





Article

Educating for Diversity: Intercultural and Inter-Religious Sensitivity in Early Childhood and Primary School Teachers in Training at the University of Barcelona

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Abstract: This study analyses the development of intercultural and interreligious sensitivity in pre-service teachers on the Early Childhood and Primary Education degrees at the University of Barcelona. Using a mixed approach, the research combines the collection and analysis of quantitative data on a validated self-perception scale and the qualitative perspective of a reflective activity inspired by Deardorff's storytelling circles. In its quantitative phase, the study involved 290 students, and the results showed medium to elevated levels of self-perceived sensitivity, influenced by factors such as gender and previous intercultural experiences. The qualitative phase involved 84 pre-service teachers and consisted of the shared analysis of a short film on discrimination, highlighting the participants' capacity for critical reflection and their ability to engage in meaningful dialogue about diversity and inclusion. These results emphasize the importance of integrating intercultural and interreligious training into teaching programmes to prepare future educators for the challenges of increasingly diverse classrooms. The study highlights the transformative role of educators as agents of change in promoting inclusive school environments and highlights the need for innovative pedagogical approaches to develop these competencies.

Keywords: intercultural sensitivity; inter-religious sensitivity; intercultural competence; training teachers; teaching education; diversity in education; story circles; mixed approach



Academic Editor: Dilshod Achilov

Received: 27 December 2024

Revised: 1 February 2025

Accepted: 4 February 2025

Published: 14 February 2025

Citation: Quirós Domínguez, Carolina, Valeria De Ormaechea Otarola, Mónica Ferré Tobaruela, and Núria Lorenzo Ramírez. 2025.

Educating for Diversity: Intercultural and Inter-Religious Sensitivity in Early Childhood and Primary School Teachers in Training at the University of Barcelona. *Religions* 16: 238. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16020238>

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1. Introduction

1.1. Education and Diversity

In 2015, the United Nations member states committed themselves to a common plan of action called Agenda 2030 (United Nations 2015). This plan established seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aimed at dealing with some of the main challenges facing today's world.

The SDGs constitute targets of significant importance for societies in general and, as a fundamental mission, for education, at which objective 4 is aimed: "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all", (United Nations 2015).

The notion of diversity is associated with differences in people's features, such as their gender, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, language, culture, religion, or mental and physical abilities (UNESCO 2017). In the educational sphere, this concept is also associated with

respect and acceptance, in the sense of “Understanding one another and going beyond the more limited perspective of tolerance” (European Commission 2023, p. 14).

While migratory movements are a complex phenomenon influenced by a range of factors, analysing them goes beyond a simple increase in the movement of people between territories or reorganization and integration in countries of origin and destination. It is essential to recognize that the intensity, frequency, and new reasons behind these movements are undeniable traits of today’s global societies. For this reason, in recent decades, this phenomenon has been of special interest to the social sciences, which seek to understand its relationship with increasingly diverse, mixed societies.

Cultural diversity has been defined as “the manifold ways in which the cultures of groups and societies find expression” and as “a manifestation of the diversity of life on earth” (Art. 4.1 of the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (UNESCO 2005)). In this respect, schools remain essential places to achieve full inclusion for all and must be capable of appreciating and promoting diversity as something fundamental.

Europe is a continent in which minors arrive daily as refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants, alone or accompanied by family members, in search of a new life (European Commission 2017). Schools and their teachers must be capable of taking in migrant children, young people and families, providing support for their inclusion and to meet their needs, and encouraging respect for differences and coexistence between cultures (OECD 2014).

1.2. Intercultural and Interreligious Sensitivity

Cultural diversity was defined by UNESCO (2005) as “the manifold ways in which the cultures of groups and societies find expression” and as “a manifestation of the diversity of life on earth” (p. 14).

Interculturality is a dynamic concept that refers to developing relations between cultural groups. It is defined as “the existence and equitable interaction of diverse cultures and the possibility of generating shared cultural expressions through dialogue and mutual respect” (UNESCO 2005, p. 16).

The way that people experience, interpret, and interact through cultural differences has been defined as intercultural sensitivity. Intercultural sensitivity is defined as the capacity to experience and recognize relevant cultural differences, a concept based on the ability to distinguish between these differences, especially those related to values and behaviours (Van Melle and Ferreira 2023). This process involves a progressive development that takes people from an ethnocentric outlook, in which one’s own culture is seen as central and superior, towards an ethnorelative viewpoint that recognizes all cultures as equally valid (Bennett 1986, 2017, 2020). Thus, intercultural sensitivity is presented as an essential basis on which to develop intercultural competence, facilitating adaptation and effective communication in multicultural contexts. The conceptualization of intercultural competences was addressed by the European Commission (2018), the OECD (2019), and UNESCO (2017) in integrating approaches including a range of components and dimensions, such as knowledge, behaviours, attitudes, values, and personality traits. Some of the essential intercultural competences are cultural knowledge, self-awareness, empathy, communication, flexibility, conflict resolution, and openness (UNESCO 2017; Vilà Baños et al. 2022). The Pyramidal Model proposed by Deardorff (2006, 2020) makes it possible to understand and develop intercultural competences. This pyramid model is organized on four hierarchical levels that reflect a progressive process:

1. Attitudes: Respect, openness, and curiosity towards other cultures as a basis for intercultural interaction.

2. Knowledge and understanding: This includes cultural self-awareness, in-depth knowledge of other cultures, and sociolinguistic aspects.
3. Skills: Listening, interpreting, analysing, and relating to apply knowledge in effective interactions.
4. Internal and external outcomes: Adaptability, empathy, and ethnorelative view, which translate to effective intercultural behaviour and communication.

