Programme *Adventures of the Other*: developing children's intercultural competences in the context of mother tongues

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Abstract
The aim of this article is to present the "Adventures of the Other" programme in the context of educational challenges arising from socio-cultural transformations reflected in Polish kindergartens and schools, with particular attention to the implementation of compulsory education for students from Ukraine after 2022. Against the background of theories, concepts, and research on otherness, cultural diversity, and child development, the article outlines the programme's rationale, theoretical foundations, and methodology. The programme supports the development of children's intercultural competences through the use of intercultural fairy tales and the integration of mother tongues into educational activities. This approach fosters linguistic awareness, mutual understanding, peer relationships, and identity formation. The article also discusses the key stages of the programme's development over a 16-year period, from its initial pilot implementation in Podlasie in 2010 to its third edition conducted by IBE in 2024. The paper is structured into five parts: programme history, socio-scientific context, target groups, content and methods of implementation, and concluding remarks.

Keywords: *intercultural competences, mother tongues, pedagogical innovation, linguistic diversity, Ukrainian migration, fairy-tale-based learning, art therapy, children's stereotypes*

Introduction

This article adopts an analytical-descriptive approach, combining an examination of contemporary socio-cultural challenges with an account of the pedagogical programme "Adventures of the Other," initially developed and piloted in 2010. It does not present findings from a fully designed empirical study but rather focuses on the programme's theoretical assumptions, educational structure, and pedagogical potential.

The analysis is situated within broader socio-cultural transformations, particularly those related to migration processes and the arrival of Ukrainian children in Polish schools after 2022. It draws on selected theoretical perspectives, including Nikitorowicz's concept of encountering the Other, Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, key developmental theories (Piaget, 1952, Vygotsky, 1978, Erikson, 1963), and established models of intercultural competence (Barrett, 2018a, Barrett, 2018b, Magala, 2011; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development is used to discuss how support for the mother tongue may facilitate learning and adaptation in new linguistic environments.

The article further explores the programme's capacity to create pedagogical space for the inclusion of children's mother tongues in the development of intercultural competences. It also refers to earlier pilot implementations and recognitions, including the OMEP 2012 award. The programme is presented as the outcome of a 16-year developmental process, from initial pilots in the Podlasie region to its 2024 implementation by the Educational Research Institute (IBE). It incorporates experiential methods such as intercultural storytelling and arts-based activities aimed at supporting peer relations, emotional resilience, and identity development in preschool and early school-aged children.

The article is structured into five parts: programme history, socio-scientific context, target group, content, and implementation methods.

Programme history

The "Adventures of the Other" programme has a 16-year developmental history. It was initially designed in 2010 as a pedagogical innovation. From its inception, an interdisciplinary and international team of researchers and practitioners contributed to the development of its theoretical foundations, as well as to the design of intercultural tales, lesson scenarios, and supporting educational activities. This team included pedagogues, psychologists, philologists, cultural experts, teachers, students, and representatives of non-governmental organisations.

This collaborative framework enabled the implementation of pilot versions of the programme in kindergartens and schools in the Podlasie region, followed by its introduction in other educational institutions across Poland. The pilot phase was preceded by diagnostic studies on children's perceptions of Otherness (in the first stage) and attitudes towards individuals with migrant backgrounds (in the second stage). It was also accompanied by evaluation activities addressed both to educators implementing the programme and to participating children. The pilot implementations were conducted by teachers and students of the University of Białystok, who were prepared for programme delivery through cyclical training sessions. Following the completion of the pilot phase, further training cycles were organised in 2011 and 2015 for teaching staff and students intending to implement an updated version of the programme in their respective institutions.

The outcomes of the pilot phase include two scientific and methodological monographs: *Adventures of the Other. Tales in Intercultural Education* (Młynarczuk-Sokołowska, Potoniec, Szostak-Król, 2011) and *Adventures of the Other*. *Intercultural Tales to Integrate Foreign Students* (Młynarczuk-Sokołowska, Potoniec, Szostak-Król, 2015), as well as the instructional film Adventures of the Other II. The programme gained recognition at both regional and international levels. In 2011, it received first place in the Podlasie Voivode's competition "Social Initiative of the Year," followed by first place in the World Organization for Early Childhood Education (OMEP) competition in 2012. Through OMEP, the programme was translated into English and made available via the Polish Committee of OMEP website. Between 2012 and 2016, the programme was implemented by teachers and volunteers in England, Bulgaria, and Germany. It has continued to attract interest from educational practitioners and researchers, and has been presented as an example of research-informed intercultural education initiatives, including during meetings of the European Commission's Working Group on Promoting Common Values and Inclusive Education and Training (2019), under the theme Inclusion of Young Refugees and Migrants through Education: Access, Transitions and Values. In 2023, it was also referenced on the European Commission's website as a project supporting the development of key competences.

