Diversity in Education and Its Social Implications: Predictors of Diversity Competence of the Future Teachers

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Abstract. *This study explores the factors influencing the development of diversity competence in future primary and preschool teachers, focusing on age, religiosity, background, and sexual orientation. Diversity competence refers to the ability to interact effectively with diverse groups across various dimensions, such as culture, gender, religion, and socioeconomic status, allowing educators to create inclusive classroom environments that respect and value each student's unique background. Using the DiKo rating scale, data were collected from 170 student teachers at Babeș-Bolyai University. The analysis employed Pearson correlation and regression models to assess the relationship between these demographic factors and diversity competence. The results indicate that religiosity and age have a significant, though modest, influence on diversity competence, with intrinsic religiosity linked to greater openness to diversity. Conversely, sexual orientation and background were found to have no significant impact on diversity competence. These findings have important implications for teacher education programs, particularly the need to promote empathy, self-reflection, and critical engagement with diverse groups. The study also highlights the importance of future research to further investigate the influence of sexual orientation and background on diversity competence, considering the limitations of the current sample size.*

Key words: *diversity competence, teacher education, demographic predictors.*

1. Introduction

In an era of increasing globalization, diversity has become a defining characteristic of modern societies (Banks & McGee Banks, 2020; Nieto & Bode, 2018). This diversity encompasses a wide range of individual differences, including but not limited to culture, gender, religion, socioeconomic background, and other unique traits that shape one's identity (Nieto & Bode, 2018; Gorski & Pothini, 2018). In educational contexts, teachers frequently face the challenge of meeting the needs of students from these varied cultural, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds. To foster an inclusive learning environment, it is therefore essential for future educators to develop specific competencies that enable them to manage and embrace diversity effectively.

The importance of diversity competence in education lies in its potential to enhance students' social and academic outcomes by fostering empathy, mutual respect, and cultural sensitivity (Banks & McGee Banks, 2020; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2018). This study addresses a key gap in understanding the demographic factors – such as age, religiosity, background, and sexual orientation – that influence diversity competence among future teachers. Identifying these predictors is essential for determining which areas of teacher training require targeted improvements to better equip educators for increasingly diverse classrooms.

This paper aims to expand the existing knowledge on diversity competence by identifying sociodemographic factors that play a significant role in shaping these skills. Specifically, the study's objectives are to examine how age, religiosity, background, and sexual orientation relate to diversity competence and to provide insights into how teacher education programs can integrate training to develop these critical skills. By addressing these objectives, the study seeks to inform policy and curriculum development in teacher education, ultimately promoting a framework that both acknowledges and respects diversity in educational contexts.

2. Theoretical Background

Diversity is a prescriptive approach that seeks, at least rhetorically and programmatically, ways to recognize the differences, identities, and belonging of people. There are numerous models for differentiating the various facets of human diversity. The most well-known approach is to categorize them into six basic dimensions: age, ethnic-cultural origin, religion, gender, sexual identity, and disabilities, referred to as the „Big-6" (Bendl, Eberherr & Mensi-Klarbach, 2012) or „structural categories" (Klinger & Knapp 2007). These six basic dimensions are generally described as „natural" and „personality-forming" and cannot be modified by the individual or can only be changed to a limited extent (Pietzonka, 2016).

In the field of education, diversity is seen as a resource which, when properly managed, can contribute to the development of an inclusive and equitable learning environment.

According to Pietzonka (2016), **diversity competencies** describe a person's ability to competently and constructively manage human heterogeneity. These competencies are essential for teachers working with heterogeneous groups of learners. Pietzonka outlines four main dimensions of diversity competence.

1. **Professional competences**: include knowledge about diversity, prejudice and racism as well as cultural differences. They enable teachers to effectively manage a culturally diverse classroom.
2. **Social skills**: refers to communication and cooperation skills. Empathy plays a key role in recognizing and managing prejudice.
3. **Methodological competences**: these cover the ability to find solutions to diversity issues by applying appropriate teaching and assessment techniques.
4. **Personal competences**: these include self-reflection and tolerance of ambiguity, skills that enable teachers to assess their own biases and adjust their behavior according to the needs of their students.