Putting these four components together makes it possible to develop an ethnorelative view and engage in effective intercultural behaviour, both internally (cognitive and emotional) and externally (visible interactions).

Bennett (1986, 2017, 2020) defines intercultural sensitivity as a process of development involving the evolution of awareness and comprehension of cultural diversity and outlines the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), which situates a person in two stages, Ethnocentrism and Ethnorelativism, with three perceptual categories in each, and organized from “Denial” through to “Integration”, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), based on Bennett (1986, 2017).

Stage	Perceptual Category	Description of the Perceptual Category
Ethnocentrism One’s own culture is the centre of reality	Denial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ignoring or denying the existence of cultural differences. - Avoiding contact with other cultures and seeing one’s own as the only valid or relevant one.
	Defence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Recognizing some cultural differences but considering them a threat. - Tendency to polarize cultures in terms of “us” versus “them”, rejecting other cultures.
	Minimization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Recognizing cultural differences, but tending to underestimate them, believing in universal values shared by all. - Trivialising cultural differences or seeing them as minor variations on the same human reality.
Ethnorelativism One’s own culture is one of many valid realities	Acceptance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Recognizing and appreciating cultural differences. - Realising that values and behaviours are not universal.
	Adaptation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Developing the ability to change behaviour to communicate effectively in intercultural contexts. - Beginning to incorporate diverse cultural perspectives into interactions with other people.
	Integration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Internalizing multiple cultural perspectives and alternating between them as needed, developing an identity that transcends a single culture.

Bennett (2017, 2020) deals with intercultural sensitivity through a constructivist approach, stressing that it is not innate, but a skill that can be learnt. He highlights how cultural perceptions organize sensory experience into abstract categories to facilitate shared communication and action. He also introduces ethical categories to compare culture, like the concepts of high and low-context communication, which are useful for intercultural

adaptation. These theories have practical applications in education, mediation, conflict resolution, and multicultural management. Bennett emphasises their importance in a globalized world, while recognizing that the process is neither linear nor universal.

A context in which cultural differences emerge is the expression of religious beliefs, which is an essential factor for some groups of people and calls for a sensitive attitude to this factor in diversity on the part of the public. The connection between religion and culture has been debated extensively in anthropology, philosophy, and sociology, as diverse cultures display through their practices their view of the transcendental and spiritual and expect respectful treatment for their beliefs and customs (Vilà Baños et al. 2018).

Interreligious sensitivity focuses on the capacity to recognize, respect, and include people, groups, and world views with religious or spiritual beliefs different from those of the majority population living in a territory (Quirós Domínguez et al. 2023). Using an approach based on the levels devised by Bennett (1986, 2017, 2020) in his Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), Abu-Nimer (2001) developed the Interreligious Sensitivity Scale (IRRSS), a tool designed to explore people's perceptions and attitudes towards different religious beliefs. The categories in this scale are as follows:

- Defence: Some religious differences are recognized, but they are seen as threats. Defensive or superior attitudes may be displayed towards other religions.
- Minimization: Religious differences are recognized, but their importance tends to be minimized, emphasizing the similarities between religions.
- Acceptance: Religious differences are recognized and appreciated. An attitude of respect and curiosity towards other religions is shown.
- Adaptation: Religious differences are recognized and appreciated, and people are able to change behaviour to interact effectively with people from other religions.
- Integration: Different religious perspectives are integrated in identity, and it is possible to mediate and facilitate understanding between different religious groups.

This paper emphasises intercultural and interreligious sensitivity as a fundamental part of learning to cope in heterogeneous societies in which relations with people of diverse cultural and religious origins and customs are part of the reality of the contemporary world. Developing and displaying this sensitivity must be a central goal at all educational levels. To achieve it, teachers must work on their own personal and professional development, acquiring competences to enable them to foster this capacity in their pupils.

1.3. Teacher Training to Promote Intercultural and Interreligious Sensitivity

Teachers have an essential role in promoting the value of diversity and inclusion in the educational setting. Their function is vital in detecting pupils' learning difficulties and needs, improving their academic results, and strengthening both their abilities and their socio-emotional well-being (European Commission 2023). Alongside this, teaching staff must be trained to recognize and deal with the processes that lead to discrimination and exclusion for cultural or religious reasons, even though international evidence indicates that working with students in multicultural contexts is one of the areas in which teachers feel least prepared (OECD 2014, 2023). Teachers' intercultural sensitivity, along with the behaviours and attitudes of openness, adaptability, and communication with people of diverse cultural and religious origins, influence the development of intercultural competence in their pupils (Filipović and Jurišić 2024).

The training of future teachers is a task of significant importance in terms of promoting their commitment to working for diversity, interculturality, equality, and inclusion. This commitment constitutes an ethical and moral imperative so that new generations can genuinely contribute to social change (Miller Dyce et al. 2024; Ryan et al. 2020).