As part of the "School Accessible to All" project, implemented by the Educational Research Institute in cooperation with the Ministry of National Education and UNICEF, a third edition of the programme was developed. An integral component of this edition is the volume Adventures of the Other. Intercultural Fairy Tales with Elements of Art Therapy in the Process of Developing Children's Intercultural Competences (Młynarczuk-Sokołowska, Szostak-Król, 2024), published by the Educational Research Institute.

Social and theoretical background of the programme

The programme constitutes an educational response to contemporary socio-cultural transformations that increasingly shape school environments across Europe. In particular, it addresses challenges related to migration, linguistic diversity, and the need to develop intercultural competences among children in inclusive educational settings. It is grounded in the assumption that intercultural education should not only promote openness towards cultural diversity, but also create pedagogical spaces in which children's linguistic and cultural identities are recognized and valued. Within this framework, participants' mother

tongues function not as the central object of instruction, but as a mediating and supportive resource that may foster communication, empathy, and mutual understanding.

Research in multilingual and intercultural education has widely emphasized the role of the mother tongue in children's cognitive, emotional, and social development. The mother tongue (L1) is understood not only as the first language acquired by a child, but also as a key medium of identity formation, emotional security, and meaning-making. Cummins (2000) argues that strong proficiency in the first language provides a cognitive and linguistic foundation for subsequent second-language acquisition and academic achievement. This perspective is supported by UNESCO (2014), which emphasizes the importance of maintaining learners' home languages in order to ensure equitable multilingual education, social inclusion, and the preservation of cultural identity. Contemporary research in multilingual education further indicates that recognizing students' linguistic repertoires contributes positively to their well-being, participation, and sense of belonging within school communities (García & Wei, 2014; Norton, 2013).

These assumptions became particularly visible in the Polish educational context after 24 February 2022, when Russia's aggression against Ukraine led to a rapid influx of Ukrainian refugee children into Polish schools. Many children entered educational institutions shortly after experiencing forced migration, separation, trauma, and prolonged uncertainty. In addition to adapting to a new educational system, they often faced linguistic barriers, disrupted peer relations, and emotional distress related to war experiences and displacement (Tędziagolska, et al., 2022). In such contexts, schools become important spaces for rebuilding a sense of safety, agency, and social belonging. The inclusion of children's mother tongues in educational interactions may therefore serve not only linguistic functions, but also psychosocial and relational ones, potentially reducing exclusion, strengthening peer relationships, and supporting identity continuity.

The programme is theoretically embedded in intercultural education and social constructivist approaches to learning and identity formation. A key point of reference is Jerzy Nikitorowicz's (2005) concept of encountering and understanding the Other, which emphasizes dialogue, openness, and the ethical dimension of intercultural relations. Edward T. Hall's (1984) iceberg model of culture further conceptualizes visible cultural manifestations as only a small part of deeper systems of values, beliefs, communication patterns, and identity structures. This perspective is complemented by Geert Hofstede's theory of cultural dimensions (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010), which describes culture as a form of collective mental programming that shapes perceptions, behaviours, and social relations. Together, these frameworks support the assumption that intercultural learning requires moving beyond surface-level representations of cultural difference towards deeper understanding and reflective engagement.

Developmental and socio-cultural theories of learning further inform the programme's conceptual framework. Piaget's (1975) constructivist approach highlights the active role of children in constructing knowledge through interaction with their environment, while Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory emphasizes the importance of language, social interaction, and mediation in cognitive development. In particular, Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development provides a useful framework for understanding how the use of children's mother tongues may support learning, participation, and adaptation in new linguistic environments. Erikson's (1997) theory of psychosocial development further underscores the importance of identity formation and social recognition during childhood and adolescence, especially in contexts of cultural transition and displacement.

Research on stereotypes, prejudice, and social categorization in childhood also informs the programme (Davidson et al., 1995). Contemporary societies are increasingly characterized by diversity related to language, ethnicity, religion, migration histories, and social identities. Such differences may become sources of exclusion, symbolic boundaries, and "us–them" distinctions (Bauman, 1996; Grzybowski, 2008; Nikitorowicz, 2005). Language plays a particularly significant role in these processes, as it functions not only as a communicative tool but also as a visible marker of belonging, identity, and cultural recognition.

Consequently, creating opportunities for positive intercultural and interlinguistic encounters in early childhood education may be important for reducing prejudice and fostering inclusive attitudes.