Diversity education thus becomes a necessity in initial teacher training, aiming to develop the skills needed to create an inclusive learning environment based on mutual respect and collaboration. Nowadays, the diversity in education is an essential aspect and competences of diversity are becoming very important for future teachers working with students from diverse cultural, religious and social backgrounds. The development of these competences could be influenced by several factors, such as age, religiosity, background and sexual orientation. Understanding how these factors influence the diversity competences is essential to support the training of future teachers to create an inclusive educational environment.

One of the factors examined in this paper that may influence diversity competence is age. Studies indicate that younger generations (individuals aged 18–25, often associated with modern societal values and increased exposure to cross-cultural interactions through globalization and digital media; Inglehart & Welzel, 2018; Janmaat & Keating, 2017) tend to show greater tolerance toward diverse groups, including racial and sexual minorities. This openness is largely attributed to their enhanced exposure to different cultures, facilitated by internationalization (Janmaat & Keating, 2017). This exposure to diversity through education or social interactions can contribute to the development of empathy and tolerance. In addition, young people grow up in a more stable socio-economic context, which facilitates the development of values such as freedom of expression and acceptance of others, values that support tolerance and diversity (Inglehart & Welzel, 2017, apud Janmaat & Keating, 2017). Age plays a significant role in shaping diversity competence by influencing cognitive and social-emotional skills, such as empathy, adaptability, and openness to new perspectives. Younger generations, in particular, tend to have greater exposure to diverse cultural experiences, both locally and globally, through digital media, travel, and multicultural educational settings. This heightened exposure enables them to develop a more nuanced understanding of different social and cultural norms, enhancing their ability to empathize with and

engage constructively with people from varied backgrounds. Such experiences foster critical skills for diversity competence, allowing younger individuals to navigate diverse environments more effectively and with greater sensitivity (Inglehart, & Welzel, 2005; Janmaat & Keating, 2017). Although the influence of age on diversity competences is not very strong, there is evidence that it may partly explain how these competences are developed.

Religiosity is a significant factor that can influence diversity competence, particularly through its intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions. Allport & Ross (1967) originally distinguished between intrinsic religiosity, where individuals deeply internalize their beliefs as a guiding force for values and behaviors, and extrinsic religiosity, where religion is practiced primarily for social or personal benefit. Research suggests that intrinsic religiosity is generally associated with greater openness to diversity and more accepting attitudes, as individuals are often driven by moral commitments to empathy and inclusivity rooted in spiritual values of human dignity and worth (Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993; Ysseldyk, Matheson, & Anisman, 2010). Conversely, extrinsic religiosity, where faith is utilized as a social tool, may correlate with biases and prejudices. This form of religiosity often strengthens in-group loyalty, sometimes at the expense of tolerance toward out-groups, fostering exclusionary attitudes (Allport & Ross, 1967; Hunsberger & Jackson, 2005). Recent studies further support that those with extrinsic religious motivations may exhibit stronger preferences for their own group, which can contribute to less inclusive behaviors and perspectives on diversity (Hall, Matz, & Wood, 2010; Johnson, Rowatt, & LaBouff, 2012).