Schools are more diverse than ever, and this diversity will continue to exist in different educational contexts, so teacher training programmes must systematically prepare them to be able to interact with all children, especially those from less advantaged families and communities deprived of their rights. Intercultural education is essential within school activities and the educational community, covering both teaching and the overall school culture (Filipović and Rihtar 2017).

Teacher training in the culture of Interculturality, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (IDEI) must promote their commitment to these concepts and help to ensure that trainee teachers gain the knowledge and competence necessary to perform these functions. Opportunities for continuing professional development are also essential to prepare and support teachers for their work with diverse pupils and to encourage inclusion in the classroom (Miller Dyce et al. 2024; UNESCO 2017).

Teacher education and training programmes must foster the capacity to collaborate with other teachers, professionals, and families, to teach in multicultural/multilingual contexts and to raise awareness of prejudices and stereotypes. Out of all European teachers, only 20% have taken part in in-service training programmes on teaching in multicultural or multilingual contexts. Moreover, some of these teachers have expressed a concern about their lack of preparation to manage inclusive classrooms (European Commission 2023). This suggests the need to tackle the obstacles to participating in these programmes and ensure that teachers acquire the skills necessary to foster diversity and inclusion in schools.

2. Methodology

2.1. Design of the Study: A Mixed Methodological Approach

This research was approached as a single case study, the aim of which was to describe and understand in depth the specific features of a context, using a range of sources and types of data (Stake 1995, 2013). The case study presented is instrumental in nature, as based on this case study, it was hoped to understand the broader phenomenon of the intercultural and interreligious sensitivity of trainee schoolteachers at Barcelona University, as well as seeking complementary information (Yin 2014). The case study was conducted using a mixed research methodology, specifically one of a “transformational” nature that seeks to cover the needs of a specific population and contribute to change and improvement (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011). In this case, the analysis was of quantitative data gained from the application of a scale of self-perception and qualitative information gathered during the running of a teaching activity involving collaborative reflection called “Story Circles” (Deardorff 2020) with trainee teachers.

2.2. Context of the Study: Cultural and Religious Diversity in Barcelona

Barcelona, a cosmopolitan city in Spain, stands out for its long history of migration, which has shaped its cultural and ethnic diversity. Currently, 33.6% of the resident population was born outside the city or the country, and people of 180 nationalities coexist there. The main migratory flows come from Latin America (28%), Europe (16.6%), Asia (13%), and Africa (6.6%). Apart from its two official languages, Catalan and Spanish, more than 300 languages are spoken in the city. This diversity has shaped its social fabric significantly, creating a multicultural community. There is also considerable religious diversity, with more than thirty traditions practised in over five hundred places of worship. The communities most represented include Catholicism, Islam, Protestantism, Sikhism, and various Asian religions.

Founded in 1450, Barcelona University has 50,000 students of 145 nationalities, of which 12% are of foreign origin. This diversity is also reflected in the Faculty of Education,

which has 7000 students on six degree courses and more than fifty master's programmes focusing on educational and social subjects.

The study presented in this paper concentrated on the degree courses in Pre-Primary Teaching, Primary Teaching, and the joint degree in Pre-Primary and Primary Teaching at the University of Barcelona.

2.3. Quantitative Phase: Sample, Instrument, and Data Analysis

In the quantitative phase of the study, the scale applied was answered by 290 students in the Faculty of Education at Barcelona University. The sample was selected by accessibility and comprised 80% women, 19.66% men, and 0.34% non-binary people. The average age of the student's taking part was 20.9 (SD = 2.1). Overall, 16.9% of the students were studying the degree in Pre-Primary Education, 73.1% the degree in Primary Education, and 10% the joint degree in Pre-Primary and Primary Education.

The data-gathering instrument consisted of a self-perception scale (Aneas et al. 2024) created within the European Erasmus + Stories that Move Project promoted by the Anna Frank House (Stories that Move 2024). The aim of the project is to work on developing habits for intercultural and democratic citizenship based on appreciation of diversity and prevention of discrimination in all its forms using an educational "toolbox" available online on the project website. Three components of this scale were used for this study: (a) sociodemographic and identifying data, (b) intercultural and interreligious sensitivity scale, and (c) questions about identity-based violence and discrimination.

The intercultural and interreligious sensitivity scale is of the Likert type and comprises 12 items for which students must choose their position from five categories, from lowest to highest level of agreement, concerning cultures and religions other than their own.

The data on the scale were analysed statistically using the IBM SPSS Statistics programme, version 29, and calculating the reliability index gave a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.804, indicating a proficient level of internal consistency in the responses. Bartlett's test of Sphericity gives a significance of <0.001, so the sample can be interpreted as having a normal distribution.

The Kayser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) test gives a result of 0.820, implying that the data are adequate to conduct a factorial analysis. An exploratory-type analysis indicated unifactoriality; i.e., no distinct factors were identified to explain the variance in the data collected.

2.4. Qualitative Phase: Participants, Pedagogical Activity, and Analysis of the Information

The aim of the pedagogical activity was to explore in greater depth the intercultural and interreligious sensitivity of the trainee teachers. To this end, a reflective group dynamic was designed, involving 84 students, organized in 21 groups of 4. Participation was voluntary, and the activity was run in two class sessions.

