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Early Intercultural Education in the Danube Region: A Comparative Analysis of the Preschool Curriculum in Five Riparian States

Gheorghe Octavian Zamfirescu¹

Abstract: Objectives. The paper examines how the intercultural dimension is integrated into the early childhood education curriculum of five Danube basin states — Romania, the Republic of Moldova, Bulgaria, Ukraine and Serbia — and identifies the convergences and divergences among these systems. **Prior work.** Comparative scholarship on Central and Eastern European education systems deals predominantly with primary and secondary levels, leaving the preschool link insufficiently explored from a regional perspective. **Approach.** The study applies a qualitative-comparative analysis of the curricular documents adopted during the 2016–2022 reform generation and of the related normative acts in force, using a six-dimension grid constructed deductively and refined inductively. **Results.** Convergence in declared principles is found, together with marked functional divergence in concrete solutions, particularly in the treatment of linguistic diversity; on this basis, a typology of three models of integrating interculturality is proposed. **Implications.** The current challenge is no longer the recognition of principles, but implementation capacity — the training of teaching staff and support for disadvantaged institutions. **Value.** The article provides the first systematic comparison of the intercultural dimension of the preschool curriculum in five Danubian systems, explicitly distinguishing pedagogical regulation from structural policy.

Keywords: minority rights; language policy; inclusion; social cohesion

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¹ Lecturer, Ph.D., Danubius International University of Galati, Romania, Address: 3 Galati Blvd., Galati 800654, Romania, Corresponding author: gheorghezamfirescu@univ-danubius.ro.



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1. Introduction

Throughout history, the River Danube has functioned not only as a route of communication and economic exchange, but also as a space of encounter, overlap and sedimentation of cultural, linguistic and ethnic identities. The communities settled along its lower course were historically constituted as areas of intercultural contact, in which the coexistence of majority groups with national minorities (Romanians, Bulgarians, Ukrainians, Russians, Gagauz, Serbs, Hungarians, Roma and others) represents a structural feature rather than an exception. This diversity, sedimented diachronically through the succession of empires, shifting frontiers and migrations, continues to shape synchronically the life of contemporary local communities, including in its educational dimension.

The paper addresses the way in which the cultural diversity of Danubian communities is reflected in the earliest link of education systems: preschool education. The premise is that early childhood education does not constitute a culturally neutral space, but a field in which societies transmit — explicitly or implicitly — their models of relating to otherness, to linguistic diversity and to community belonging. The preschool curriculum thus becomes a revealing document: it codifies each state's educational policy choices regarding the formation, from the very first years of life, of the competences of living together.

Interest in early intercultural education has grown over the past decade, both against the background of the recommendations issued by international bodies and as a response to the concrete challenges facing contemporary European societies: mobility, migration, pressures on social cohesion and, in the specific case of the Danube region, the management of the balance between the construction of national identity and the protection of minority rights. Between 2016 and 2022, all five states under analysis adopted or reformed the fundamental curricular documents for early childhood education, which offers an opportune moment for a comparative analysis. Although the comparative literature on the education systems of Central and Eastern Europe is relatively rich, studies explicitly devoted to the intercultural dimension of the preschool curriculum in this area remain fragmentary: most analyses either address a single national system or focus on the primary and secondary levels.

The **research question** guiding the study is the following: *in what way is the intercultural dimension integrated into the early childhood education curriculum of five Danube basin states, and what convergences and divergences emerge among these systems?* From this question derive four **objectives**: (1) to identify the status

and the forms of presence of the intercultural dimension in the preschool curriculum of each state; (2) to compare the manner in which linguistic diversity and education in minority languages are regulated; (3) to highlight the curricular documents and approaches explicitly dedicated to this dimension; (4) to formulate, on the basis of the comparison, a typology of the models of integration.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Danubian Diversity: A Historical Reality Preceding the Concept

A clarification of principle is required from the outset: in the Danube region, interculturality is not first and foremost an imported theoretical concept, but a historical reality woven into the life of communities long before pedagogy made it a topic of reflection. Regions such as Dobrudja, the Banat, southern Bessarabia or Vojvodina were constituted, through the succession of ruling powers and through successive ethnic settlements, as spaces of long-lasting multi-ethnic cohabitation. In the case of Dobrudja, ethnological research describes an “open intercultural model” and a “zone of ethnic acceptance”, characterised by comprehensive cohabitation, ethnocultural reception and mutual respect for the customs, language and religion of each group (Pârău, 2012; Papari, 2013), the coexistence of the numerous ethnic communities on Dobrudjan territory being described as a genuine “Dobrudjan interethnic model” (Damian & Săgeată, 2018).

