

Whose Culture? Exploring Ministry-Assigned Prose Fiction in the Republic of Croatia

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Abstract

This research aims to explore how the mandatory children's literature, prescribed by the Ministry of Science and Education and covered within the school subject "Croatian Language," depicts Croatian cultural heterogeneity and global cultural diversity and whether it offers examples of vocabulary that would assist elementary school students in engaging in critical analyses about human-rights topics as part of the national agenda to implement the intercultural dimension of formal education. For the purpose of this research, an analysis of the representation of cultural diversity was carried out on two levels: with regards to the choice of authors and the content of 21 works of fiction included in the latest *Croatian Language Curriculum* (2019). The obtained findings reveal a profound discrepancy between the objectives of intercultural education, as outlined in three relevant educational documents (*National Curriculum Framework* (2010), *Curriculum for Elementary Schools* (2006), and *Croatian Language Curriculum* (2019)), and the cultural values and messages being promoted in the selected literary content. The conducted analyses reveal that the Ministry-assigned authors (white, European, and predominately Croatian) create white, Christian, and European (usually Croatian) characters, whereby the focus lies on characters representing the majority Croatian population and culture, while the national ethnic minorities remain virtually completely omitted. Furthermore, global cultural diversity remains reduced to trivial geographical information and stereotypical descriptions. The findings of this research provide the first wholesome insight into multicultural content and implicit messages found in children's literature that has been selected as mandatory for all Croatian elementary school students.

Keywords: Curriculum, Diversity, Intercultural education, Literature, Elementary school

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Introduction¹

In its core, intercultural education is oriented towards building a solid foundation for a democratic society with active and responsible citizens in a multicultural world and, as such, it relies on the development of intercultural competence that transcends mere factual knowledge but is rather rooted in deeper insights and greater awareness of our own culture and those around us.

While there is no one definition of what constitutes intercultural competence, there is a general consensus that it comprises cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills and characteristics that form the starting point for achieving successful interactions in a variety of cultural contexts (Byram, 1997; Bennett, 2001; Stier, 2006; Huber 2012). It includes the knowledge, skills, and attitudes we harbor towards the unfamiliar “other” with the aim of achieving the kind of cultural democracy that promotes cultural similarities and understands difference not “as a natural fact, a statistical data” but as “a dynamic, interactional process” (Hercigonja, 2017, p. 108). The educational process should thereby be oriented towards critically analyzing oppressive social relationships and standing up to discrimination and prejudices (Nieto, 1996; UNICEF, 2007; Bartulović and Kušević, 2016) and should rely on culturally relevant pedagogy (Landson-Billings, 1992) that “must provide a way for students to maintain their cultural integrity while succeeding academically” (Landson-Billings, 1995, p. 476).

In the Republic of Croatia, the emphasis on the intercultural dimension of education has become more prominent in the last two decades. As Blažević Simić (2011) highlights, the Croatian educational system has undergone numerous changes in that period. These include, among others, the implementation of the Bologna Process, State Matura, the Strategy of Developing Vocational Education, the National Curriculum Framework, the Croatian National Education Standard, all of which recognize the intercultural education as one of their key educational priorities. The importance of nourishing intercultural competence has also made its way into documents that determine the essential elements of the Croatian education system: the *Curriculum for Elementary Schools* (2006) (CES), which defines the goals and tasks of the mandatory elementary level of education, and the *National Curriculum Framework for Pre-School Education and General Compulsory and Secondary Education* (2010) (NCF), which defines all aspects of formal education ranging from the pre-school level to the completion of secondary education. The NCF lays out the “values, goals, principles, content and general goals of educational areas” (NCF, 2010, p. 11) and the direction which Croatian education is expected to move in. This includes the promotion of “human dignity, freedom, justice, patriotism, social equality, solidarity, tolerance, industriousness, integrity, peace, health, conservation of the natural and human environment, and other democratic values” (NCF, 2010, p. 14). The document also mentions the importance of, on the one hand, developing in Croatian citizens the respect for “languages and cultures of all peoples living in the Republic of Croatia and Europe” (NCF, 2010, p. 31) given that “the acquisition of multi-linguistic and intercultural competence helps to develop the awareness of the need to master foreign languages and, on the other, familiarizing oneself with their cultures and promoting respect and tolerance” (NCF, 2010, p. 31).

¹ All quotes from the referenced Croatian research papers and Croatian educational documents have been translated into the English language by the author of this paper.