The methodology was inspired by the Story Circles approach proposed by Deardorff (2020). This tool was used to foster the development of intercultural competences through the exchange of personal stories in an inclusive, safe setting. Story Circles allow participants to share meaningful experiences, fostering listening and mutual understanding. This approach is based on open dialogue and collective reflection to facilitate the recognition of diverse points of view and the construction of shared understanding. The reason it was considered suitable for this phase is that it had been used before in educational and community settings to deal with questions related to cultural diversity, social justice, and community cohesion from an intercultural point of view.

The pedagogical approach consisted of setting up circles for discussion based on viewing a short film produced by the Spanish Federación SOS Racismo (2017). After presenting the activity and organizing students into small work groups, the short film

was shown. A link was then given to an online questionnaire with the above-mentioned questions for students to think about them and work in groups.

The short film shows a scene at a stand in a fair or market, in a busy street in a Spanish city. At the stand, a woman is promoting a draw with a night in a spa hotel as the prize. Various interested people approach the stand and fill in their details on a form to enter the draw. However, the situation changes with the arrival of a racialized young woman wearing a hijab. The attitude of the woman running the draw changes: while others are allowed to enter with no problems, she tells the young woman that there are no forms left, even though this is obviously not true.

The young woman insists on entering, causing a tense or confused situation, involving the reactions of passers-by. Some people ignore what is happening, while others take sides, supporting either the woman running the draw or the young woman. Thus, the short film shows the different attitudes and comments the situation draws from those seeing it, highlighting the social dynamics that emerge around discrimination and prejudice.

After watching the video, students were asked to collaboratively answer the following questions:

- What caught your attention in the situation shown in the video?
- Have you ever seen situations like the one shown in the video?
- What strategies could be used to prevent or deal with these situations in education?

The responses of the students in the Story Circles were transcribed and their content analysed, establishing analytical categories based on the questions posed.

3. Results

3.1. Quantitative Phase: Results of the Intercultural and Interreligious Sensitivity Scale

Table 2 shows the descriptive analysis of the results for the items in the intercultural and interreligious sensitivity scale.

Table 2. Descriptive results of the intercultural and interreligious sensitivity scale.

Item	Mean	SD
1. I am interested in learning about the knowledge and practices of other cultural or religious conditions.	3.91	1.127
2. I have been integrating principles, values and practices from other cultures or religions into my life.	2.90	1.250
3. I am critical of some principles, values, traditions, or facts of my cultural or religious group.	3.72	1.072
4. All cultural and religious positions, deep down, share principles and goals.	3.57	1.038
5. I adapt my behaviour according to the cultural and religious context in which I find myself.	3.48	1.050
6. I can share spaces for dialogue and practice with other cultural and religious groups, depending on the cultural and religious context in which I am.	4.26	0.890
7. When I interact with people from other cultural and religious groups, I try to make communication possible.	4.36	0.813
8. I try to keep in mind the values and principles of other cultural and religious groups so as not to offend them with my actions or words.	4.32	0.914
9. Relating to people from other cultural and religious groups is stimulating and enriching for me.	3.94	1.039
10. I am bothered by the presence of some cultural and religious groups in my environment.	1.62	0.900
11. It is difficult for me to accept that people I appreciate follow certain cultural or religious positions.	1.76	1.025
12. It is difficult for me to trust people from other cultural or religious groups.	1.67	0.960

The results for the averages in the different items display values above 3, indicating a level of agreement by students between medium and high with the statements given.

Regarding the standard deviation, the scores show an appropriate level of dispersion in most items (with levels above 1) and a certain level of homogeneity in others.

When the averages for each item on the scale are observed, the highest values were for those related to the attitude of trying to communicate as well as possible when interacting with people from other cultures and religions ($m = 4.36$), the intention to take into account the values of other cultures and religions in order not to act offensively towards them ($m = 4.32$), and the capacity for dialogue and sharing with people from cultures and religions other than one's own ($m = 4.26$).

It is important to bear in mind that at first sight, the items concerning difficulties in accepting and relating to people from other cultures or religions give lower scores, but this is because as they are formulated negatively, they should be analysed in the opposite way, and taking this into account, the students' level of agreement is above 4. The only statement with an average lower than 3 is the one referring to incorporating principles or values from other cultures or religions into one's own life, with an average of 2.90.

About the overall average for all the items in the intercultural and interreligious sensitivity scale, after carrying out the bivariate correlation test, a significant difference in terms of age was observed: the higher the age, the less intercultural and interreligious sensitivity was perceived by the students ($r = -0.219, p < 0.001$). Significant differences were also observed in relation to gender ($t = 3.57, p < 0.001$) in the Independent Sample *t*-Test, in which women score significantly higher for intercultural and interreligious sensitivity ($M = 4.01, SD = 0.54$) than men ($M = 3.71, SD = 0.62$).

Regarding the degree course, the Anova statistical test did not reveal significant differences in inter-religious and intercultural sensitivity between students on the three courses included in this research.

As well as the intercultural and interreligious sensitivity scale, the questionnaire also contained three questions about the violence and discrimination rooted in identity issues: (1) whether they had ever been victims of such violence and/or discrimination, (2) whether they had ever observed any situation of violence and/or discrimination, and (3) whether they might ever have offended someone for reasons rooted in identity issues.