This qualification has a methodological consequence for the study as a whole: we shall avoid the mechanical transfer of theoretical frameworks elaborated for different historical and geographical contexts — for instance, the models designed for Western societies of recent immigration — preferring an anchoring in the Danubian specificity, in which diversity is predominantly one of historical, autochthonous national minorities. International educational policy benchmarks will be used as comparative markers, not as normative grids forcibly superimposed on local reality.

2.2. Intercultural Education and the Specificity of the Early Level

In Romanian pedagogical scholarship, the point of reference for conceptualising intercultural education is the work of Constantin Cucoş, for whom its principal objective lies in “preparing persons to perceive, accept, respect and experience otherness” (Cucoş, 2000). In this understanding, intercultural education does not mean a separate education for different cultures — which would presuppose isolation

and staticism — but an education for all, centred on interaction, dialogue and mutual exchange. The distinction from the “multicultural” is essential: whereas multiculturalism describes the mere coexistence of groups on the same territory, the prefix “inter-” points to dynamic processes of reciprocity, the removal of barriers and solidarity (Rey, 1996, apud Cucoş, 2000; Dasen, Perregaux & Rey, 1999). At the level of international benchmarks, the UNESCO Guidelines on Intercultural Education formulate three principles: respect for the cultural identity of the learner; the provision to each learner of the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary for active participation in society; and the development of respect and solidarity among individuals and groups (UNESCO, 2006). In the same vein, the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue emphasises that the “inter” presupposes exchange and reciprocity, and not the passive acceptance of groups conceived as fixed and closed (Council of Europe, 2008).

The shift of the analysis towards the preschool level is not accidental. Early childhood education and care, defined by international bodies as covering the period from birth to approximately eight years of age, is recognised as a foundational stage for socio-emotional development and for the formation of attitudes towards oneself and towards the other; it is precisely in this period that the first representations of belonging, similarity and difference take shape, which makes the kindergarten a privileged — and equally sensitive — space for the formation of the competences of living together, inclusion having been recommended as a guiding principle of early childhood education from the very start (UNESCO, 2021). The integration of the intercultural dimension at this level nevertheless raises a specific tension, more pronounced in the Danube region than in other regions: the balance between the transmission of the identity and language of one’s own group and openness towards the majority language and culture. The way in which each national system resolves this balance — through the curriculum — constitutes the central object of the analysis that follows.

2.3. The Curriculum as an Instrument of Educational Policy

Since the object of the analysis is the preschool curriculum, the sense in which we use the term should be specified. We adopt the broad definition promoted by the OECD *Education 2030* framework, according to which the curriculum represents the totality of learning experiences provided for children — a definition that is at once inclusive (covering both the formal and the hidden curriculum), multi-layered and

dynamic, of an ecosystemic rather than a linear type (OECD, 2020). This understanding is particularly appropriate for the intercultural dimension, which manifests itself not only in explicit contents, but also in implicit choices — from the language of instruction to the diffuse representations of “us” and “the others” transmitted in the everyday life of the kindergarten. From such a perspective, the curriculum is not a mere normative document, but one of the most powerful — and also most contested — instruments of educational policy through which societies prepare their children for the future (OECD, 2020).

Two operational distinctions for our analysis derive from this systemic understanding. The first is that between the prescribed, the implemented and the attained curriculum, that is, the curriculum effectively reached by children (OECD, 2020). The second, less common in the curriculum literature but necessary in the area under analysis, opposes *pedagogical regulation* — the intentions formulated in curricular documents — to *structural policy*, that is, the whole body of norms concerning the language of instruction, funding and the organisation of the school network, which determine the actual conditions in which the pedagogical intention may or may not be realised. We shall show that, in several of the cases studied, the intercultural dimension is decided not in the curricular text, but outside it.