One of the ways of promoting the values and objectives of intercultural education in the language arts domain is through literature since it is through reading works of literary fiction, as authentic learning and teaching sources, that language learners are immersed “in authentic communication and in genuine experiences which have value, importance, or significance for them” (Stern, 1992, p. 302) and “construct experiences of ‘content’ in a non-trivial way which gives voice to complexities and subtleties not always present in other types of texts” (Carter and McRae, 1996, p. xxiv). Multicultural literature is an invaluable ally in the promotion of intercultural values given that “through meaningful interactions with multicultural literature, students can discover the universality of the human experience that unites people of all backgrounds” (Stallworth et al., 2006, p. 478). It has transformation potential in that it can help students decrease negative stereotyping and develop understanding of other people and cultures (Evans, 2010; Gómez Rodríguez, 2012; *Expanding the Canon*, 2018) as well as foster their awareness of diversity (Tunnell et al., 2012).

Through literature, children “learn about who they are and how they fit into society” (White, 2015, p. 5), provided their lived experiences are mirrored in the narratives. Engagement with literature also contributes to children’s “moral development, serving to cultivate either compassion for others or racial biases and stereotypes; either can have lasting effects for both the child and those around the child” (Welch, 2016, p. 373). However, Tschida et al. (2014) observe that the majority of the characters that are portrayed in the stories that children read are white and middle class. This means that white and middle-class children see their world represented in literature; however, this is not the case for children belonging to ethnic minority groups who hardly ever see themselves represented in literature (White, 2015, p. 15). Furthermore, Vižintin underscores that, in the formal education context, “when constructing a curriculum for the language arts classroom in education, authors of curricula often limit their choice to text by writers and scholars of the country’s majority culture and language” (2016, p. 2).

Given the importance attributed to literature in fostering intercultural competence, this paper analyzes the rapport between the theoretical conceptions of intercultural education as outlined in the three key national educational documents (*Curriculum for Elementary Schools* (2006), *National Curriculum Framework for Pre-School Education and General Compulsory and Secondary Education* (2010), and the *Croatian Language Curriculum* (2019)) and the depictions of national and global cultural diversity in the literary fiction for elementary schools that is prescribed by the Croatian Ministry of Science and Education. The focus is placed on the choice of authors and special attention is paid to uncovering the context in which cultural references occur and whether the selected titles include vocabulary that encourages human-rights discussions and promotes overcoming stereotypes and prejudices.

Fostering intercultural competence through Ministry-assigned literature

The roots of the lists of assigned works of literary fiction and non-fiction (Cro. *lektira*), both compulsory and elective, go back to the 1950s when assigned literary texts became the source of institutional guarantee of quality literature in Croatian elementary schools. In other words, the school curricula and state regulations prescribed the independent reading of literary texts at home (Hameršek and Zima, 2015). The Ministry of Science and Education, based on the recommendation of the

Expert group for Croatian language, prescribes the learning objectives and outcomes for each education cycle². The obligation to read throughout primary and secondary education is a key component of Croatian language arts; hence the choice of assigned compulsory and elective titles is addressed specifically in the *Croatian Language Curriculum* and includes book-length texts, excerpts, and selections of poetry. The 1954 Curriculum introduced the first list of literary texts for elementary schools, and the emphasis on the child-caring role of children's literature emerged in the aftermath of World War II and was then broadened in the 1960s with the beginnings of academic research of children's literature (Hameršek and Zima, 2015, p. 28). The Ministry-assigned reading lists suggest that the school is in the service of transmitting knowledge but also national (ideological) values, whereby the educational models need to satisfy the value-normative function in the shaping of curricula and impact the formation of the students' value orientations (Katunarić, 2004, qtd. in Blažević Simić, 2011, p. 154). Furthermore, the subject curricula should "meet the needs and interests of the students (and parents) and of the majority and minority cultures, preserve the cultural specificity of minorities, but also encourage a dialogue between majority and minority cultures" (Blažević Simić, 2011, pp. 154-155).

In the 21st century Croatian language arts curriculum, literature is understood to serve a myriad of educational objectives. According to Rosandić (2005), these include reaching a certain level of literary education, developing a culture of reading, creativity, literary taste, and a student's view of the world. The author further highlights that the fundamental activity in the field of literature and assigned reading lists is reading. Therefore, the tasks behind assigned reading must be in line with the tasks of reading education, which include "reaching/achieving a certain level of literary education; developing a culture of reading, creative skills of students, literary taste; enabling a richer, more meaningful, and subtle spiritual life; fostering a holistic view of the world" (2005, p. 52). Certainly, the goals of literature are more than just educational ones. According to Blažević (2007), the aim of assigned reading should be to set educational and functional goals, i.e., to teach the student how to read a literary text, to immerse him/her into the literary world, and to develop an aesthetic experience as well as the capacity for logical and critical thinking. In Visinko's view, "the essence of teaching literature in elementary school (...) is the experience of the literary word that enriches the student's life" (2010, p. 17). In other words, the prescribed reading "first and foremost offers art and artistic experience" (Crnković, 1976, p. 19).

