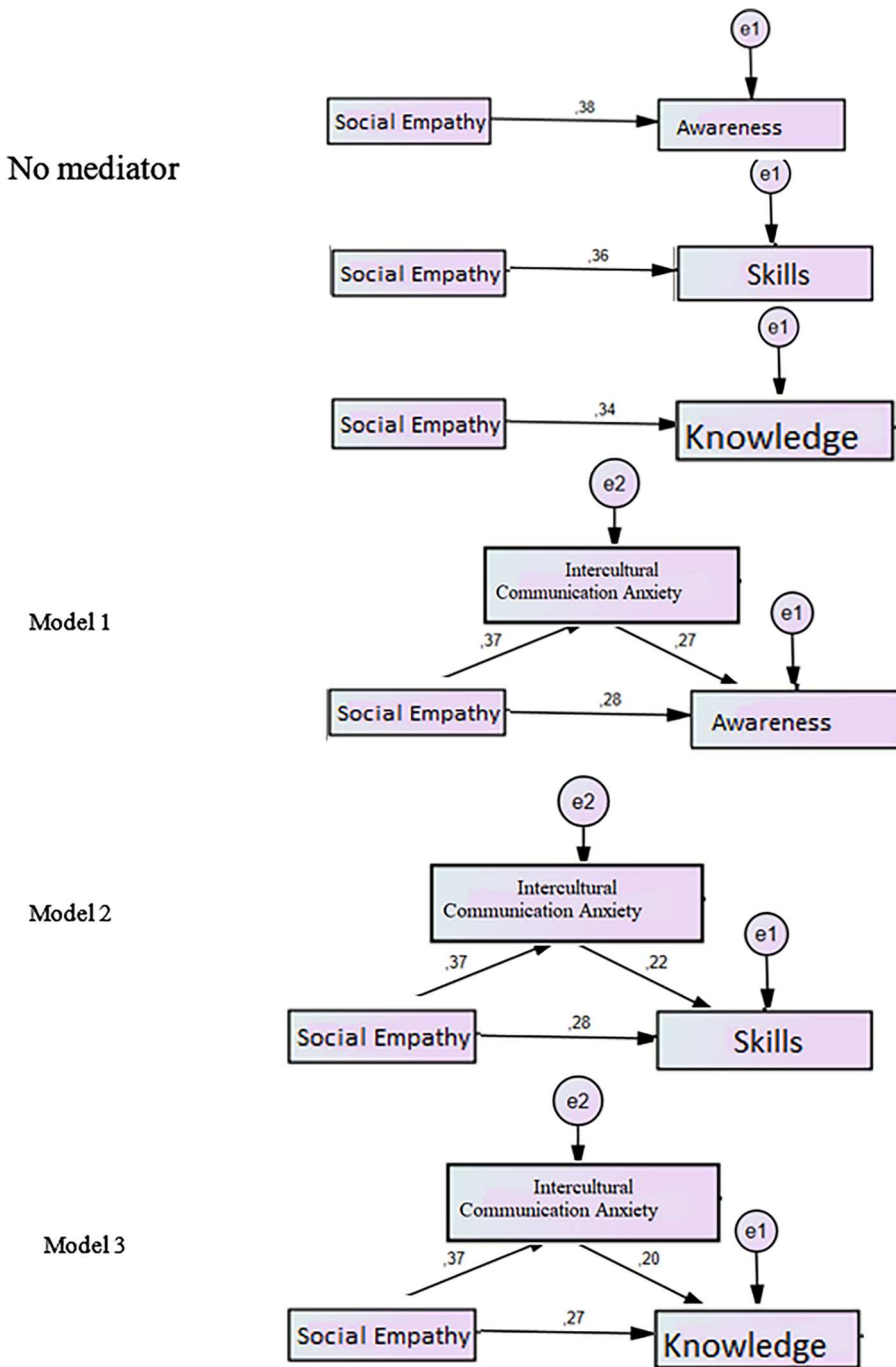
	Path	Path coefficient (B)	Std. Path coefficient ( $\beta$ )	<i>p</i>
<b>No intermediary variables</b>	SE > Awareness	0.40	0.38	<0.05
	SE > Skill	0.45	0.36	<0.05
	SE > Knowledge	0.28	0.34	<0.05
<b>Model 1</b>	SE > Communication anxiety ( <i>Direct effect</i> )	0.38	0.37	<0.05
	Communication anxiety-> Awareness ( <i>Direct effect</i> )	0.27	0.27	<0.05
	SE > Awareness ( <i>Direct effect</i> )	0.30	0.28	<0.05
	SE > Communication anxiety → Awareness ( <i>Indirect effect</i> )	0.10	0.10	
<b>Model 2</b>	SE > Communication anxiety ( <i>Direct effect</i> )	0.38	0.37	<0.05
	Communication anxiety→ Skill ( <i>Direct effect</i> )	0.27	0.22	<0.05
	SE > Skill ( <i>Direct effect</i> )	0.35	0.28	<0.05
	SE > Communication anxiety → Skill ( <i>Indirect effect</i> )	0.10	0.08	
<b>Model 3</b>	SE > Communication anxiety ( <i>Direct effect</i> )	0.38	0.37	<0.05
	Communication concern-> Information ( <i>Direct effect</i> )	0.16	0.20	<0.05
	SE > Knowledge ( <i>Direct effect</i> )	0.22	0.27	<0.05
	SE > Communication anxiety → Knowledge ( <i>Indirect effect</i> )	0.06	0.07	