Background can also influence diversity competences, although this impact is not always defined very clearly. Individuals from isolated social areas typically have fewer opportunities to interact with diverse cultural groups, which can lead to the development of more rigid attitudes towards diversity (Putnam, 2015). On the other hand, those who have access to multicultural education and experiences are more likely to develop diversity competencies. In this regard, Hofstede (2001) emphasizes that collectivist cultural norms may limit the acceptance of diversity, whereas individualistic societies tend to be more open to diversity. While models such as Hofstede's collectivist versus individualist framework provide valuable foundational insights into cultural differences, more recent research underscores the fluidity and complexity of cultural norms, which can vary significantly even within the same region or community. This variability highlights the importance of adopting adaptable and context-sensitive approaches when examining diversity in both research and practice. For example, within a single nation, urban and rural areas may differ substantially in terms of cultural values, attitudes, and openness to diversity, challenging the assumptions of static cultural models (Taras, Steel, & Kirkman, 2016; Minkov & Kaasa, 2021). Recent studies suggest that diversity frameworks must account for these intranational variations and the dynamic nature of culture, which is continuously shaped by globalization, migration, and technological advancements (Fischer & Schwartz, 2021). Therefore, a more nuanced understanding

of diversity requires a flexible approach that considers these evolving cultural contexts, rather than relying solely on broad national cultural dimensions. While background alone does not directly account for diversity competencies, having access to educational and multicultural experiences plays a significant role in their development. Sexual orientation, though less frequently examined in this context, could have an indirect effect. McCormack (2012) suggests that individuals from sexual minorities, because of their experiences with marginalization, often cultivate a stronger sense of empathy and heightened awareness of diversity. However, as Herek (2009) points out, the statistical significance of sexual orientation's influence on diversity competencies remains inconsistent, indicating the need for more research to fully understand this connection. Consequently, while sexual orientation might play a part in shaping diversity competencies, the existing literature does not offer enough evidence for definitive conclusions.

In conclusion, age, religiosity, background and sexual orientation are demographic factors that have a complex influence on the development of the diversity competences. Understanding these relationships is very important to develop educational strategies that support the development of an equitable learning environment for all future teachers.

3. Research methodology

This study focuses specifically on sociodemographic factors in analyzing diversity competence because they provide foundational insights into how individual backgrounds shape attitudes and abilities regarding inclusivity. Sociodemographic variables, such as age, religiosity, background, and sexual orientation, are significant in understanding the development of diversity competence as they directly influence personal values, biases, and socialization processes. While other factors, including psychological and environmental influences, also impact diversity competence, sociodemographic factors offer a primary, observable basis for examining diversity-related skills in the context of teacher education programs (Gorski & Goodman, 2021; Banks & McGee Banks, 2020)

3.1. Aim of the research

The main aim of this research was to identify the factors influencing the development of diversity competence in prospective primary and preschool teachers. The research focused on demographic variables such as age, religiosity, background and sexual orientation, and how they influence diversity competence.

3.2. Hypothesis

The hypotheses, which aim to explore the factors affecting diversity competence, are as follows:

H1. *Younger individuals are expected to exhibit higher levels of diversity competence than older individuals.*

H2. *Religiosity has a significant impact on diversity competences.*

H3. *Individuals from urban backgrounds are expected to display higher diversity competence than those from rural areas.*

H4. *Individuals who identify with sexual minority groups may exhibit higher diversity competence.*

3.3. Sample

The sample included 170 students from the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences at Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, with 85% identifying as female and 15% as male. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 30 years, with a mean age of 21.5 years and a standard deviation of 3.2, indicating moderate age variability within the group. Approximately 58% of the students reported urban backgrounds, while 42% came from rural areas.

3.4. Research tools

The DiKo rating scale proposed by Pietzonka (2018) was used for this study and provided good results regarding validity and reliability. This is a self-assessment instrument that measures five dimensions of diversity competence and consists of 13 items.

The research instrument was applied in electronic version using Microsoft Forms and participants completed the questionnaire in approximately 7 minutes. Participation was voluntary, participants were informed about the confidentiality of any sensitive information and informed consent was obtained by the researchers. Data obtained were statistically analyzed using IBM SPSS™ software.

Although an increasing amount of research is focusing on diversity and diversity competencies, the operationalization of these skills remains unclear. While they are frequently mentioned, they have not been consistently defined or thoroughly examined in empirical studies. Building on this, Pietzonka (2018) proposes the DiKo rating scale, which operationalizes *diversity* competence.