3. Methodology

3.1. The Data Corpus and the Selection of States

The study adopts a qualitative design of the comparative analysis of curricular documents type. This option is justified by the nature of the object of study: the curriculum is the formal, institutionally assumed expression of a state’s educational policy, and the comparative approach makes it possible to identify convergences and divergences beyond the particularities of each national context.

The five states were selected on the basis of three criteria: they are riparian states in the lower Danube area, included in the territory covered by the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR); they have historical national minorities, in several cases cross-border ones; and they adopted or revised the fundamental curricular documents for early childhood education after 2016. Their political and institutional diversity — European Union member states (Romania, Bulgaria) alongside candidate or aspiring states (Serbia, the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine) —

allows the contrasting of curricular models formed under distinct historical and political conditions.

The corpus comprises the fundamental curricular documents for early childhood education in each state, supplemented by the related normative acts relevant to the intercultural dimension and to education in minority languages:

Romania: the Curriculum for Early Childhood Education, approved by Order of the Minister of National Education no. 4694/2.08.2019; the Pre-University Education Law no. 198/2023; the measures affecting the school network established by Law no. 141/2025.

The Republic of Moldova: the Early Childhood Education Reference Framework and the Child Learning and Development Standards, approved by Order of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Research no. 1592/25.10.2018, and the Curriculum for Early Childhood Education, approved by Order of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Research no. 1699/15.11.2018; the optional curriculum “Cultura bunei vecinătăți” [The Culture of Good Neighbourliness]; the Romanian language curriculum for institutions with instruction in the languages of national minorities.

Bulgaria: the State Educational Standard for Preschool Education (Ordinance no. 5/3.06.2016); the State Educational Standard on Civic, Health, Environmental and Intercultural Education (Ordinance no. 13/21.09.2016).

Ukraine: the Basic Component of Preschool Education (Order of the Ministry of Education and Science no. 33/12.01.2021); the legislative framework concerning the language of instruction (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2017, 2019).

Serbia: the curricular framework for early childhood education and care Years of Ascent (*Godine uzleta*), adopted in 2018, implemented in stages from 2019 and generalised from 2022.

The documents were analysed in their official versions, in the original language or in official translations, with reference to the primary sources of the relevant ministries. The temporal delimitation follows the 2016–2022 reform generation, while also taking into account subsequent legislative amendments with an impact on the intercultural dimension.

3.2. The Design of the Analysis

The comparative analysis was structured along six dimensions, constructed deductively on the basis of the theoretical framework and refined inductively following a preliminary reading of the corpus: **D1** — the status of interculturality in the curricular architecture (principle, aim, content area, transversal value); **D2** — linguistic diversity and education in minority languages; **D3** — intercultural contents (themes, activities, explicitly targeted competences); **D4** — the existence of dedicated curricular documents or components; **D5** — references to the training of teaching staff for addressing diversity; **D6** — the inclusion of children belonging to vulnerable groups.

The limitations of the design are explicitly acknowledged: the analysis targets the prescribed curriculum, not the implemented or the attained one. Wherever comparative statements rest on sources of a different nature — a normative document, an independent evaluation report or a secondary analysis — the type of source is specified in the text, so as not to attribute to the findings a robustness that the empirical basis does not support.

4. Results

4.1. D1 — The Status of Interculturality in the Curricular Architecture

Although all five states declaratively recognise cultural diversity as a value of the education system, the status conferred on interculturality varies significantly. Romania grants it the rank of a fundamental principle of the Curriculum for Early Childhood Education (Ministry of National Education, 2019; Parliament of Romania, 2023), while the Republic of Moldova treats it as a transversal dimension, the Reference Framework explicitly promoting a “multicultural approach” (Ministry of Education, Culture and Research, 2018a); in Serbia, the *Godine uzleta* framework is founded on the principle of respect for diversity (Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, 2018). Bulgaria affords it the highest normative visibility, through a dedicated state educational standard which places it alongside civic, health and environmental education (Ministry of Education and Science of Bulgaria, 2016b). Ukraine integrates it into the “Child in Society” area of the Basic Component (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 2021), but, as will be shown, subordinates it to the general orientation of language policy.