Within this framework, intercultural competences are understood as a combination of knowledge, attitudes, skills, and critical awareness that enable individuals to communicate and interact effectively and appropriately in culturally diverse situations (Deardorff, 2006; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009; Barrett, 2018a, Barrett, 2018b). Byram (1997) further emphasizes that linguistic competence constitutes an inseparable dimension of intercultural competence, as language mediates cultural meanings, perspectives, and relationships. The Council of Europe's Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (Barrett, 2018a) similarly highlights empathy, openness, respect for diversity, and multilingual awareness as key competences for democratic and inclusive societies.

Within this conceptual framework, the programme assumes that intercultural competences should be developed through children's everyday experiences and relational environments, including their linguistic practices and identity resources. Magala's (2011, 40) metaphor of intercultural competences as a "backpack of tools" for navigating diverse cultural realities captures their practical and dynamic character. By engaging children in playful interactions involving different languages and cultural expressions, the programme seeks to foster empathy, curiosity, inclusion, and reflective engagement with diversity. Rather than treating multilingualism as an educational obstacle, it conceptualizes linguistic diversity as a pedagogical resource that may support intercultural dialogue and inclusive peer relationships.

Programme recipients and content

The programme "Adventures of the Other" is intended for children aged 6–10. The need to develop intercultural competences from early childhood is widely supported by research as well as pedagogical practice. Existing studies suggest that, in the absence of educational interventions addressing equality and fostering positive attitudes towards the Stranger and the Other, children's perceptions of difference may take simplified or negative forms. Empirical findings indicate that even very young children tend to hold stereotypical representations of social groups, including age-related biases (Davidson et al., 1995; cf. Shutts et al., 2013). Similarly, children aged 7–13 may exhibit stereotypical and essentialist thinking regarding various social categories, including ethnic, linguistic, and cultural groups (Powlishta, Serbin, Doyle, & White, 1994; Benitez et al., 2022).

The programme is implemented in both kindergarten and primary school settings. It provides a pedagogical framework for addressing content related to intercultural education, as outlined in the national core curriculum for preschool and general education (Regulation of the Minister of National Education, 2026). A key component of the initiative is the inclusion of languages spoken by children within a given group or class, which may support identity affirmation and foster awareness of linguistic diversity as a meaningful dimension of intercultural interaction.

The initiative aims to create conditions for the development of intercultural competences grounded in respect for diversity, emotional openness towards interpersonal encounters with Others, and adherence to principles of equal treatment. Its relevance is further reinforced by ongoing processes of social diversification and increasing mobility, which contribute to more frequent contact between individuals from different cultural backgrounds.

The structure of the programme's fairy tales reflects a gradual progression of human differences, ranging from those closest to the child (biological and developmental), through socio-economic conditions, to cultural and identity-related diversity. In this way, the narratives address themes such as disability, developmental differences, and ethnic, national, or religious diversity, highlighting varied needs and forms of social exclusion. Each story includes a 12-year-old boy named Inny (the Other), presented as a puppet character who recounts observed or experienced situations. The character is designed to foster positive associations with difference and to model inclusive attitudes. Rather than functioning as an

authority figure in a strict sense, Inny serves as a narrative mediator who encourages reflection, empathy, and pro-social responses towards individuals perceived as different from the majority group.

Methods and forms of work

The implementation of the programme is based on a structured sequence of educational activities comprising two main stages: (1) classes centred on intercultural fairy tales, enriched with activating didactic methods; and (2) reinforcing classes designed to consolidate the knowledge and skills acquired during the initial sessions and to extend them with related content. This cyclical structure supports both the introduction and reinforcement of intercultural learning outcomes.

Intercultural fairy tales form part of the broader tradition of psychoeducational storytelling and are situated within the framework of educational and developmental bibliotherapy. They are designed to sensitise children to the diversity embedded in social reality across biological, economic, social, and cultural dimensions. Rather than presenting difference as exceptional, these narratives aim to normalise heterogeneity and encourage children to recognise diversity as a valuable aspect of human experience. They also seek to foster curiosity about the world and openness towards encounters with the Stranger and the Other, understood as individuals who may differ in terms of appearance, health, socio-economic status, religion, language, or cultural background.

Given that such encounters may be challenging for young children, intercultural fairy tales may function as preparatory tools that support the development of positive attitudes and adaptive behavioural patterns. At the same time, they contribute to identity formation by strengthening children's understanding of their own cultural belonging and social identity (Potoniec, 2011). Engagement with these narratives may therefore enhance awareness of the multidimensional nature of diversity and stimulate cognitive curiosity as well as openness to interaction with others. The didactic strategies applied in the programme (e.g., evaluative, practical, and exploratory methods) are designed to engage cognitive, emotional, and psychomotor domains of learning. They also create opportunities for verbal, artistic, and physical expression, encouraging active participation, independent thinking, and the integration of personal experiences and observations. Importantly, classroom activities incorporate elements of the languages spoken by children from minority and migrant backgrounds, thereby promoting linguistic inclusion.