The results show that in general terms, more students have seen situations of violence and/or discrimination rooted in identity issues than have been victims or offended other people (see Figure 1).

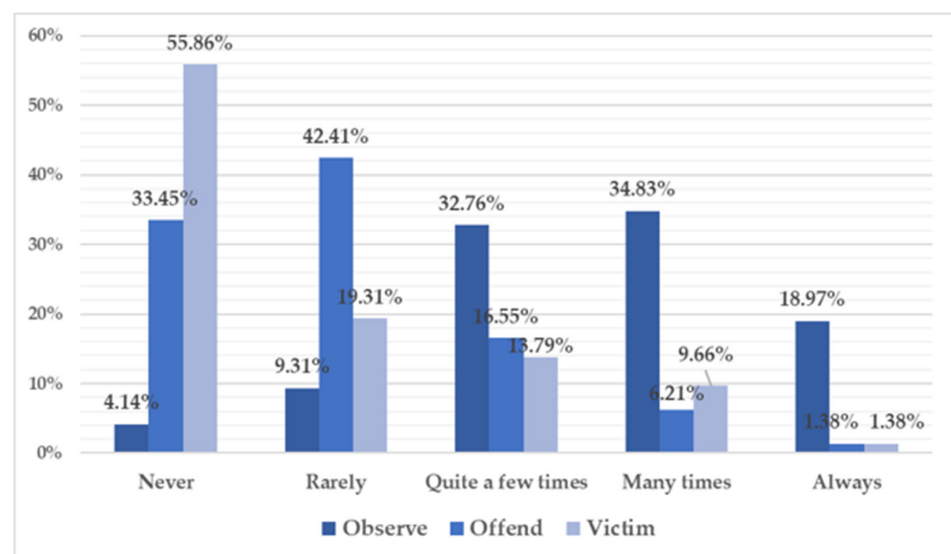


Figure 1. Frequency of observation, victimization, and offence in situations of identity-related violence or discrimination.

The results of the bivariate correlation also show that there is a correlation between the three positions about situations of discrimination. Those who have been victims for reasons rooted in identity are also those who have seen the most situations of violence and discrimination ($r = 0.41, p < 0.001$) and those who most often believe they might have offended others ($r = 0.18, p < 0.002$).

According to the bivariate correlation test, those students who marked that they had offended other people scored significantly lower in the intercultural and interreligious sensitivity scale ($r = 0.19, p < 0.001$). Those who had caused most offence for reasons rooted in identity had a significantly lower degree of intercultural and interreligious sensitivity than those who said they had not offended other people.

When people who had been victims of violence and/or discrimination were asked about the reason for the discrimination, the response selected by the most students was “gender or sexual identity”, at 31.7% (see Figure 2). The next most selected causes (socio-economic status, religion, and ethnic origin) are far from the above percentage, each scoring 2.8%. The other options suggested are not included in the graph as they scored less than 2%.

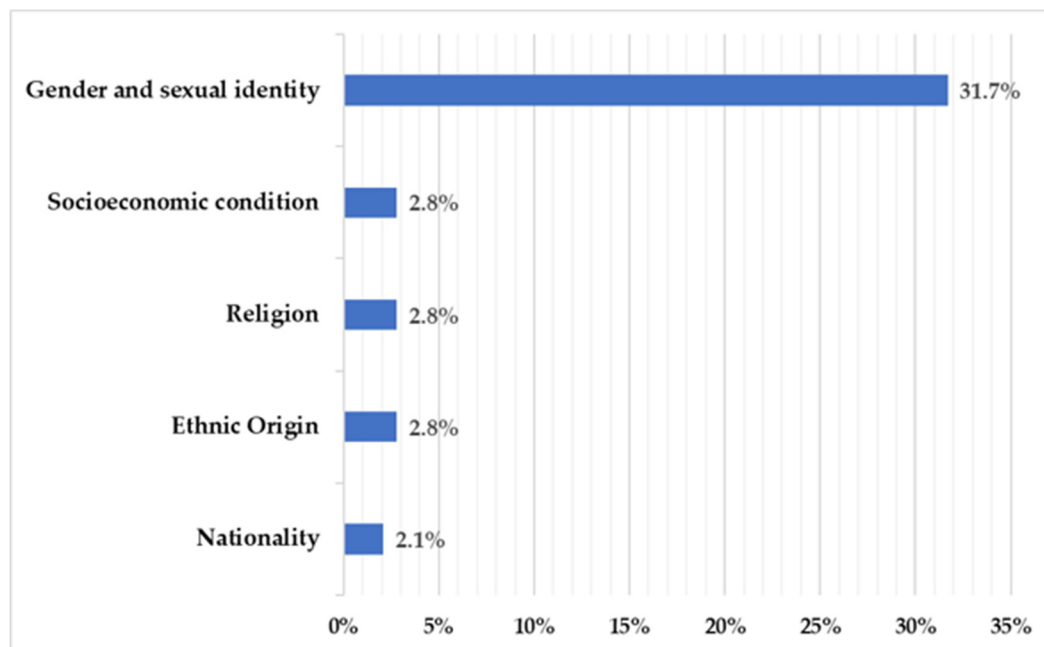


Figure 2. Causes of discrimination.