The test is aimed at people aged 16 and over. The scale is available in German and English, and the items contain self-assessment tasks for which respondents rate their degree of agreement or disagreement with the given statements using a six-point Likert scale: 0 Strongly disagree, 1 Strongly disagree, 2 Somewhat disagree, 3 Somewhat agree, 4 Strongly agree, 5 Strongly agree.

Subjects' responses are deductive indicators, and mean responses are not possible. It considers a format of constrained, equidistant responses so that the data can be computed on an interval (equidistant) scale.

The DiKo rating scale is a synthesis of deductive and inductive test development strategies. The original 43 items developed based on literature research and preliminary studies were reduced through analysis to 26 items, which were convincing in terms of item difficulty, selectivity (> 0.30), and homogeneity. In 2017, the two researchers drew a nonprobability sample for large-scale testing in an online survey (n = 1,707). Following this survey, a multivariate exploratory factor analysis (Projection Pursuit / PP) was conducted, and the result of this analysis is the 13-item DiKo scale, which assesses five factors

Pietzonka presents the results of the exploratory factor analysis showing that the model with k=5 factors and 13 items, which can explain a variance of 47%, is adequate. The research found that all quality criteria of DiKo are good to very good. Having Cronbach's Alpha α = 0.87, the scale has a very good internal consistency, and the split-half correlation is r = 0.91 which makes the discriminant validity analyses convincing.

4. Results

In order to analyze the links between age, sexual orientation, background and degree of religiosity and the formation of diversity competences, we used Pearson correlation coefficient and simple regressions. Thus, the independent variables (age, sexual orientation, background and degree of religiosity) that could have a significant influence on the dependent variable (level of development of diversity competence) were assessed by testing the significance of their associated regression coefficients.

The results (Table 1) show that some correlations are significant ($p < 0.005$), and others are insignificant. The highest correlations that we identified are between religiosity and diversity competence (*r = 0.346,* $p < 0.005$) and between age and diversity competence (*r = 0.231,* $p < 0.005$). We can observe from these data that age and religiosity have a linear relationship with diversity competency, even though the correlations are not very strong.

Table 1.

Pearson Correlation Matrix between Age, Background, Religiosity, Sexual Orientation and Diversity Competence

	Age	Environ-ment	Religiosity	Sexual Orientation	Diversity Competence
Age	1	-0.127	0.042	-0.009	0.231** (p = 0.003)
Environment	-0.127	1	-0.068	0.015	-0.003
Religiosity	0.042	-0.068	1	0.346** (p < 0.001)	0.107
Sexual Orientation	-0.009	0.015	0.346** (p < 0.001)	1	-0.068
Diversity Competence	0.231** (p = 0.003)	-0.003	0.107	-0.068	1

4.1. Religiosity and competence for diversity

In our simple regression, a linear relationship was found between the variable religiosity and diversity competence ($R^2 = 0.12$, $p < 0.005$), which means that religiosity influences diversity competence ($B = 0.40$, $p < 0.005$).

Table 2.

Regression results for the predictor Religiosity on diversity competence

Predictor	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	F	B	Beta	t	p (Sig.)
Religiosity	0.35	0.12	0.11	22.20	0.40	0.35	4.71	<0.001

The relationship between religiosity and sexism, homophobic bias, and multicultural competence has been researched often (Batson & Burris, 1994; Kirkpatrick, 1993; Batson et al., 2002; Balkin, Schlosser, & Levitt, 2009), most of them demonstrating the relationship between levels of religiosity and various aspects of diversity assessment. To better understand the relationship between religiosity and prejudice, Allport and Ross (1967) differentiated between intrinsic religiosity, arising from sincere internal belief, and extrinsic religiosity, characterized by a utilitarian approach to religion. Individuals with an extrinsic orientation use religion for "security and self-justification," while those with an intrinsic orientation view religion as a guiding moral force (Allport & Ross, 1967). Hunsberger and Jackson (2005) found positive correlations between extrinsic religiosity and intolerance towards minorities, though intrinsic religiosity was not linked to racial prejudice. However, there was a positive correlation between intrinsic religiosity and prejudice against homosexuals.

