

EDUCATIONAL POTENTIAL OF INFLUENCER PUBLICATIONS IN THE ASPECT OF SOCIAL AND INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE FORMATION

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Abstract. The article presents the results of a study conducted with 240 students from two schools in Sofia (Bulgaria). The aim of the study is to trace the potential educational effect of influencer publications on children in terms of supporting the process of forming social and intercultural competence. Among the main objectives are to trace the impact of influencer publications on children's attitudes, views, and opinions; to identify the presence or absence of educational potential in the content produced by influencers; as well as to outline recommendations for the beneficial integration of such content in the educational process. The research methods used are theoretical analysis, projective methodologies, and content analysis. The results indicate the presence of educational potential in the content presented by opinion leaders in the direction of facilitating the formation of social and intercultural competence in children.

Keywords: publications by influencers; social competence; intercultural competence; educational effect; educational opportunities

Introduction

The topic of the impact of influencers on adolescents, which is a component of the broader research problem of mass media as a factor of education, is extremely relevant in modern times. The benefits and negatives of mass media and its integration into the educational process have been commented on for decades, and in the 21st century, especially in the last 10 years, these issues have been frequently discussed and have become the subject of a range of research.

Recently, researchers have shown an increased interest in the topic and the reason for this is the constant development and improvement of technology, virtual realities, and experiences, and the opportunities that the online space provides, including in the field of education. Factors are also the needs and interests of the new generations who are developing as individuals in a digital society, in a world "subjugated" by devices, internet connectivity, and dynamic consumption of online products and services, and content.

The importance of the issue has been further increasing over the last three years, a trend triggered by the pandemic situation in the world. The amplified use of mobile devices has led to an escalation in the time, spend online and respectively – to an increasingly regular viewing of publications presented by opinion leaders. Influencers, also referred to as opinion leaders, and content creators, are individuals who post engaging (according to various criteria), authentic, audience-specific content on social media (De Veirman, Cauberghe, Hudders 2017; Hill, Troshani, Chandrasekar 2020).

1. Theoretical analysis

Numerous studies in the field highlight the interest of children and youth in new technologies, and social media, specifically bloggers, vloggers, and influencers. Among the mentioned studies is a nationally representative multicomponent study “Media consumption and “influencers” of children and young people in Bulgaria”, carried out by the agency ESTAT, commissioned by the United Nations Children's Fund – UNICEF Bulgaria (2020). According to the survey data, 77% of the surveyed persons visit social media every day, 61% watch videos online and 47% use the Internet to learn and search for information.

As preferred media, survey respondents most frequently mention Facebook (69%), Instagram (22%), and TikTok (7%)¹. Each of these networks also features many posts by influencers, characterized by a large number of reactions and interactions (“likes”, “shares”...), i.e. – potentially impacting a lot of people, including children. Hence the relevance of the topic is linked to the degree of influence exerted by opinion leaders on children, as well as to the variable ways of interaction between social media posters and their followers.

Children often perceive influencers as role models, as a personal example (Simeonova 2020), which leads to an urge in adolescents to imitate and emulate their behaviour, ways of expression, style, etc. As a consequence of the aforementioned thesis, two main challenges emerge – the apparent risks considering the influence of opinion leaders upon children, and the potential educational opportunities, including in the context of moral and intercultural education, the formation and development of social and intercultural competence.

The two mentioned competences are commented on in the framework of the competence approach, and more specifically as part of the set of eight key competences for lifelong learning². Exploring in detail the nature of social competence in practical terms, R. Stamatov defines it as a “multidimensional construct” integrating “various contents (abilities, cognitions, emotions, qualities of the self, behaviours) that ensure the achievement of goals recognized as valuable in the existing social context and culture” (Stamatov 2015, p. 14). L. Andreeva (1998) considers the combination of self-knowledge, knowledge of others, and the ability to read social situations as essential elements of this competence. According

to the author, the development of social competence is a guarantor of resolving social conflicts and implies the presence of skills for managing social contacts.