A gradient thus emerges: from an assumed transversal principle (Romania, the Republic of Moldova, Serbia), to the object of a distinct normative document (Bulgaria), and further to a dimension subordinated to the consolidation of the state language (Ukraine).

4.2. D2 — Linguistic Diversity and Education in Minority Languages

The linguistic dimension reveals the most pronounced divergences, configuring two diametrically opposed policy trajectories — and it illustrates most clearly the distinction between pedagogical regulation and structural policy.

At one pole stands the protective-multilingual model. Through the Pre-University Education Law, Romania guarantees the right to education in the languages of national minorities, including at the preschool level (Parliament of Romania, 2023). One aspect nevertheless deserves a clarification, since it illustrates precisely the distinction proposed above: the measures restructuring the school network adopted in 2025 did not have the protection of minorities as their purpose — Law no. 141/2025 is an act of a fiscal-budgetary nature, which introduced mergers of institutions and an increase in class sizes (Parliament of Romania, 2025) — yet they maintained, by way of derogation, differentiated thresholds for institutions providing instruction in the languages of national minorities, exempting them from the increase in group sizes and applying to them reduced criteria for retaining legal personality. The continuity of the minority network was therefore the result of a derogation within an austerity policy, and not of a pedagogical intention — a dependence of the intercultural dimension on decisions external to the curriculum.

The Republic of Moldova illustrates the most elaborate form of the protective model: beyond education in Romanian, the system has developed a national Romanian language curriculum intended for early childhood education institutions with instruction in minority languages (Russian, Gagauz, Bulgarian, Ukrainian), pursuing simultaneously the preservation of the mother tongue and linguistic integration into the national space — a rare balance between the preservation of identity and civic cohesion.

Bulgaria and Serbia occupy an intermediate position: both recognise the right to education and to the preservation of the linguistic identity of minorities, yet instruction in the state language remains dominant at the preschool level, without a comparable mechanism for protecting the minority network.

At the opposite pole lies Ukraine, which illustrates a trajectory of progressive restriction. The language reforms initiated through the Law on Education and through the law on the functioning of the state language (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2017, 2019) have gradually limited instruction in minority languages, preschool and primary education remaining the last levels with extensive access to the mother tongue. The result is an integrationist model centred on the state language, opposed to the Moldovan one — the most eloquent contrast in the entire corpus, since two states with comparable ethnolinguistic structures adopt radically different solutions.

4.3. D3 — Intercultural Contents

All the curricula draw on themes such as the family, the community, traditions and festivities — natural vehicles for addressing diversity at preschool age — but the degree to which the intercultural aim is made explicit differs. Romania, the Republic of Moldova and Serbia formulate competences oriented towards knowing and respecting differences, openness towards the other and living together. Bulgaria, through its dedicated standard, offers the most detailed specification of the expected intercultural competences. Ukraine integrates contents concerning belonging to society and community, yet the emphasis placed on national identity and on the state language tends to subordinate the properly intercultural dimension of living together with minorities.

4.4. D4 — Dedicated Curricular Documents

This dimension clearly divides the corpus into two categories. Only two states possess curricular instruments explicitly devoted to the intercultural dimension. The Republic of Moldova has developed the optional curriculum “Cultura bunei vecinătăți”, designed for preschool children, which directly addresses living together, mutual knowledge and good neighbourliness among ethnic communities (Ministry of Education, Culture and Research, n.d.) — an instrument with few equivalents at European level for this age group. Bulgaria has the State Educational Standard on Intercultural Education, which regulates this dimension normatively and explicitly (Ministry of Education and Science of Bulgaria, 2016b). The other three states treat interculturality as a transversal dimension of the general curricular document, without a distinct instrument for the preschool level.