The potential which literature, especially multicultural literature, has in promoting the essence of intercultural education is specifically highlighted in the *Croatian Language Curriculum* (2019) (CLC), which specifically mentions literature as a fruitful tool for developing intercultural competence. In this document, it is emphasized that the choice of topics and literary texts should foster and contribute to a greater "understanding and acceptance of intercultural differences as well as noticing and overcoming cultural and linguistic stereotypes and prejudices, while respecting the languages of other peoples" (CLC, 2019, p. 6). The document describes literature as "a source of knowledge, experience, and value of mankind" (CLC, 2019, p. 6) whereby a distinction is made between the objectives of reading national and

² First cycle: 1st through 4th grade, second cycle: 5th and 6th grade, third cycle: 7th and 8th grade, fourth cycle: 1st through 4th grade of grammar school/ 1st through 2nd/3rd grade of vocational school.

world literature. “Reading and familiarization with the literature of the Croatian people, culture and civilization, enables the students to acquire literary knowledge, literary culture, and cultural identity, while reading literary texts pertaining to world literature develops cultural competence and intercultural understanding” (CLC, 2019, *Description of the Subject Croatian Language*). Furthermore, the document highlights that reading literary texts “encourages personal development, the development of aesthetic criteria, reflection on the world and oneself, and the exchange of views and opinions on what has been read” and “contributes to students’ cultural experience and the success of their socialization by sharing their own experiences and learning about other people’s and other cultures’ experiences” (CLC, 2019, *Domains of the Subject Curriculum*).

Given the aforementioned, it is assumed that the described potential of reading works of national and world literature would also translate into the choice of compulsory³ (and elective) literary texts that should be read independently at home throughout the duration of formal education.

Research aims, questions, and hypotheses

This research aims to explore whether the assigned compulsory texts for elementary school acknowledge the existence of Croatian national minorities and global cultural diversity and how this diversity is depicted. More specifically, the major aim of this research is to verify whether the cultural messages conveyed through the literary texts correspond to the educational goals highlighted in all education cycles of the *National Curriculum Framework* (2010): a) becoming familiar with the cultures of national minorities in the Republic of Croatia and other cultures and b) recognizing, respecting, identifying, and accepting the differences between the Croatian culture, their own cultures (if not Croatian), and other cultures on the basis of (non-literary and) literary texts. With regards to the latter goal, the focus of the present research is on exploring whether the compulsory texts depict authentic representations of diverse global realities and what vocabulary is used to assist the young readers in engaging in critical analyses about human-rights topics.

An attempt is made to answer the following questions:

- a) Whose culture is promoted in the assigned texts: Croatian majority and/or minority cultures, the European, and/or the global cultural diversity?
- b) Are the representations of cultural diversity aligned with the objectives of intercultural education?
- c) Do the assigned texts for elementary schools provide a human rights-oriented exploration of cultural diversity?
- d) Do the texts provide inclusive vocabulary when discussing ethnic diversity?

³ According to the Decision on Adopting the Croatian Language Curriculum for Primary Schools and High Schools in the Republic of Croatia (2019), “During primary and secondary education, in each school year, the student independently reads a number of complete literary texts that the teacher chooses to achieve the intended learning outcomes. In the first and second grades of elementary school, the student reads 10 complete literary texts per year, of which 2 are compulsory literary texts. From the third to the eighth grade of elementary school, the student reads 8 complete literary texts, of which 2 are compulsory literary texts.” For more see https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2019_01_10_215.html

It is hypothesized that the assigned texts will not sufficiently promote global cultural diversity (in terms of the choice of authors and content) but would instead remain limited to the European and, especially, the national level due to a greater emphasis on the promotion of the Croatian language, culture, and identity, as outlined in the *National Curriculum Framework (2010)*, the *Curriculum for Elementary Schools (2006)*, and the *Croatian Language Curriculum (2019)*. On the other hand, it is assumed that the literary texts will authentically reflect the diversity of minority ethnic experience in Croatia since Croatia is a multicultural, multiethnic, multilingual, and multiconfessional country.

