

**BUILDING INTERCULTURAL SOCIAL COMPETENCE IN FUTURE PRIMARY  
SCHOOL TEACHERS THROUGH STRUCTURED PARENT ENGAGEMENT  
PROGRAMS**

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**Abstract:** This article investigates how structured parent engagement programs embedded in teacher preparation curricula can serve as a powerful vehicle for developing intercultural social competence in future primary school teachers. In increasingly diverse educational settings, the capacity to work respectfully and effectively with families from varied cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds has emerged as a critical professional competency. The article draws on intercultural communication theory, the ecological model of teacher professional development, and empirical findings from teacher preparation programs in Europe, Asia, and Central Asia to argue that genuine parent engagement — as distinct from passive observation or procedural compliance — cultivates the interpersonal sensitivity, cultural awareness, and collaborative orientation that define intercultural social competence. A three-phase developmental model is proposed, moving from awareness to skill acquisition to integrated professional practice, with specific program components and assessment criteria for each phase. The Uzbek educational context, with its distinctive cultural traditions of community solidarity and family involvement in children's education, provides a recurring contextual reference. The article concludes that structured parent engagement programs, when designed with pedagogical intentionality, represent not merely a training exercise but a transformative dimension of teacher professional formation.

**Keywords:** intercultural social competence, pre-service teacher education, parent engagement, teacher preparation, family diversity, professional identity, collaborative competence, intercultural communication, Uzbekistan, primary education.

Classrooms in the twenty-first century are social and cultural crossroads. Primary school teachers encounter students and families from diverse ethnic, linguistic, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds, each bringing distinct values, expectations, and ways of engaging with educational institutions. This diversity is not a peripheral feature of contemporary schooling — it is its defining reality, and it places demands on teacher social competence that traditional teacher preparation programs have been slow to address.

Among the most significant of these demands is the capacity for intercultural social competence in family-school relations. Teachers who lack this competence may unknowingly communicate disrespect to families from minority backgrounds, misinterpret culturally grounded parenting practices as deficiencies, or fail to build the genuine partnerships with diverse families that support children's learning. The consequences of this failure are not abstract: research consistently demonstrates that children whose families are meaningfully engaged with school achieve better academic and social outcomes across all cultural groups, and that the quality of family engagement is powerfully shaped by teachers' interpersonal and intercultural competence (Epstein, 2011; Henderson & Mapp, 2002).



Teacher education programs have a central responsibility for developing this competence. Yet the way in which family-school partnership is treated in most teacher preparation programs — as a procedural module, a brief practicum requirement, or a theoretical topic — is inadequate to the depth of social and intercultural learning it requires. This article argues for a more ambitious approach: the embedding of structured parent engagement programs within teacher preparation curricula as a deliberate, extended arena for the development of intercultural social competence.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 defines intercultural social competence and analyzes its relevance to family-school partnership. Section 3 examines the theoretical foundations for parent engagement as a site of teacher professional formation. Section 4 presents a three-phase developmental model for building intercultural social competence through parent engagement programs. Section 5 addresses assessment and evaluation. Section 6 examines the specific implications for teacher education in Uzbekistan. Section 7 presents conclusions and recommendations.

Social competence, in the context of teacher professional practice, refers to the integrated set of interpersonal, communicative, and relational capacities that enable effective professional relationships. Intercultural social competence extends this concept by adding the specific capacities required for effective relationships across cultural difference — the ability to communicate respectfully and effectively with people whose cultural frameworks, communicative styles, and worldviews differ substantially from one's own.

Deardorff's (2006) widely cited model of intercultural competence identifies attitudes (respect, openness, curiosity), knowledge and comprehension (cultural self-awareness, cultural knowledge, sociolinguistic awareness), and skills (listening, observing, evaluating, analyzing) as the three foundational elements. Applied to the teacher-parent context, this model suggests that intercultural social competence in family-school partnership requires: respectful attitudes toward diverse family cultures and childrearing practices; knowledge of the cultural communities served by one's school; and the practical skills to listen across cultural difference, adapt one's communicative approach to different family contexts, and engage with cultural knowledge that challenges one's professional assumptions.

The relevance of intercultural social competence to family-school partnership in contemporary primary education is substantial and well-documented. Lareau (2003) demonstrated in her landmark ethnographic study that family-school partnerships are profoundly shaped by class and cultural dynamics, with middle-class families — whose cultural capital more closely matches the institutional culture of schools — engaging more comfortably and effectively than working-class and minority families. Teachers who lack intercultural social competence tend to reproduce these inequalities, inadvertently reinforcing the patterns of exclusion that undermine educational equity.

More recent research (Achinstein & Athanases, 2005; Sleeter, 2008) demonstrates that cultural responsiveness in family-school partnership is teachable — that structured educational experiences can significantly develop pre-service teachers' intercultural social competence — but that this development requires more than exposure to diversity. It requires guided reflection on one's own cultural assumptions, structured engagement with families from different backgrounds, and sustained support for the often uncomfortable process of confronting cultural bias in professional practice.