statistically significant and calculated as 0.28 ( $p < 0.05$ ). The indirect effect of SE on awareness via Intercultural Communication Anxiety was 0.10. When Intercultural Communication Anxiety was included in the model the path coefficient from SE to awareness was still statistically significant but decreased. Thus, it could be suggested that Intercultural Communication Anxiety partially mediated the effect of SE on awareness. Model 2 demonstrated that the path coefficient from SE to Intercultural Communication Anxiety ( $\beta = 0.37$ ) and the path coefficient from Intercultural Communication Anxiety to skills ( $\beta = 0.22$ ) were statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). When Intercultural Communication Anxiety was included in the model, the path coefficient from SE to skill was 0.28 and statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). The indirect effect of SE on skills via Intercultural Communication Anxiety was 0.08. The inclusion of Intercultural Communication Anxiety in the model decreased the path coefficient from SE to skills, but it was statistically significant.

Thus, it was clear that Intercultural Communication Anxiety partially mediated the effect of SE on skills. Model 3 demonstrated that the path coefficient from SE to Intercultural Communication Anxiety ( $\beta = 0.37$ ) and the path coefficient from Intercultural Communication Anxiety to information ( $\beta = 0.20$ ) were statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). When Intercultural Communication Anxiety was included in the model, the path coefficient from SE to knowledge was 0.27 and statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). The indirect effect of SE on information via Intercultural Communication Anxiety was 0.07. The inclusion of Intercultural Communication Anxiety in the model decreased the path coefficient from SE to awareness, but it was still statistically significant. Thus, it could be suggested that Intercultural Communication Anxiety partially mediated the effect of SE on knowledge. SE significantly predicted multicultural competence perception via Intercultural Communication Anxiety.

## Discussion

The present study sought to elucidate the correlations between preschool teachers' multicultural competence perceptions, Intercultural Communication Anxiety, and social empathy (SE) skills. Employing a quantitative descriptive-relational screening method, the study utilised structural equation modelling (SEM) to reveal significant findings. The SEM results indicated that SE significantly predicts multicultural competence perception, mediated by Intercultural Communication



**Figure 1.** The model for the mediation effect of intercultural communication anxiety on the correlation between SE and multicultural competence perception.