Methodology

For the purpose of this research, an analysis of the representation of cultural diversity was carried out on two levels: with regards to the choice of authors and the content of 21 works of fiction included in the latest *Croatian Language Curriculum (2019)*. The selected list consists of titles which were either originally written and published in the Croatian language or translated into Croatian if written by a foreign author. The list includes the following:

Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, *Little Red Riding Hood, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty*
Hans Christian Andersen, *The Emperor's New Clothes, The Ugly Duckling, The Daisy*
Ivana Brlić-Mažuranić, *The Brave Adventures of Hlapitch, Croatian Tales of Long Ago (How Quest Sought the Truth, Fisherman Plunk and His Wife, Reygoch, Stribor's Forest, Little Brother Primrose and Sister Lavender, Toporko the Wanderer and the Nine Princes, Bridesman Sun and Bride Bridekins, and Yagor)*
Mato Lovrak, *A Train in the Snow, Pero Kvržica's Gang*
Ivan Kušan, *Koko in Paris*
Miro Gavran, *Head over Heels in Love*
Nada Mihelčić, *Green Dog*
Pavao Pavličić, *Three Friends in Trnje*

The categories included in the analysis include cultural references, skin color, and religion. In the present research, race and religion are included as separate categories to gain a more nuanced insight into the depiction of character diversity in the selected texts.

It became apparent during the research that the setting of the vast majority of titles was in Croatia. Therefore, in this paper, an emphasis is placed on examples that include references to Croatian ethnic minorities and global cultural diversity. Also, since the texts abound in references to Christianity, only some are mentioned that reflect the context in which these descriptions appear in the analyzed texts. On the other hand, the analysis will provide all examples of other referenced religions.

Results and discussion

Part I: Choice of authors

In the first part of research, the focus is placed on the selection of authors pertaining to national and world literature.

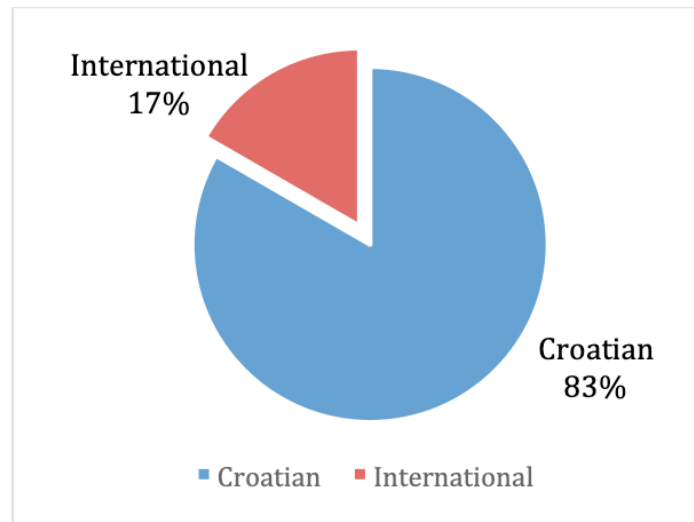


Figure 1: Representation of Croatian and international writers

Insight into the representation of authors reveals that an emphasis is placed on Croatian authors. The list of mandatory texts includes 12 authors of prose and poetry, 10 of whom (83.3%) are Croatian. In other words, only 2 foreign authors (16.66%) are included on the compulsory list. Furthermore, all authors are European (100%), white (100%), and predominantly male (83.33%).

It is worth repeating that the CLC (2019) highlights that reading texts pertaining to world literature contributes to the development of “cultural competences and intercultural understanding” (p. 6). However, in the absence of a greater selection of international authors, the obtained finding confirms the initial hypothesis that the compulsory texts would not adequately represent global diversity with regards to the choice of authors. Furthermore, the focus on European authors is not that surprising given that the NCF limits the scope of intercultural learning objectives to “languages and cultures of all peoples living in the Republic of Croatia and Europe” (NCF, 2010, p. 31). Figure 2 provides an insight into which authors constitute the corpus of Croatian authors who have been selected for the compulsory reading list.