Batson (1982) also proposes a third religious orientation, the quest-oriented orientation. In his study he demonstrates that even people who view religion as a quest are more tolerant than those with an extrinsic religious orientation.

In our research, respondents were asked to indicate only whether or not they are believers, without further investigation of their religious orientation. Thus, based on the above-mentioned research data we can also explain the positive results of our research by the aspect of religious orientation.

4.2. Age and competence for diversity

Analyzing the causal relationship between the age of the participants in the study and the diversity competence it can be observed that it is not a strong one: ($R^2 = 0.05$), but it is statistically significant: ($p < 0.005$), in the sense that age can be a predictor for this competence, explaining 0.5% of the variance.

Although age does not strongly influence diversity competence, its influence on diversity competence is nevertheless positive (*B = 0.07*). These low values could also be explained by the fact that the research sample has an average age of 22.7 years.

Table 3.

Regression results for the predictor Age on diversity competence

Predictor	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	F	B	Beta	t	p (Sig.)
Age	0.23	0.05	0.05	9.22	0.07	0.23	3.04	0.003

Other research (Janmaat & Keating, 2017; Dejaeghere; Hooghe; Claes, 2012; Dobbernack & Modood, 2013) examining the level of tolerance and acceptance among young adults shows that they tend to be more tolerant of minority groups of people than their parents or grandparents. However, it can be observed that intolerance has not disappeared, especially when it comes to attitudes towards immigrants. Janmaat & Keating (2017) found that in general young people in the UK are more tolerant of racial diversity and homosexuality than previous generations. Trend analysis clearly shows that intolerance of these groups has declined considerably since the 1980s, and indeed some measures of racial diversity suggest that among young people opposition to these types of racial diversity has almost disappeared. Examining attitudes toward immigrants, including support for equal treatment and perceptions of competition, found declining levels of tolerance and, in some cases, slightly lower levels of tolerance among young than middle-aged respondents.

The gradual increase in living standards in the West following World War II is one factor contributing to the greater degree of tolerance. Inglehart and Welzel (apud Janmaat & Keating, 2017) explain this phenomenon by pointing out that younger generations have grown up in more affluent and safe environments. After their basic needs were satisfied, these generations learned and carried with them the so-called postmaterialist values of self-fulfilment, tolerance for others, and freedom of choice and expression throughout their formative years.

4.3. Sexual orientation and diversity competence

In the simple regression conducted, the results do not indicate a significant influence of sexual orientation on diversity competence, with a value of $R^2 = 0.00$ and a negative Beta coefficient (-0.03). This suggests that, in this sample, sexual orientation does not show a strong relationship with diversity competence and the variables tested do not explain the variance observed in diversity competence.

Table 4.

Regression results for the predictor Sexual Orientation on diversity competence

Predictor	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	F	B	Beta	t	p (Sig.)
Sexual Orientation	0.07	0.00	0.00	0.77	-0.03	-0.07	-0.87	0.383

The insignificant result can be attributed to the small number of participants belonging to a sexual minority (11.76%), which limits the generalizability of the results. The literature indicates that studies on the attitudes of sexual minorities towards other forms of human diversity are rare, with much research focusing on the discrimination experienced by these groups rather than their attitudes towards diversity. According to previous research (Herek, 2009; Meyer, 2015), sexual minorities are frequently exposed to prejudice and intolerance, which may indirectly influence their competences to deal with diversity. However, these studies emphasize that sexual minority individuals tend to be more empathetic and have a greater awareness of cultural diversity, although existing research has not sufficiently explored their attitudes towards other minority groups. Thus, the specific influence of sexual orientation on diversity competence remains underexplored. Individual experiences of sexuality are likely to interact with other factors, such as education, social and economic background, to shape attitudes to diversity. For example, McCormack (2012) suggests that recent social changes, such as the legalization of same-sex marriage, have contributed to an increase in acceptance of sexual diversity among young people, but this does not always guarantee positive attitudes towards other forms of diversity.