This difference between gender and sexual identity and the other causes of discrimination is in line with the profile of students who responded to the questionnaire, in which, regarding gender, 80% were women, and of these 35.34% selected “gender and sexual identity” as the cause of discrimination. This percentage is lower among males; out of the 19.66% of men of the total sample, only 15.79% marked this option as a reason for discrimination. As regards the different sexual options, 16.6% of the sample stated that they belonged to the LGBTIQ+ collective.

Only 3.1% of the students consulted consider themselves believers who practice a religion, and the vast majority (79%) stated that they had not received training in how to coexist with people from other cultures and religions, compared to 12% who said they had received such training, and 9% who said they did not know and/or did not wish to answer the question (see Figure 3).

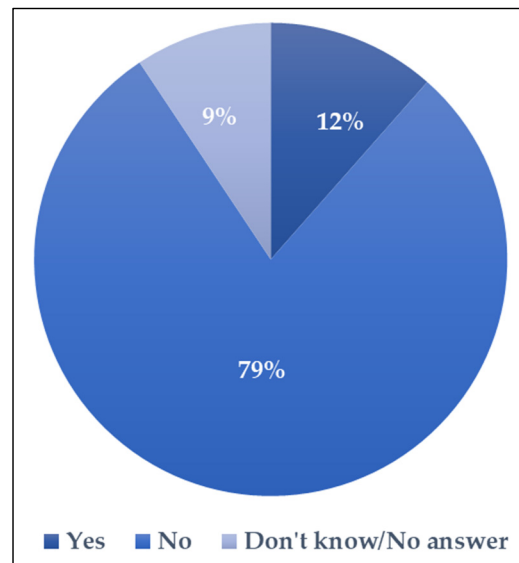


Figure 3. Training in intercultural and religious coexistence of students.

3.2. Qualitative Phase: Story Circles

To analyse the content of the Story Circles, three fundamental categories, linked to the questions that guided the reflective group activity, were taken as a reference.

- (a) Perception of a discriminatory situation.
- (b) Own experience of discrimination.
- (c) Teaching skills and knowledge to deal with the matter.

Regarding the question about what caught their attention about the contents of the short film, they said it was striking how several people agreed with or supported a situation of injustice like the one shown in the video. In some cases, this agreement is explicit, manifested in specific attitudes: direct verbalization of agreement (even with openly racist comments), or attitudes of indifference, expressed through silence or passivity.

“Our attention was caught by reactions of a racist nature that went in favour of the girl who was not letting people of immigrant origin ‘sign’”. (Group 21)

“Some people’s indifference to the situation going on. Moreover, at the end of the video the percentages from the experiment appear, with a surprisingly high proportion of people expressing indifference or agreement with the girl”. (Group 1)

“Such negative responses from some people and those who kept quiet before this situation”. (Group 19)

“Discrimination by physical appearance alone, as they only noticed the physical appearance of the girl wearing a hijab. On the other hand, there were other people from other countries, like a Ukrainian girl and another Muslim girl who were allowed to take part, because physically they did not look foreign (. . .) and this was justified by saying, ‘they don’t look it’”. (Group 2)

They also emphasized the perception of normality when faced with situations like the one in the video, even stating that unfortunately, scenes like these are extremely common in everyday life or on social networks.

“Unfortunately, the situation we have seen today didn’t really seize our attention, as in recent years we have seen many similar situations on social networks or on TV. However, this doesn’t mean that hearing conversations like this directly doesn’t make you feel bad and nervous”. (Group 6)

One group even said they were moved by the people who reacted to injustice by defending the girl with the hijab.

Another aspect highlighted by several groups was the generational difference. Some young people and adults argued with this situation, while older people were indifferent or explicitly supported it.

“People who acted as if nothing was happening were generally older people, over 55 years old. On the other hand, the people who refused to take part or leapt to her defence were young people or younger adults. This is because we think that today young people are more aware of this problem”. (Group 3)

“The majority of the people who agreed that the girl should sign the survey were also immigrants or young people, while on the other hand, the people who disagreed were nearly all older people”. (Group 2)

When asked whether they had seen similar situations to the one shown in the film, the majority said they had seen similar situations and identified them directly with the specific places where they had arisen. They point to physical places like the discotheque and shops, public transport, school, and finally airports and social networks.

“One of the similar situations we’ve all seen is at the entrance to some discotheques. Going in, they stopped the kids whose appearance was other than what they considered normal and seemed to be from another culture, while the other young people went in with no problem”. (Group 6)

“One time, they didn’t let a black person into a discotheque, simply because of the colour of their skin (. . .) At different police checks, we’re used to seeing how they first stop racialised people (. . .). A child brought presents on their birthday for the whole class, except for a black girl”. (Group 8)

In the experiences they explain, the people who generally have discriminatory attitudes are those with some authority or manifest power over others, though they also point out cases of segregation among the students themselves. Even those who say they have not experienced such explicit situations as that in the video admit that they have heard discriminatory comments or insinuations in their immediate environment.

In some cases, they perceive a tendency to minimize discriminatory situations they have witnessed, which prompts reflection on how these people could have fallen into attitudes of inaction, silence, and passivity they previously criticized and were surprised to see in others. This suggests that the perception of a discriminatory situation is influenced by the position one is in at the time of the episode. When the scene is observed from the outside, it seems simpler to identify racism in other people’s actions; however, when the person is directly involved, it proves harder to recognize it, or they tend to underestimate the impact.