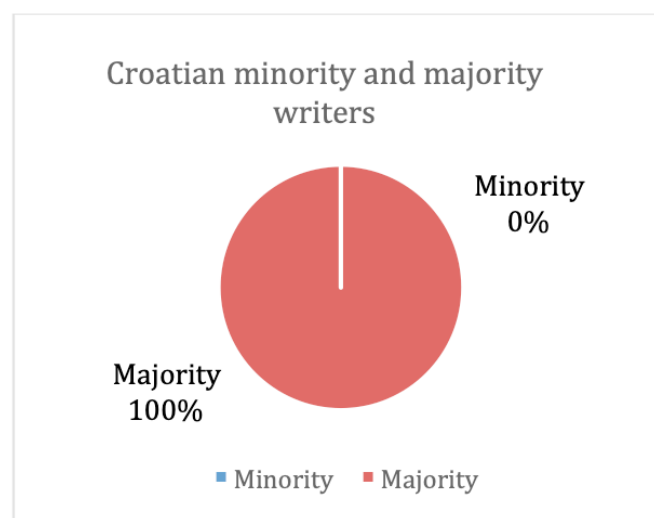


Figure 2: Representation of Croatian minority and majority writers

What this initial part of research clearly shows is that the Ministry of Science and Education has opted for predominantly Croatian authors who represent the Croatian majority population (100%).

While, without a doubt, the selected group of Croatian authors represents an authentic source of insight into the experiences of one ethnic group, it can by no means be considered as accurately reflecting a wide range of (literary) voices that provide invaluable insight into a multitude of national realities. Given the great importance attributed to literature in promoting the respect for Croatian cultural identity, what, then, does the Ministry consider under “Croatian culture” (NCL, 2010), “Croatian national identity” and “literature of the Croatian people” (CLC, 2019) given that “Croatian” is not a homogenous construct. As Burai noted, “the Croatian national and cultural identity is based on diversity, which stems from historical, political, economic, social, and other circumstances that have manifested themselves in different ways in different historical periods in Croatia” (2016, p. 182). The complete omission of literature written by minority authors brings into question the educational goal that focuses on becoming familiar with the culture of Croatian national minorities as well as the initial hypothesis that the literary texts would authentically reflect ethnic diversity in Croatia.

Given that the most contemporary title on the assigned reading list was published in 2009 (*Green Dog*), while the others were published in the 1980s or prior to World War II, it is also questionable whether the selected titles will give voice to (contemporary) human-rights issues that should be addressed as part of intercultural education. Therefore, the degree to which the exclusion of a robust selection of international writers and Croatian minority authors results in the omission of ethnically diverse characters in the prescribed texts will be analyzed in the continuation of the paper.

Part II: Choice of literary texts – representation of cultural diversity

The second part of the research explores how the selected authors depict the national and global multicultural reality and whether the content of their works provides an incentive for explorations of cultural diversity and the challenges faced by certain ethnic groups both in Croatia and around the world. Given the very few instances when a Croatian minority ethnic group was mentioned, the categories considered included skin color, religion, and cultural references as a broad term that encompasses any reference to national ethnic minorities and global cultures.

Table 1. References to cultural references, skin color, and religion

Title	Cultural references	Skin color	Religion
Little Red Riding Hood			
Snow White		+	+
Sleeping Beauty			
The Emperor's New Clothes			
The Ugly Duckling	+		+
The Daisy			+
The Brave Adventures of Hlapitch	+		+
A Train in the Snow	+	+	
Pero Kvržica's Gang			
Koko in Paris	+		+
How Quest Sought the Truth		+	+
Fisherman Plunk and His Wife		+	
Reygoch			+
Stribor's Forest			+
Little Brother Primrose and Sister Lavender		+	+
Toporko the Wanderer and the Nine Princes			
Bridesman Sun and Bride Bridekins			
Yagor			
Head over Heels in Love	+	+	
Green Dog	+		+
Three Friends in Trnje	+		

It is observable from Table 1 that almost all titles contain some form of cultural reference; those that usually do not are fairy tales (Andersen, Grimm brothers, Brlić-Mažuranić).

The recorded examples (listed in Table 2) may be divided into the following categories:

- a) *language*: Egyptian, Italian, non-native speaker of Croatian recognized as such by his rather poor Croatian;
- b) *physical appearance*: American movie stars get their haircuts in Paris, hairstyle of a Mongolian warrior, Eskimos wear warm clothing;
- c) *general information*: population size in Vienna, Parisian monuments
- d) *generalizations/stereotypes*: depictions of America (presumably the United States) as the land of earthquakes and where family members emigrate to in hope of a better future, existence of princesses in Asia, the long life span of Caucasian highlanders, Italians speak Italian, all Roma marry under a willow
- e) *discriminatory language*: Gypsy