The theoretical case for treating parent engagement as a site of teacher professional formation draws on several complementary frameworks. Three are particularly foundational for the developmental model proposed in this article.



Transformative learning theory, developed by Mezirow (1991), describes the process by which deep-seated assumptions and frames of reference are challenged and transformed through critical reflection on disorienting experience. Mezirow argues that the most significant forms of adult learning — the kinds that change not merely what one knows but how one knows — are triggered by experiences that do not fit within existing interpretive frameworks, forcing the learner to examine and revise those frameworks. In the context of pre-service teacher education, genuine engagement with families from diverse backgrounds provides exactly these kinds of disorienting experiences: encounters that challenge student teachers' assumptions about what 'normal' families look like, how 'good' parents behave, and what schools owe to families different from the majority culture. When these experiences are accompanied by guided reflection and conceptual support, they create the conditions for transformative learning about cultural difference and professional role.

Contact theory, originating in Allport's (1954) work on intergroup relations and elaborated by Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) in a comprehensive meta-analysis, provides a second theoretical foundation. Contact theory demonstrates that meaningful contact with members of outgroups — under conditions of equal status, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and institutional support — reduces prejudice and builds positive relational orientation. Applied to pre-service teacher education, this framework suggests that structured engagement with diverse families — under conditions of genuine partnership rather than professional hierarchy, with common goals centered on children's wellbeing, and with institutional support from mentors and supervisors — can reduce the cultural bias and stereotype-based judgment that impede effective intercultural family-school partnership.

Situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991) provides the third foundational framework by emphasizing that professional competence is developed through legitimate participation in authentic professional practice communities, not through decontextualized instruction. Student teachers who participate genuinely in the family-school partnership practices of their practicum schools — attending parent meetings, contributing to family communication, engaging with parents about their children's learning — develop intercultural social competence through the situated practice that produces genuine competence, rather than the classroom simulation that produces knowledge about competence.

Building on the theoretical foundations above, this section proposes a three-phase developmental model for building intercultural social competence in pre-service primary teachers through structured parent engagement programs. The three phases — awareness, skill acquisition, and integrated practice — correspond to the progressive deepening of professional formation that transformative learning theory describes.

**Phase One: Cultural Awareness and Self-Examination.** The foundation of intercultural social competence is self-awareness: understanding one's own cultural background, assumptions, and biases, and recognizing how these shape one's perceptions of and responses to families from different backgrounds. Many student teachers enter preparation programs with limited explicit awareness of their own cultural positioning; they experience their cultural frameworks as simply 'normal' rather than as one cultural perspective among many. The first phase of the developmental model aims to disrupt this unreflective normality through a combination of structured self-examination, conceptual input, and guided community inquiry.

Cultural autobiography exercises — in which student teachers explore their own family, community, and educational histories and examine how these experiences have shaped their assumptions about education and family involvement — are a powerful starting point. These exercises, described by Milner (2010) as essential for developing culturally responsive teaching,



begin the reflective process that intercultural social competence development requires. Combined with conceptual input on cultural variation in family-school relations, models of family involvement, and the research evidence on the impact of cultural bias in teacher-family interaction, cultural autobiography prepares student teachers for the community inquiry experiences that follow.

Community funds of knowledge projects, adapting the methodology developed by Moll et al. (1992), engage student teachers in structured investigation of the cultural, linguistic, and social resources of the communities their practicum schools serve. Through interviews with parents and community members, analysis of community institutions and practices, and participant observation in community contexts, student teachers discover the 'funds of knowledge' — the rich intellectual, cultural, and practical resources — that diverse families bring to their children's education. This discovery challenges deficit assumptions and builds the genuine respect for family diversity that intercultural social competence requires.

**Phase Two: Skill Acquisition Through Structured Practice.** Building on the awareness developed in Phase One, the second phase focuses on the acquisition of specific intercultural communicative and relational skills through structured practice. The skills targeted in this phase include: cross-cultural communicative adaptation; active listening across cultural difference; strengths-based communication with diverse families; and the facilitation of collaborative problem-solving in culturally diverse contexts.

Structured role-play and simulation exercises provide a practice environment in which student teachers can develop and refine these skills before encountering real families. Effective simulations for intercultural family-school partnership training should be developed from authentic research on family-school interaction in culturally diverse contexts, should present genuine complexity rather than stylized scenarios with obvious correct responses, and should be accompanied by structured debriefing that attends explicitly to the intercultural dimensions of the interaction. Video review of role-play exercises — in which student teachers observe and analyze their own communicative behavior — is particularly effective for developing the observational precision that intercultural competence requires.

Mentored initial parent contacts — structured opportunities to engage with real parents under the guidance of experienced teachers — bridge the gap between simulation and independent practice. Student teachers who have developed basic intercultural communicative skills through simulation are better prepared to apply and extend these skills in authentic interactions when they have both the conceptual frameworks to interpret what they experience and the mentoring support to process and learn from it.