4.5. D5 and D6 — The Training of Teaching Staff and the Inclusion of Vulnerable Groups

The two dimensions are treated together, since the available evidence is of the same nature and unevenly distributed across states — an asymmetry that must be acknowledged as a limitation of the analysis.

The preparation of educators for addressing diversity is the dimension most weakly represented in the curricular documents proper, being as a rule regulated separately, through training standards. For four of the states analysed, the finding therefore remains at a declarative-normative level. Only in the case of Bulgaria are independent evaluations available: a report on the early inclusion of Roma children signals a deficit in the preparation of early childhood education staff in areas such as inclusive education, ethnic diversity and second-language acquisition, compounded by the small number of Roma mediators and assistants (Open Society Institute Sofia, 2020).

The inclusion of children from vulnerable groups constitutes a point of declarative convergence and, at the same time, of divergence at the level of concrete challenges. All five states assume it as an aim of early childhood education, yet the situation of Roma children remains the most visible common challenge, particularly in Bulgaria and Romania. In the case of Bulgaria, the report cited documents systemic barriers to Roma children's access to early childhood education, phenomena of segregation and an insufficient reflection of their cultural and linguistic identity in the curriculum (Open Society Institute Sofia, 2020). In the case of Ukraine, the issue of inclusion has become more complex after 2022, through its overlap with the challenge of children affected by conflict and internal displacement.

4.6. Comparative Synthesis

Table 1. The integration of the intercultural dimension into the early childhood education curriculum of five Danubian states

Dimension	Romania	Rep. of Moldova	Bulgaria	Ukraine	Serbia
D1 — Status	Explicit principle	Transversal; multicultural approach	Dedicated document	Subordinated to the state language	Principle: respect for diversity

Dimension	Romania	Rep. of Moldova	Bulgaria	Ukraine	Serbia
D2 — Language	Guaranteed; network kept via derogatory thresholds (2025)	Integrationist multilingual model	Recognised; teaching mainly in state language	Progressively restricted (2017–2023)	Recognised; teaching mainly in state language
D3 — Contents	Present; aims of living together	Present, explicit	The most detailed	Present; emphasis on national identity	Present; aims of diversity
D4 — Document	No (transversal)	Yes (“Cultura bunei vecinătăți”)	Yes (Ordinance no. 13/2016)	No (transversal)	No (transversal)
D5 — Training	Regulated separately	Regulated separately	Documented deficit	Regulated separately	Regulated separately
D6 — Vulnerable groups	Declared; the Roma challenge	Declared	Declared; documented barriers (Roma)	Declared + children affected by conflict	Declared

5. Discussion

The analysis highlights a declarative convergence and a functional divergence. At the level of principles, all the riparian states recognise cultural diversity and inclusion as values of early childhood education — a consensus that reflects the influence of shared international benchmarks. At the level of concrete solutions, however, the way in which each system operationalises the intercultural dimension differs substantially.

5.1. A Typology of the Models of Integrating Interculturality

On the basis of the results, we propose a typology of three models, built on the intersection of two criteria derived from the analysis: the normative visibility of interculturality (the presence or absence of a dedicated curricular instrument) and the orientation of language policy (the protection or the restriction of education in minority languages). The typology does not constitute a hierarchy of values, but an analytical instrument for ordering the differences observed.

The first is the **model with a dedicated curricular instrument**, illustrated by the Republic of Moldova and Bulgaria. Both states have developed documents explicitly devoted to the intercultural dimension: Moldova through the optional curriculum

“Cultura bunei vecinătăți”, oriented towards effective coexistence among ethnic communities, and Bulgaria through the corresponding state educational standard. The specific feature of this model is the visibility and the intentional character of intercultural education, treated as a distinct object rather than as a diffuse value.

The second is the **transversal-integrationist model**, illustrated by Romania and Serbia, in which interculturality is assumed as a guiding principle and as a transversal value, infused throughout the curriculum, without a separate document. To this model Romania adds a component of institutional maintenance of the network of education in minority languages, guaranteed in legislation but — as has been shown — dependent on derogations granted within policies of a different nature.