Table 2. Cultural references

<p>general information</p>	<p>“There are even more people in Vienna than here” (<i>The Brave Adventures of Hlapitch</i>, p. 70) Orly airport, the Eiffel Tower, Notre-Dame, Napoleon’s tomb, Leonardo da Vinci, Louvre, Mona Lisa, river Seine, New York, Greece, Piraeus (<i>Koko in Paris</i>)</p>
<p>language</p>	<p>“The stork wanders around on long red legs and speaks Egyptian, the language she learned from her mother” (<i>The Ugly Duckling</i>, p. 98). “The master does not speak Croatian well. He turns the machine and speaks loudly: Dear audience...! Now I sees an unfortunate countess on the canvas...!” (<i>A Train in the Snow</i>, p. 46) “Grandma explained to him that the kid must be Italian, and Italians speak Italian. Now the little one is constantly boring everyone how his best friend is Italian and questioning us what certain Italian words mean. And he has remembered a million of them” (<i>Green Dog</i>, p. 54)</p>
<p>physical appearance</p>	<p>“But if only you had seen them all bundled up!” They looked like real little Eskimos!” (<i>A Train in the Snow</i>, p. 65) “Zlatko’s hairstyle was that of a Mongol warrior with a tuft on top of his bare scalp” (<i>Koko in Paris</i>, p. 32).</p>
<p>generalizations/ stereotypes</p>	<p>“They were questioning Pero where his money came from. ‘From America, from my uncle!’” (<i>A Train in the Snow</i>, p. 22) “The newspapers report that there was an earthquake in America” (<i>A Train in the Snow</i>, p. 103) “And what interesting pictures there are in the newspapers. There you see painted bald statesmen. They travel around Europe. They are accompanied by their ladies in silk dresses, with flowers in their hands in the middle of winter. The depict the best wrestlers and runners. In addition to all this, there is a picture of the most beautiful woman in the world and the Pope sitting on a big chair. They also show the new airplanes and Asian princesses” (<i>A Train in the Snow</i>, p. 103). “Ratko Milić, also known as Koko, turned thirteen, which, compared to some Caucasian highlanders who live to be one hundred and fifty years old, is not a particularly long human life” (<i>Koko in Paris</i>, p. 48). “It is known that the bell ringers of that church are always hunchbacked monsters who look for victims at night, attack them and... ha-ha...” (<i>Koko in Paris</i>, p. 7) “I didn't even know where to run. It doesn't matter where. I will go to sea and board a ship for America. I will make millions of dollars there, and then I will become a real biologist as I intended” (<i>Green Dog</i>, p. 32). [Paris] The place of the best barbers in the world. Well, actors from America come here every day to shave and get a haircut” (<i>Koko in</i></p>

	<i>Paris</i> , p. 32) “The wedding was to be done like a Gypsy’s. Only not under a willow, but in a small grove” (<i>A Train in the Snow</i> , p. 10).
discriminatory language	“The wedding was to be done like a Gypsy's” (<i>A Train in the Snow</i> , p. 10).

Given the importance which in the key educational documents is attributed to literature in promoting curiosity about cultural diversity as well as equipping the students with the tools and knowledge that would help combat various forms of discrimination, it is disheartening that the sole examples of ethnic diversity reflect their rather trivialized and even generalized portrayal as well as the use of derogatory language. The example “The wedding was to be done like a Gypsy's” contains a racial slur. In Croatian, the word “Gypsy” (*cigan*) is a derogatory ethnonym. Another example of the use of the word “Gypsy” is recorded in Table 3.

This finding reveals that the educational goal of “becoming familiar with the culture of national minorities in the Republic of Croatia and other cultures” (NCF, 2010) has not been met because, on the one hand, the notion of “culture” has been reduced to the monuments, museums, and clothes or languages associated with a country and, on the other, characters pertaining to Croatian ethnic minorities are excluded from the narrative. Furthermore, if literature serves an educational function, then it remains unclear how the students might develop the ability to “recognize, respect, identify, and accept the differences between the Croatian culture, their own cultures (if not Croatian), and other cultures” (NCF, 2010) if they are presented with a trivialized understanding of culture and even discriminatory language that might remain undiscussed in the classroom unless the teacher is aware of the importance of appropriately addressing it.