Anxiety. The model fit statistics underscored the significance of Intercultural Communication Anxiety, SE, and multicultural competence perceptions among preschool teachers. Notably, two key elements emerged from the model: the mediating role of Intercultural Communication Anxiety and the directional influence of this mediation. Specifically, teachers with high SE skills demonstrated enhanced knowledge, skills, and awareness of multicultural competence, contingent upon

their levels of Intercultural Communication Anxiety. Hence, while high SE skills are crucial for multicultural competence, a certain level of Intercultural Communication Anxiety also plays a pivotal role.

The multicultural efficacy perceptions of teachers were found to be intertwined with various factors such as institutional support, sense of social justice, multicultural sensitivity, awareness of multicultural education, multicultural knowledge, professional competence, stress, stereotypes, self-efficacy, beliefs about multiculturalism, linguistic differences, and professional satisfaction (Chwastek et al. 2021; Gorski and Parekh 2020; Hachfeld et al. 2015; Huh, Choi, and Jun 2015; Kang 2015; McCarthy, Lambert, and Ullrich 2012; Segura-Robles and Parra-González 2019; Toms, Reddig, and Jones-Fosu 2019; Vygovskaya-Kazarina et al. 2018). Additionally, literature has associated SE skills with several educational variables, including self-efficacy, loneliness, poverty, social justice, interactive digital storytelling, vulnerability, and race. Intercultural Communication Anxiety, on the other hand, has been linked to ethnocentrism, emotional intelligence, collaborative attitudes, meta-stereotypes, effective instruction, linguistic barriers, prosocial capacity, intercultural conflict, willingness to communicate, and perceived communication skills (Abayadeera, Mihret, and Hewa Dulige 2018; Batkhina 2020; Croucher 2013; Fall et al. 2013; Jacobi 2020; Kam, Guntzwiller, and Pines 2017; Lin and Rancer 2003; Matera and Catania 2021).

These findings align with the existing literature, demonstrating significant correlations between SE skills, Intercultural Communication Anxiety, and multicultural competence perception. The study revealed that Intercultural Communication Anxiety significantly and positively predicts the relationship between SE and multicultural competence. While no prior studies have examined this specific triadic relationship, the independent studies on these variables suggest that teachers' SE skills influence their multicultural competence perceptions via Intercultural Communication Anxiety (Çelik and Çağdaş 2010; Üzar-Özçetin, Çelik, and Özenç-Ira 2022; Yilmaz 2011).

The implications of these findings are profound, suggesting that enhancing teachers' SE skills, coupled with addressing their Intercultural Communication Anxiety, can significantly improve their multicultural competence. They directly support the assumptions of AUM and intercultural competence models, showing how empathy-based teacher training can improve educational equity. Policymakers should integrate such theoretical insights into the design of inclusive curricula and teacher evaluations.

## Conclusion and recommendations

### Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the relationships between preschool teachers' multicultural competence perceptions, Intercultural Communication Anxiety, and social empathy (SE) skills. Through the mediating function of Intercultural Communication Anxiety, the results, which were obtained from a structural equation model (SEM), show that SE significantly predicts views of multicultural competence. This emphasises how teachers' capacities to adapt to and negotiate multicultural classroom contexts are shaped by the intricate interactions between emotional and cognitive elements.

Theoretical theories of intercultural competency, such as Dearsdorff's (2006) Process Model of Intercultural Competence, which emphasises the significance of attitudes, knowledge, and skills in promoting successful cross-cultural engagement, are consistent with these findings. Additionally, the findings align with Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, which highlights how exposure and involvement help people gradually gain intercultural awareness. Our research expands on existing models by highlighting the mediating function of intercultural communication anxiety, indicating that whereas empathy promotes cultural competency, the efficacy of this process is influenced by intercultural communication anxiety.

Comparing our findings with previous research, we observe similarities with Kang (2015) and Huh, Choi, and Jun (2015), who reported that Intercultural Communication Anxiety negatively

impacts cross-cultural interactions. However, our study diverges from prior works by highlighting that a moderate level of anxiety may, in fact, serve as a catalyst for improving multicultural competence, as it fosters greater cognitive awareness and adaptability in diverse classroom settings.