4.4. Background and diversity competence

Data analysis did not identify a significant influence of background on diversity competence, with nonsignificant values for both $R^2 = 0.00$ and $B = 0.00$. This indicates that the participants' background does not help to explain diversity competence in this sample.

Table 5.

Regression results for the predictor of background on diversity competence

Predictor	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	F	B	Beta	t	p (Sig.)
Background	0.00	0.00	-0.01	0.00	0.00	0.00	-0.04	0.970

These results align with previous research that has not found a clear link between background and diversity competencies (Schmidt & Hunter, 2015). In a globalized

world, individuals' experiences of diversity may be influenced by other factors, such as education or exposure to diverse cultural groups, rather than by their background. These findings could be influenced by the nature of the sample and specific contextual factors. The background, while not appearing to have a direct impact on diversity competence, could be influenced by several additional factors. For example, social mobility and access to educational and cultural opportunities play a key role in shaping perceptions of diversity. Research by Putnam (2015) shows that people who grew up in more socially or economically isolated communities tend to have fewer opportunities to interact with diverse cultural groups and are therefore more likely to develop more rigid attitudes towards diversity. In contrast, individuals exposed to diversity through migration, education and work are more likely to develop diversity competences.

The urban vs. rural context may also influence the degree of diversity that individuals experience on a daily basis. One reason could be because encounters with culturally varied groups are far less common in rural areas than they are in urban areas, where diversity is a key feature. However, by making it easier to acquire ethnic knowledge and experiences even in more remote settings, the acceleration of digitization and online communication may lessen these disparities. This implies that although background matters, its impact on diverse competencies can be altered by having access to contemporary educational and social opportunities.

On the other hand, the value of local social norms and community pressures influence individuals' attitudes towards diversity. Hofstede's (2001) research on cultural dimensions suggests that individuals living in communities with a high level of collectivism may be less open to diversity, as group norms tend to be more restrictive in accepting differences. In contrast, individuals in more individualistic societies are generally more tolerant of diversity and more likely to develop intercultural competence.

5. Discussions

In a general analysis of the data, it can be observed that both religiosity and age influence diversity competence among students who are future teachers, while background and sexual orientation do not show a direct impact. Although age does not strongly influence diversity competence in our study, its positive correlation suggests that as individuals grow older, their competence for understanding and engaging with diversity may increase, albeit marginally. Our findings align with other research that explores the relationship between age and tolerance, such as studies by Janmaat & Keating (2017), Dejaeghere, Hooghe, & Claes (2012), and Dobbernack & Modood (2013). These studies generally suggest that younger generations tend to be more tolerant of minority groups compared to older generations, especially concerning racial diversity and homosexuality. However, these studies also caution that this tolerance may not uniformly extend to all forms of diversity, as attitudes toward immigrants, for example, still reflect some levels of intolerance.

One explanation for the higher levels of tolerance among younger people is their increased exposure to cross-cultural contact. As highlighted by Ford (2011), young people have more opportunities for such interactions than older generations because the immigrant population itself tends to be young. In an increasingly globalized world, young people are more likely to encounter individuals from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds through education, work, social media, and travel. This expanded exposure fosters cross-cultural understanding and can lead to greater empathy and tolerance toward diversity. Furthermore, younger generations now have access to opportunities that were unavailable to older generations, thanks to advancements in globalization and digital technology. Virtual cross-cultural connections have become possible on a scale previously unthinkable due to the rise of social media and international communication platforms. Through these digital spaces, young people are frequently exposed to global perspectives that appear immediately on their screens. While this form of digital cross-cultural exchange differs from face-to-face contact, it can still promote empathy and lessen prejudice. Research suggests that online interactions have the potential to foster intercultural understanding, particularly when people engage in meaningful conversations that emphasize shared values or objectives (McKenna & Bargh, 2004). However, while digital technology provides young people with unprecedented access to global perspectives, exposure to cultural diversity is also shaped by the physical environments individuals inhabit.