Table 3. References to skin color

white skin	“If only I had a child with a face as white as snow” (Snow White, p. 89) “The Mermaids squeaked like silverfish, gathered around the boat, grabbed it by the spokes with their white hands, and danced in circles” (Ribar Palunko, p. 35) “white neck” (<i>Head over Heels in Love</i> , p. 27) “as white as wax” (<i>How Quest Sought the Truth</i> , p. 22) “In front of the church sits a little girl, like a white rose” (<i>Brother Primrose and Sister Lavender</i> , p. 117).
black skin	“Draga was offended and cannot forgive Ljuban for the insult. She won't ever forgive him. Ever! He was black to her. Blacker than the blackest Gypsy” (<i>A Train in the Snow</i> , p. 9). “as black as a mole” (<i>How Quest Sought the Truth</i> , p. 9)

Table 3 includes all recorded references to skin color, which reveal that there are very few instances when a character’s skin color is mentioned; however, the context in which it is mentioned greatly differs. White skin is associated with beauty (“a face as

white as snow,” mermaids’ “white hands,” “white neck” of the protagonist’s secret crush, a young girl resembling a “white rose”), i.e., references to white skin are used to highlight the beauty of that which appears to be considered the Croatian norm. On the other hand, black skin is unmistakably used as an insult (“He was black to her. Blacker than the blackest Gypsy”). Also, it is worth noting that when a character’s black skin is mentioned, it addresses one particular ethnic group in Croatia: the Roma – the most vulnerable minority in Central and Eastern Europe (Csepeli and Simon, 2004). Furthermore, black skin is clearly visible to the characters (and authors), hence highlighted; yet the Roma as an ethnic group remain socially invisible because no Roma character or any other character of color ever appears in the texts.⁴

It is worth repeating that, in the latest CLC, literature is described in terms of its ability to empower young learners with the knowledge and insights that would help combat “discrimination” (2019, p. 6). Given that, and especially because, the derogatory statement “He was blacker to me than the blackest Gypsy” is never properly addressed in the continuation of the book, it desperately requires teacher intervention. As Vižintin notes, “if the texts students read contain examples of stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination which are not overcome, we should critically analyze such texts in the classroom and this requires teachers to develop intercultural competence” (2016, p. 5). This, however, presumes that the teacher will recognize the discriminatory nature of the statement and raise their concerns about it in the classroom.

Furthermore, beyond the need to educate the students on the dehumanizing nature of discriminatory language, we must consider the message its appearance in the school environment, which should be a safe space for all children, sends to both the majority and minority students. Even if the example above were properly addressed, it is a disheartening reality that the sole example of themselves, which elementary school Roma children will see in compulsory literature, is not even a real Roma character, but a white character being called a derogatory name.

Table 4. References to religion

Christianity	<p>“Christmas” (Green Dog)</p> <p>“Nowhere in the world at that time were there any dragons, fairies, witches, or evil spirits. They were driven away by the holy cross and human reason” (<i>Brother Primrose and Sister Lavender</i>, p. 87).</p> <p>“church” (<i>Brother Primrose and Sister Lavender</i>, p. 91)</p>
Other religious references	<p>“If by any chance they had sent their grandmother as a negotiator to the Middle East, both Jews and Arabs would have converted to Buddhism before they even realized what had struck them” (<i>Green Dog</i>, p. 26).</p> <p>“And what if someone is a Muslim? What do you mean?”</p>

⁴ Butković and Vidović (2020) observed the same binary opposition in undergraduate students’ creative writing. After studying the content of 164 texts and a total of 651 characters produced when given the assignment to write a short detective story, there was only one reference to race (0.15%) – a homeless black man who ends up becoming the murder suspect. On the other hand, a character’s white skin was never mentioned.

	<p>I do not know. For example, Vlatka goes to such a commune and prays to God and Our Lady for hours every day. What if a girl is a Muslim? Does she get some corner where she prays to Allah or is our God in charge of all the drug addicts of this world? I have no idea and I don't care!" (<i>Green Dog</i>, p. 139).</p> <p>"He hated him, as the heathen hate a righteous man" (<i>How Quest Sought the Truth</i>, p. 8).</p>
Open to interpretation	<p>"Thank the Creator for all the good He has done for you." (<i>The Ugly Duckling</i>, 105)</p> <p>"They did not know how to thank God" (<i>Reygoch</i>, p. 73)</p> <p>The sun begs God and his mother to forgive him. God forgave him, and his mother never even held it against him" (<i>Stribor's Forest</i> p. 86).</p> <p>"Hlapitch sat on the grass, took his bread and bacon and a small knife out of his bag. Then he crossed himself, took off his hat and began to eat" (<i>The Brave Adventures of Hlapitch</i>, p. 19).</p>

Similarly to the manner in which the authors implemented skin color into their narratives, when religions are mentioned, they appear in different contexts. Christianity is portrayed as a family holiday, represented by the holy cross and the church as a place of worship, all of which are intended to evoke feelings of comfort and protection. On the other hand, Islam and Judaism are mentioned only in the context of armed conflict, whereby Muslims and Jews are portrayed as being more likely to convert to another religion (Budhaism) than to find common ground. Another example of Islam appears in the context of drug treatment facilities, whereby the issue is raised whether recovering addicts would be allowed to pray to Allah. Finally, the notion of justice is associated with Christianity and pagans are portrayed as devoid of just behavior. In some cases, the name of the religion is not specifically mentioned (usually in fairy tales). However, references to religion in Brlić-Mažuranić's fairy tales and novel allow room for the students to interpret them differently if read independently from the author's other works.