Additionally, the generalizability of these findings should be considered in the context of different educational levels. While this study focuses on preschool teachers, the relationship between SE, Intercultural Communication Anxiety, and multicultural competence may also apply to primary, secondary, and higher education teachers. Future research should explore whether similar patterns emerge in different educational settings and whether variations in institutional support, curriculum demands, and professional expectations influence these relationships.

## **Implications**

The research findings have significant implications for preschool education policy, teacher training programmes, and classroom practices. It is crucial to acknowledge that institutional, social, and economic issues impact the integration of multicultural education in early childhood settings in order to put these consequences into context. Strategies for managing social empathy and intercultural communication anxiety must be customised to particular educational environments due to the variability in teacher education programmes across various national contexts. These findings can inform teacher education programmes not only in Turkey but also in diverse international contexts, where increasing multicultural student populations pose similar pedagogical challenges. Comparative analyses across countries with different multicultural education policies may yield further insights.

Structured interventions that address the development of social empathy and intercultural communication anxiety should be included in teacher training programmes. Reflective journaling, intercultural simulations, and practical interactions with diverse populations are examples of experiential learning strategies that should be incorporated into professional development programmes. In order to help teachers become resilient in the face of multicultural difficulties, schools should also put in place established support systems like peer mentoring and facilitated conversations.

The dynamic character of multicultural competency must be acknowledged by educational policies, which should also require ongoing professional development programmes. Policies should support partnerships between multicultural advocacy groups and early childhood education institutions in order to promote best practices in culturally responsive teaching and facilitate the sharing of knowledge.

Additionally, even though preschool education is the study's primary focus, other educational levels are also affected. Institutions of higher learning, elementary, and secondary education should think about including social empathy instruction and techniques for dealing with intercultural communication anxiety in their curricula. Teachers at all levels can create a more welcoming and encouraging learning environment for diverse student groups by using these results in a variety of educational contexts.

To improve instructors' and students' intercultural sensitivity, classroom practices should prioritise empathy-building techniques including interactive storytelling, cultural immersion exercises, and structured discourse. In order to make sure that their educational approach promotes an inclusive and flexible learning environment, teachers should also be pushed to critically examine their own prejudices and communication styles. Additionally, extending the multicultural education experience outside of the classroom and enhancing students' comprehension of cultural variety can be achieved by interacting with the larger community through inter-school collaborations, parental involvement programmes, and cultural exchange programmes.

Educational stakeholders may improve teachers' capacity to successfully manage multicultural classrooms by putting these evidence-based ideas into practice. As a result, all students benefit from inclusive, egalitarian, and culturally sensitive learning settings.

## Recommendations

Several suggestions are made for future research, policy, and practice in light of the study's findings:

Due to the pandemic nature of COVID-19, online data gathering was chosen; however, in order to improve the depth and dependability of the results, it is still crucial to access additional data sources, such as a qualitative follow-up research or in-person data collecting.

The relationships identified in this study may reduce the potential for self-report bias in future research through longitudinal research designs.

Curriculum developers should integrate multicultural education across all levels, emphasising the importance of empathy, cultural awareness, and effective communication.

Future research should conduct longitudinal studies to track changes in teachers' multicultural competence, SE skills, and Intercultural Communication Anxiety over time, providing deeper insights into the long-term impacts of professional development.

Complementing quantitative findings with qualitative research to explore teachers' personal experiences and challenges in multicultural classrooms, new research can be designed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of their needs and perceptions.

By addressing these recommendations, educational stakeholders can better support teachers in developing the necessary skills and competencies to effectively manage and thrive in increasingly multicultural classroom environments. This, in turn, will contribute to more inclusive and equitable education for all students.

## Limitations

Due to the covid 19 pandemic, the data of this research was collected online. The limitation of this research is that face-to-face surveys could not be conducted, which may have influenced the depth of participant responses and the interpretation of non-verbal cues. Future studies should consider mixed data collection methods to enhance data richness.

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