In the third edition of the programme, particular emphasis is placed on intercultural art-based techniques inspired by elements of art therapy. These methods support active learning and the development of intercultural competences while also fostering emotional and social development. Creative activities involving movement, visual expression, and other forms of artistic engagement enable children not only to acquire knowledge about diversity but also to develop strategies for coping with difference and to cultivate open attitudes. Such practices may positively influence children's psycho-emotional well-being by supporting a sense of safety, emotional expression, and constructive group interaction. They also encourage collaboration, peer integration, and the sharing of personal experiences within a supportive educational environment.

An important component of the programme consists of supplementary encounters with individuals representing diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. These meetings provide opportunities for authentic interpersonal and intercultural interaction, enabling children to ask questions, experience linguistic diversity, and engage with perspectives different from their own. Such encounters may also contribute to reducing anxiety related to difference and to challenging existing stereotypes and prejudices. A key element of these sessions involves exposure to various languages spoken by participants' peers or invited guests, allowing children to develop awareness of the multilingual environment in which they live. Optional excursions may further extend these real-world intercultural experiences.

The programme also includes introductory and concluding sessions designed to support pedagogical reflection and to observe children's perceptions of diversity and intercultural relations. The initial phase

involves a preliminary diagnostic process conducted through guided discussions, associative tasks, and reflective activities addressing themes such as diversity, otherness, language, and peer relations. These activities allow educators to gain insight into participants' initial attitudes, stereotypes, and levels of openness towards cultural and linguistic difference.

The concluding phase functions as a reflective stage aimed at identifying potential changes in participants' perceptions and attitudes following engagement in the programme. Through comparative discussion, narrative exercises, and group reflection, it becomes possible to observe possible shifts in children's understanding of diversity, empathy, inclusion, and intercultural communication.

Although the programme is primarily educational in nature rather than experimental, its design provides a framework for qualitative pedagogical inquiry. It offers opportunities for observational analysis and reflective interpretation concerning the development of intercultural competences, multilingual awareness, peer integration, and attitudes towards diversity. As such, the activities may also serve as a basis for future empirical research in educational contexts.

Table 1: Leveraging Mother Tongues to Develop Intercultural Competences in the "Adventures of the Other" Programme.

Method/Activity	Mother tongue (L1) integration	Impact on intercultural competences
Intercultural fairy tales	Incorporates linguistic elements of minority, migrant, and refugee backgrounds into texts and dialogues	Builds empathy through familiarisation with different languages, strengthens identity, and fosters curiosity about the Other
Meetings with Strangers/Others	Children are exposed to native speakers (e.g., Ukrainian) and are encouraged to ask questions	Reduces perceived language barriers and develops awareness of linguistic diversity as a value
Art therapy (3rd edition)	Creative expression involving L1 in movement- and arts-based activities	Supports peer integration, psychological safety, and openness
Initial/final diagnostics	Discussions on diversity with reference to children's linguistic repertoires	Enables observation of potential changes in attitudes towards linguistic difference as an identity marker

Source: Own elaboration based on the three editions of the programme.

Conclusion

Preparing societies for constructive encounters with people perceived as Strangers and Others requires educational initiatives targeting learners across different age groups, beginning in early childhood education. Such initiatives benefit from cyclical and sustained implementation and can address multiple dimensions of human functioning, including cognitive, emotional, and behavioural domains, with particular attention to linguistic diversity. In this context, the recognition and inclusion of participants' first languages (L1) may support identity affirmation and foster awareness of linguistic and cultural plurality.

The Intercultural Competence Development Programme "Adventures of the Other" represents a pedagogical initiative designed to support these processes by engaging children in activities that integrate minority and migrant languages within narrative-based and play-oriented contexts. This approach creates opportunities for educational practice and reflection on attitudes towards Otherness. In particular, practical activities incorporating phrases in children's first languages (L1) are intended to recognise and valorise their linguistic and cultural resources, while encouraging openness to linguistic and cultural diversity.

By foregrounding linguistic and cultural plurality, the programme seeks to create opportunities for developing more positive perceptions of the Other, associated with curiosity, creativity, and appreciation of difference. It also aims to foster the conditions for peer relationships grounded in mutual recognition, respect, and openness to diversity. As this paper presents the design and pedagogical assumptions of the programme rather than an empirical evaluation of its outcomes, its potential contribution to changes in children's perceptions and attitudes requires further systematic empirical investigation.

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