What these examples suggest is that references to religions (Islam and Judaism) that depart from the Croatian majority's religious affiliation are not given adequate or almost any attention.

Conclusion

What the findings of the selection of Ministry-assigned authors (Figures 1 and 2) and content (Table 2, 3, and 4) reveal is a disparity between the objectives of intercultural education, as outlined, on the one hand, in Croatian key educational documents (*National Curriculum Framework* (2010), *the Curriculum for Elementary Schools* (2006), and *the Croatian Language Curriculum* (2019)) and the portrayal of national and global cultural realities in the assigned works of fiction for the elementary school level, on the other. With the selected authors being 100% white, 100% European, and predominately Croatian (83%), it comes almost as no surprise that their fictional characters are white, Christian, and European (usually Croatian). Croatian authors almost exclusively focus on the majority Croatian population and culture, omitting to give voice to national ethnic minorities. Furthermore, none of the protagonists are

non-white, non-Christian, and non-European,⁵ let alone placed in the role of the protagonist.

The recorded examples of how authors pertaining to the Croatian literary canon depict cultural, racial, and religious diversity reveal an unmistakable emphasis on the Croatian majority cultural identity and trivialized and even stereotypical understandings of global diversity that are reduced to examples of the language spoken in a foreign country (e.g., Italians speak Italian), a character's physical appearance (e.g., hairstyle of a Mongolian warrior, Eskimos wearing warm clothes), general information about a country or city (e.g., population size, monuments), generalizations/stereotypes (e.g., America is the land of earthquakes, Caucasian highlanders have a long life, all Roma marry under a willow), and even include derogatory language ("blacker than the blackest Gypsy") without providing concrete examples how to stand up to to discrimination and stereotypes.

Although diversity is an integral part of life in Croatia, even if not to the same degree in all Croatian schools, this is not reflected in the texts. With the current selection of compulsory titles, Croatian ethnic minority children are not given access to narratives in which they see positive representations of themselves from an early age and the ethnic majority children are deprived of the opportunity to explore the reality of life and contributions of Croatian minority cultures. Hence, both groups are presented with a one-sided worldview that does not correspond to reality and is clearly counterproductive to the objectives of intercultural education outlined in the key educational documents. Therefore, the notions of "social equality," "solidarity," and "tolerance" (NCR, 2010, p. 14), which are said to form the very foundation of Croatian formal education, are underrepresented or virtually completely omitted from the overall message that the analyzed works of literary fiction promote.

The obtained findings and conclusions have confirmed the initial hypothesis that the literary texts would not sufficiently promote global cultural diversity, yet they have disproved the second hypothesis that the literary content would at least adequately address Croatian cultural heterogeneity. Future selections of literary titles should, therefore, be more mindful of the choice of authors and content of compulsory works of fiction because it is vital that the message be sent to both minority and majority students that non-Croatian, non-European, non-Christian, and national ethnic minority perspectives matter, thereby acknowledging them and making them socially visible.

All chance of adequately implementing the key principles of intercultural education must not necessarily be lost if the teachers understand the existing gap between theory and practice and possess the required intercultural competence that would enable them to introduce supplemental materials and choose culturally sensitive elective literary fiction that would assist them in broadening their students' perspective on diverse national and global realities of life in a form appropriate to the students' age and development.

Inevitably, the findings of this research require taking into consideration whether predominately white (Christian) teachers will instinctively introduce topics that

⁵ The terms "non-white," "non-Christian," and "non-European" are used here to highlight the exclusively homogenous range of characters in the assigned texts and not the author's preference for such nomenclature.

address the challenges which the groups excluded from the literary narratives face? Are Croatian teacher education programs equipping future teachers with the appropriate knowledge, skills, and competences to bridge the gap between, on the one hand, the theoretical conceptualizations of intercultural education found in key educational documents and scientific research and, on the other, the worldview promoted through assigned children's literature? These are just some questions that future research needs to address.

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