“We haven’t witnessed any situations this serious, but we have seen and heard racist comments”. (Group 19)

They state that exceptional events (COVID-19 or the Barcelona attacks of 2017) have exacerbated racist attitudes.

“Racist behaviour towards a woman with a veil after the 2017 attack (visitor to a museum who they did not want to let in because they associated the religion with the attack). During quarantine, on social networks, racism towards Asians because the virus was associated with their ethnic group”. (Group 5)

Also, in some cases, they identify racist conduct with fear and insecurity or mention structural violence, associating racism with sexism.

“In discotheques (...) they often apply stricter rules and different treatment for men (this makes us think there is also sexism)”. (Group 10)

“(...) we’ve talked about other situations we’ve experienced involving structural violence because of origin or religion”. (Group 10)

With regard to the question about the strategies that might be used to deal with discriminatory situations at school, they basically mention the importance of training pupils and raising their awareness, and also that of families and “school staff”, as several of the examples given in the questions above referred to incidents that occurred in schools.

“Making children aware that we are all different and we must accept one another as we are (...) It is an issue we must deal with from the first years of pre-primary education to make them aware. To do all this we need to foster an inclusive, multicultural school atmosphere”. (Group 3)

“Training teachers for inclusive, multicultural education, free from racism.” (Group 7)

“Making both children and families, and even school staff, aware of this issue (...)”. (Group 19)

In this respect, they mention resources, materials, and activities to work on diversity and tolerance. They point out the need for prevention through talks, workshops, debates about everyday situations, and role plays, and the need to implement protocols and create safe spaces to discuss these issues.

However, some of the examples and comments seem to concern shared spaces that could be developed or discussing problems in more depth.

When they describe their initial teaching experience, they mention the need to involve families from two points of view: on the one hand, they point out the existence of prejudices towards certain families identified with foreign origins, and the evidence of stereotypes that affect the dynamics of the school; on the other, they express the perception that these families do not take an active part in the education of their children, underlining the importance of fostering inclusive, collaborative relations between school and home, free from stereotypes and prejudices.

“One idea would be to invite the families to take part in activities together at the school. We think that if the families get to know one another, discrimination will decrease. We would organise processes to help them realise that whatever our skin colour or culture, we’re all equal (...)”. (Group 6)

4. Discussion

The acquisition and development of intercultural and religious sensitivity are essential in today’s world, in which relations with people of a range of backgrounds and beliefs are part of everyday life (Shuali and Bar Cendón 2023).

After analysing the results obtained, both in the quantitative phase and in the qualitative one with the Story Circles, it can be concluded that the trainee teachers in the case studied display an adequate level of intercultural and religious sensitivity, despite most of them not having received any training to prepare them to coexist with people of other cultures and religions. In light of the future teachers’ high level of agreement in terms of attitudes and behaviour, and through their trying to relate positively with people of other cultures and religions, considering their values, not acting offensively towards others, engaging in dialogue, and, in short, coexisting respectfully in a range of contexts, these results coincide with those obtained by Özdoğru et al. (2024), who conclude in their study that future teachers display high levels of intercultural and religious sensitivity, as accord-

ing to their research, they respect and communicate with people from different cultures, approaching them from a perspective free from conscious prejudices.

The results obtained show that age may be a distinctive feature with regard to intercultural sensitivity: the responses given by younger students indicated a higher level of intercultural and interreligious sensitivity on the scale used. This matches the findings of [Iñiguez-Berrozpe et al. \(2021\)](#), who conclude in their study that younger trainee teachers displayed higher levels in the intercultural experience index (IEI) than older ones. Similarly, research by [Knežević \(2024\)](#) found that teachers who had joined the profession more recently (in general, being younger) displayed a higher level of sensitivity to diversity than those with more years of experience.

The perception that the older population is the one that more frequently displays discriminatory attitudes also came out in the Story Circles conducted with trainee teachers in this study, alluding to the generation gap in which greater age was related to higher levels of discrimination towards other cultures and beliefs.

With regard to gender, the results show significant differences, as women scored higher for intercultural and interreligious sensitivity than men, matching the research by [Dopico-González \(2024\)](#), who pointed out gender differences in the development of intercultural competences, with people who identified as women displaying higher levels of intercultural sensitivity than men. Likewise, [Iñiguez-Berrozpe et al. \(2021\)](#) found significant differences in favour of women, especially in the intercultural efficiency index (IEFI).

It is striking that the most common motive for discrimination pointed out by people who had been victims of it was gender and sexual identity, which confirms the conclusions of other studies ([United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2021](#); [United Nations 2024](#)) highlighting the high prevalence of structural discrimination against women and the LGTBI + collective.

Specifically with regard to intercultural sensitivity, several participants in the Story Circles stated that they had witnessed situations of discrimination motivated by differences in culture or origin in a range of places and contexts and, to a lesser extent, had personally been victims or had offended people because of intercultural differences. They also expressed surprise at the attitude of some people who supported or were indifferent to situations of racism or discrimination against other cultures. These results, together with the medium/high averages for the items related to interculturality on the scale, showed an adequate level of development of intercultural sensitivity among the trainee teachers, a learning outcome essential to their future as teachers in a constantly changing multicultural society, as pointed out by [Aguado Odina and Benito \(2017\)](#).