The third is the **integrationist model centred on the state language**, illustrated by Ukraine. Although the curriculum acknowledges belonging to society and community, the general orientation of educational policy subordinates the intercultural dimension to the objective of consolidating the state language. The Ukrainian case therefore does not represent a mere curricular variation, but the application in education of a paradigm of linguistic and national security: the intercultural dimension is not denied in the pedagogical document, but reconfigured from outside it, through structural policy.

5.2. The Fundamental Tension: Identity and Openness

The three models may be read as different responses to the same tension identified in the theoretical framework: the balance between the transmission of the identity and language of one’s own group and openness towards the language and culture of the majority community. The Moldovan model explicitly seeks a balance between the two; the Ukrainian model tips the scales towards integration into the state language; the Romanian and Serbian models rely on the coexistence of principles, without a dedicated instrument. The Danubian specificity — the diversity of historical, autochthonous national minorities — makes this balance particularly sensitive: what is at stake is not the integration of newly arrived populations, but the management of a diversity sedimented over centuries, part of the identity of local communities.

5.3. Convergences, the Implementation Gap and Limitations

Beyond the divergences, two elements bring the five systems closer together. The first is the recognition, at least declarative, of inclusion as an aim, accompanied by a common challenge — the situation of Roma children, documented as insufficiently resolved above all in Bulgaria and Romania. The second is the recurrent gap between curricular provision and the capacity for application, visible above all at the level of teacher training.

This gap does not remain a mere hypothesis. Although international comparative measurements concern 15-year-old pupils rather than the preschool level — which is why they cannot be used as direct evidence regarding early childhood education — they do provide a systemic indicator of the capacity to ensure equity of outcomes. In Romania, the performance gap between pupils from the extreme socio-economic quartiles is the widest among the participating countries, alongside that of the Slovak Republic, and the disparities related to the area of residence are among the largest (OECD, 2023). Interpreted with caution, this finding indicates that, beyond the generosity of curricular principles, the capacity of systems to convert provision into outcome remains limited — and that children from disadvantaged groups, a category that often overlaps with that of the minorities targeted by intercultural education, are the most exposed. Strengthening the capacity to design and implement curricular reforms is, moreover, the object of a technical assistance programme carried out jointly by Bulgaria and Romania (European Commission, 2024) — a confirmation both of the institutional recognition of the problem and of the pertinence of a logic of comparative learning, which the present study extends to the Danube region as a whole.

The limitations of the study follow from the methodological option: the analysis targets the prescribed curriculum, not the curriculum actually realised in the practice of kindergartens. To this is added the asymmetry of the evidence — independent evaluations concerning staff training and inclusion are available for Bulgaria, but not equivalently for the other states — which calls for caution in generalising the findings regarding D5 and D6.

6. Conclusions

The qualitative-comparative analysis of the curricular documents of five Danube basin states has highlighted a convergence at the level of principles and a marked

divergence at the level of concrete solutions, above all with regard to linguistic diversity and to the existence of dedicated curricular instruments.

The principal contribution of the paper is the proposed typology, with three models of integrating interculturality into Danubian early childhood education: the model with a dedicated curricular instrument (the Republic of Moldova, Bulgaria), the transversal-integrationist model (Romania, Serbia) and the integrationist model centred on the state language (Ukraine). The first two states also offer transferable examples of good practice — the “Cultura bunei vecinătăți” curriculum and the Bulgarian standard on intercultural education — which show that an explicit, intentional treatment of this dimension is possible even at the preschool level. A second contribution, of an analytical order, is the distinction between pedagogical regulation and structural policy: the Romanian and Ukrainian cases show, from opposite directions, that the fate of the intercultural dimension is often decided outside the curricular text — through norms concerning language, funding and the organisation of the school network. Any evaluation confined to a reading of the curriculum therefore risks missing the determining factors.

Future research could complete the picture through field studies on the effective application of curricular provisions and through investigations into the training of educators for addressing diversity — the dimension most weakly represented in the documents analysed. For the Danube region, where diversity is a structural historical feature rather than a novelty, early intercultural education remains a privileged instrument for cultivating the cohesion of local communities.

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