In addition to age, religiosity significantly contributes to developing diversity competencies relevant to teaching. Intrinsic religiosity – where faith is deeply internalized – often fosters moral commitments to compassion and inclusivity, which can positively influence educators‘ approaches to diversity (Hunsberger & Jackson, 2005; Ysseldyk, Matheson, & Anisman, 2010). Additionally, social-emotional maturity, which generally advances with age, enhances capacities for empathy, patience, and openness – essential qualities for creating inclusive classroom environments. Older individuals often have broader life experiences that allow them to relate more effectively to students from various backgrounds, fostering a classroom climate where all students feel valued and understood (Jones & Abes, 2013).

The connection between religiosity and prejudice has drawn significant attention over recent years. Although the relationship between religion and prejudice is more complex than previously understood, recent research supports this association (see Hood, Spilka, Hunsberger, & Gorsuch, 1996; Hunsberger, 1995). Studies have attempted to explain why, despite the fact that many religious beliefs forbid such bias, there is often a positive association between religion and prejudice (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992). The positive relationship between religiosity and diversity competence may be a result of both intrinsic and extrinsic orientations, as our study did not distinguish between these forms of religious orientation. People who identify as intrinsically religious may be more accepting of diversity as a result of internalizing moral and ethical lessons about empathy and respect for others. Conversely, extrinsically oriented individuals may view diversity as more of a

social or instrumental concept than as a true embrace of pluralism. This inclusion in our sample could weaken or complicate the interpretation of this positive link.

To better understand the relationship between religious beliefs and prejudice, it is essential to examine not only religious orientation but also the formal doctrines and informal cultural norms of religious groups. This broader approach considers how institutional teachings, community practices, and group dynamics interact with personal religious beliefs to shape attitudes toward others, including those of different races, ethnicities, or faiths. By integrating both individual and group-level factors, researchers can gain a more comprehensive understanding of how religious affiliation influences prejudice, either reinforcing or mitigating it. Duck and Hunsberger (1999) noted that there is limited empirical research exploring the potential influence of formal and informal stances of religious groups on members' self-reported attitudes toward prejudice. Specifically, the extent to which church doctrines and teachings that explicitly discourage or prohibit prejudiced attitudes may contribute to a reduction in such attitudes among adherents remains underexamined. Conversely, members of religious groups that tacitly tolerate or even promote certain prejudices may feel more justified or comfortable in holding and expressing those views. Batson et al. (1993) proposed that while religious organizations often proscribe, or condemn, prejudices like racism, other prejudices, such as homophobia, may not be explicitly condemned, and in some cases, they are even accepted or encouraged by certain religious groups.

Beyond age and religiosity, background factors such as urban versus rural settings may also indirectly shape diversity competence by influencing individuals' exposure to diverse cultures. People in urban areas are often exposed to greater cultural diversity due to population density and the variety of backgrounds represented, which fosters openness, empathy, and adaptability – key components of diversity competence. In contrast, rural areas tend to offer fewer opportunities for direct multicultural interactions. However, digital media and the internet can help bridge this exposure gap, allowing individuals from rural areas to access and engage with multicultural content, which can also contribute positively to their understanding and appreciation of diversity (McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Norris, 2001).

Finally, although background and sexual orientation were not directly influential in this sample, they may still shape diversity competence through indirect pathways. For example, experiences of marginalization – particularly among sexual minorities – can heighten empathy and social awareness, as individuals exposed to prejudice often develop a greater sensitivity to issues of diversity and inclusion (Herek, 2009; Meyer, 2003). Additionally, community diversity can impact openness and attitudes toward inclusivity. Research shows that individuals from more diverse communities may become more accustomed to engaging with people from varied backgrounds, fostering openness and reducing biases (Putnam, 2007). These indirect influences underscore the importance of social environments and personal experiences in shaping diversity competence beyond direct educational interventions.