Relating the results of this research with the theory of [Bennett \(1986, 2017\)](#), it could be interpreted that the trainee teachers taking part are at the ethnorelative stage, in which one perceives one's own culture and others as valid and, within this stage, in the Adaptation category, in which one develops the capacity to adapt one's behaviour to different cultural contexts for the sake of communication, by incorporating different points of view.

Specifically in relation to interreligious sensitivity, it should be pointed out that a very low proportion of the trainee teachers taking part in the research consider themselves practising members of any religion, coinciding with the report by the [Pew Research Centre \(2022\)](#), which indicated that the percentage of adults, especially younger adults, who identify as religious has fallen steadily in recent years, and this trend is expected to continue in the future in a phenomenon particularly prevalent in the western world ([Mitchell 2023](#)). In the light of this situation, the medium to high level of interreligious sensitivity shown by the trainee teachers taking part in this study is worthy of note, as in both the quantitative and the qualitative stages, their responses showed attitudes of respect for a diversity of beliefs. Following the [Abu-Nimer \(2001\)](#) model, these university students would fall into

the Acceptance category, in which one recognizes and respects diverse religions and beliefs, results that match the study by [Aneas et al. \(2024\)](#) in the same context as this research, the city of Barcelona.

It is essential for the training of school teachers to promote respect and openness towards different cultures, gradually remedying the weaknesses in intercultural education and, above all, recognizing the value of fairness and the richness offered by diversity in education and society ([Tardif-Grenier et al. 2023](#)). It is therefore very important for trainee teachers to develop their intercultural and interreligious sensitivity from the beginning of their studies and throughout their professional career, in order to understand the value of the diversity that exists in today's educational settings.

Developing intercultural competences allows future teachers to generate more inclusive, respectful educational spaces, as well as giving them tools to cope with the complexities of educational practice. Various studies conducted with practising teachers concluded that they are able to respond actively to diversity in their classrooms, by adjusting their practice to make them more inclusive, on the basis of educational guidance and research ([Byram et al. 2023](#); [Willis 2023](#)).

The ability to recognize cultural and religious diversity should make it possible to attain an in-depth understanding of what one has in common rather than the differences between oneself and others, empathizing with their lives and promoting peace and solidarity ([Lee 2024](#)).

5. Conclusions

The results of this study show the pressing need for future pre-primary and primary teachers to develop intercultural and interreligious sensitivity. Initial teacher training plays a crucial part in fostering inclusive, fair educational environments that recognize and value cultural and religious diversity.

From the quantitative standpoint, the findings show that the students have medium to elevated levels of intercultural and interreligious sensitivity, though with significant differences depending on their gender and previous experience in multicultural contexts. However, they were seen to be less disposed to incorporate principles and values from other cultures in their personal life, suggesting a need for training strategies that go beyond theoretical knowledge to foster attitudes of cultural openness and flexibility.

The qualitative analyses reinforce this conclusion as they show future teachers can identify discriminatory situations and think critically about their causes and consequences. Nevertheless, certain limitations are discernible in their in-depth understanding of the structural factors that perpetuate discrimination. This underlines the importance of building reflective pedagogical activities like the Story Circles that make it possible to explore personal and collective experience in a safe, collaborative environment.

The research also makes clear that there are persistent challenges, such as the lack of specific training received by most of the students in the topics of intercultural and interreligious coexistence. This reinforces the need to incorporate obligatory modules and transversal content in the syllabus for teacher training courses.

In terms of pedagogical options, the participants recognize the importance of implementing preventive strategies in the school setting. These include activities based on cooperative learning, emotional education, and the creation of safe, respectful learning environments. However, a tendency was observed to propose general solutions, indicating a need for greater conceptual and practical depth in teacher training.

Finally, this study reaffirms the transformational role of teachers as agents of social change. Their ability to foster respect, empathy, and social justice in intercultural environments is essential to progress towards more equal, inclusive societies. Teacher training

must therefore be seen as an ongoing, dynamic process that responds to challenges and opportunities in an increasingly globalized, diverse world.

In conclusion, this study offers a deeper understanding of intercultural and interreligious sensitivity in teacher training and the University of Barcelona, but also highlights the need to include innovative pedagogical approaches in new syllabuses to prepare future teachers for the cultural complexity of today's classrooms.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, C.Q.D., V.D.O.O. and N.L.R.; methodology, C.Q.D., M.F.T., V.D.O.O. and N.L.R.; formal analysis, C.Q.D. and V.D.O.O.; investigation, C.Q.D., V.D.O.O., M.F.T. and N.L.R.; data curation, C.Q.D.; writing—original draft preparation, C.Q.D., V.D.O.O., M.F.T. and N.L.R.; writing—review and editing, C.Q.D., V.D.O.O., M.F.T. and N.L.R. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by EACE, grant number 621431-EPP-1-2020-1-1-1-1-NL-EPPKA3-IPI-SOC-IN.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Institutional Review Board (or Ethics Committee) of Bioethics Commission of the University of Barcelona (IRB00003099, 14 June 2021).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Data supporting reported results are available by communicating with authors and describe the purpose of use of these data.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; or in the decision to publish the results.

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