**Phase Three: Integrated Professional Practice.** The third phase involves the full integration of intercultural social competence into student teachers' emerging professional identity and practice. At this stage, student teachers take genuine responsibility for family-school partnership activities — leading parent meetings, managing communication with diverse families, facilitating family involvement in classroom learning — with decreasing levels of direct supervision and increasing professional independence.

The key developmental challenge of Phase Three is identity integration: the process by which the intercultural social competencies developed in the earlier phases become genuinely part of the student teacher's professional self, rather than externally imposed requirements. Student teachers who reach this stage of integration approach diverse families with genuine curiosity and respect rather than professional compliance; they seek out family perspectives rather than merely accommodating them; and they experience the cultural diversity of their school community as a professional resource rather than a challenge to be managed.



Portfolio-based reflective documentation throughout all three phases provides the developmental record that enables student teachers to track their growth, identify persistent challenges, and articulate their emerging professional identity in relation to intercultural family-school partnership. Portfolios that include evidence of community inquiry, reflective analysis of parent engagement experiences, samples of culturally responsive communication, and mentor feedback provide a comprehensive account of intercultural social competence development that supports both formative and summative assessment.

The assessment of intercultural social competence development requires approaches that are authentic, multidimensional, and sensitive to the process as well as the outcome of development. Three assessment approaches are particularly well-suited to the developmental model proposed in this article.

Authentic performance assessment — direct observation of student teachers' intercultural family-school interactions, evaluated against explicit competence criteria — provides the most valid measure of the competencies the model aims to develop. Observation protocols should assess both observable communicative behaviors (active listening indicators, cultural adaptation strategies, collaborative facilitation moves) and underlying dispositions (respect, openness, genuine curiosity) that are expressed in the quality of relational engagement. Multiple observations across different family and cultural contexts provide a more reliable assessment of intercultural social competence than any single interaction can yield.

Structured critical incident analysis — in which student teachers analyze specific intercultural interactions using conceptual frameworks, identify what worked and what did not, and articulate implications for future practice — develops the reflective metacognition that sustains intercultural social competence development beyond the pre-service period. Critical incident analyses submitted at regular intervals throughout the program provide both assessment evidence and formative learning opportunities.

Community partner feedback — structured input from parents and community members who have engaged with student teachers in the program — provides a dimension of assessment that professional observers alone cannot supply. When families from diverse backgrounds are given genuine voice in evaluating student teachers' intercultural competence, their assessments often reveal dimensions of cultural responsiveness that professional observers from the majority culture may not perceive.

The framework developed in this article has specific implications for teacher education in Uzbekistan. Three dimensions deserve particular attention.

The cultural tradition of collective responsibility for children's education — embedded in the mahalla structure and in the broader Uzbek cultural value of *jamoatchilik* (communal solidarity) — provides a powerful cultural resource for intercultural social competence development. Student teachers who are supported to understand and genuinely appreciate this tradition, rather than merely acknowledging it procedurally, develop a foundation of cultural respect that can extend to other aspects of family diversity. Teacher education programs in Uzbekistan that draw explicitly on the mahalla tradition as a resource for family-school partnership — inviting mahalla leaders to contribute to student teacher preparation, designing practicum experiences that connect schools with mahalla community structures — leverage a culturally embedded competence that is both educationally powerful and authentically Uzbek.

The linguistic diversity of Uzbek society — with significant communities speaking Tajik, Russian, Karakalpak, and other languages alongside the official Uzbek — creates specific intercultural communicative demands for teachers that preparation programs must address.



Student teachers who develop basic communicative awareness and sensitivity in relation to Uzbekistan's major linguistic communities, and who learn strategies for supporting family communication across language barriers, are better prepared for the realities of the schools they will serve.

The ongoing expansion of international connections in Uzbek education — through programs such as Erasmus+, partnerships with international universities, and the increasing presence of international families in Uzbek cities — creates additional intercultural demands that teacher preparation must address. Student teachers who develop robust intercultural social competence during pre-service preparation are better positioned to contribute to Uzbekistan's educational internationalization than those prepared only for culturally homogeneous school settings.

Structured parent engagement programs, when designed with pedagogical intentionality and theoretical grounding, provide a powerful vehicle for the development of intercultural social competence in future primary school teachers. The three-phase developmental model proposed in this article — moving from cultural awareness through skill acquisition to integrated professional practice — provides a coherent framework for embedding this development systematically in teacher preparation curricula.

The key recommendations emerging from this analysis are as follows. Teacher education programs should treat parent engagement not as a procedural requirement but as a significant site of professional formation, allocating substantial curricular time and skilled mentorship to this dimension of preparation. Programs should design parent engagement experiences that genuinely challenge student teachers' cultural assumptions and provide supported opportunities for transformative learning about cultural difference. Assessment of intercultural social competence should be authentic, multidimensional, and should include genuine input from diverse families and communities. And teacher education institutions should build genuine partnerships with the diverse communities their programs serve, treating these communities as co-educators of the next generation of primary teachers.

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