6. Conclusions

This exploratory study provides valuable insights into the demographic factors influencing diversity competence among future educators, specifically age, background, religiosity, and sexual orientation. The results indicate that students preparing to become teachers are generally more tolerant and view human diversity as a resource. Optimistic theories predict that societies are becoming increasingly tolerant over time due to social, cultural, and technological advancements (Janmaat & Keating, 2017). From a political standpoint, racist opinions and racial intolerance have become largely unacceptable, partly due to historical associations with the Holocaust and Apartheid (Ford, 2008, apud Janmaat & Keating, 2017). Additionally, ongoing efforts to uphold human rights, dignity, and equality through international agreements aim to promote tolerance and respect for diverse cultures and viewpoints.

These findings emphasize the importance of embedding diversity competence training within teacher education programs. The significant influence of religiosity and age suggests that training should focus on fostering openness and empathy, especially for students who may hold more rigid views influenced by extrinsic religious beliefs. Teacher education programs should incorporate critical self-reflection on personal biases and provide practical opportunities for students to interact with diverse groups through multicultural education and experiences. Although background and sexual orientation did not show a significant influence in this study, these factors should not be overlooked. They highlight the need for comprehensive support for all student teachers, ensuring adequate training in diversity competence.

An important aspect in developing diversity competence is regular contact with people from diverse backgrounds, which reduces prejudice and fosters empathy (Allport, 1954, cited in Janmaat & Keating, 2017; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). This exposure provides a foundation for teachers to build their diversity competence, a critical skill that directly contributes to positive educational outcomes. By fostering an inclusive environment that encourages mutual respect and understanding, diversity-competent teachers are better equipped to address the unique cultural, social, and emotional needs of their students. This inclusive approach enhances academic performance, encourages active participation, and strengthens social engagement. It not only improves individual student outcomes but also fosters a cohesive classroom dynamic, where students learn to respect and appreciate each other's differences, preparing them for success in an increasingly diverse society (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2018; Gay & Howard, 2018).

Today, young people have greater opportunities to interact with individuals from different cultures, fostering tolerance and acceptance. Education level is a strong predictor for developing diversity competence, as studies suggest a correlation between education and tolerance (Sullivan & Transue, 1999; Scheepers et al., 2002). However, some argue that education alone does not guarantee a more tolerant society (Quillian, 1995; Scheepers et al., 2002; Semyonov et al., 2006). The rise of nationalist parties

that promote populist rhetoric and privilege majority populations demonstrates that diversity can also evoke fear and resistance. Therefore, it is important to promote democratic values in education that ensure the rights of all individuals, regardless of age, gender, religion, culture, race, or sexual orientation. Teachers who embody integrity, empathy, and resilience serve as role models for students, helping to lay the foundation for a more inclusive society. As shown in this paper, developing diversity competence requires a comprehensive approach within teacher training programs, not just the occasional addition of certain topics to the curriculum.

While this study contributes to understanding diversity competence in future educators, it has some limitations that future research should address. First, the use of self-reporting tools like the DiKo scale may introduce bias, as participants might overestimate their competence. Future studies could incorporate observational methods or peer evaluations to complement self-assessments. Second, the relatively small sample size, especially regarding sexual minorities and rural participants, limits the generalizability of the findings. Finally, the cross-sectional design does not allow for tracking changes in diversity competence over time. Longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into how diversity competence evolves during teacher training and into professional practice.

Despite these limitations, this study has important implications for future teachers who build diversity competence. Teachers significantly influence how the next generation views inclusion, equality, and diversity and, by fostering these skills in future educators, we lay the groundwork for a more tolerant, just, and inclusive society.

Notes: All authors contributed equally to this work.

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