E. Stefanova defines social competence as “a set of knowledge about different groups, societies and their specifics, skills for communicating with them and a positive attitude towards their set of differences when interacting with them” (Stefanova 2017). Therefore, the aforementioned competence represents a construct, the building blocks of which are aimed at maintaining valuable relationships and effectiveness in carrying out social interactions (Junge et al. 2020).

The presented arguments reveal the interconnection between social and intercultural competence. The culture of peace and non-violence, the rejection of prejudices towards the different, are achievable if the child develops tolerance and compassion, empathy, and other personal qualities and values which are oriented towards the good of people and society. It is important to be aware of the significance of others, their value as individuals, and their cultural identity, perceived not as an obstacle or a disadvantage, but as an enriching part of their overall being. The listed qualities, characteristics, and values are an essential part of the content fields of both competences.

The correlation between the two competences is also interpreted by V. Gyurova. The author defines the following as components of intercultural competence: “social competencies, a set of empathy, communication skills, non-conflictive reactions; abilities for interpersonal interactions based on interculturality; competences of personal self-definition – self-reflection, role distance, tolerance and self-regulation in an intercultural context” (Gyurova 2004, p. 123).

Interculturality “includes the idea of peaceful coexistence between representatives of different, interacting cultures”, it “is a value emphasizing relationships, interactions, mutual communication, imbued with mutual understanding, mutual respect for the 'different' in the other culture” (Chavdarova-Kostova 2010, p. 10). Hence the extreme importance of the formation of intercultural competence in modern times is evident.

Intercultural competence consists of a set of skills towards perceiving, understanding, and appreciating socio-cultural differences, and communicating effectively in a diverse cultural environment (Paelman, Verlot 2007). According to Agatucci (2000), essential to the formation of this competence are the desire to learn about other cultures, intercultural sensitivity, and participation in intercultural interactions and dialogue, the ability to adequately perceive social situations, appreciating human unity and similarities, and understanding the value of human rights, freedoms, and dignity.

Several factors are important for successful communication in an intercultural environment: reciprocal respect and understanding, knowledge of the basic principles of harmonious communication, “reading” one's own and other's emotions and the ability to react appropriately, consideration of others' motives, aspirations,

and attitudes, willingness to resolve conflicts in a non-violent way, etc. (Spencer-Oatey, Franklin 2009).

Taking this into consideration, it is evident, that the formation and development of social and intercultural competence - of values such as tolerance, empathy, and solidarity, the formation of skills for exhibiting respect, awareness and for working in cooperation, the promotion of positive attitudes towards cultural diversity and intercultural relations – is essential in our time. Thereby, harmonious communication and coexistence, constructive, productive, and enriching communication on a local and global scale could be achieved.

2. Methodology

In order to investigate the educational potential of influencer publications for the formation of social and intercultural competence, a study was conducted in two schools in the city of Sofia (Bulgaria) with students from two age groups. The participants are from twelve classes – six with children aged 8 – 11 (116) and six with children aged 12 – 14 (124). The total number of pupils is 240.

In the course of the study (carried out during the form-tutor periods, which, in Bulgaria continue for one academic hour and occur once every week), videos and images (from Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok publications) are presented to primary school students, depicting children with different abilities and characteristics participating in a variety of situations, including collective activities. The surveyed pupils are expected to share their perceptions of an “ideal classroom” after viewing the materials and with the help of guiding questions and discussion. Videos, pictures, and text describing objects, people, nature, and animals within different cities are shown to the adolescents in the junior high school stage. The students are asked to portray the ideal city and what it includes. The idea of the tasks is to prompt the pupils to record certain specifics of relationships and interactions (in the classroom community and the society/city). Then, the provided answers are to be investigated and analysed in search of similarities with the main components of social and intercultural competence.

The aim of the study is to investigate the potential educational effect of influencer publications on children in terms of supporting the process of social and intercultural competence formation. Among the main tasks are (1) to trace the effect of influencer publications on children's attitudes, views, and opinions; (2) to identify the presence or absence of educational potential in the content produced by influencers; (3) to outline recommendations for the beneficial integration of such content in the educational process.

The methods used during the study are theoretical analysis, projective methodologies, and content analysis.

The content analysis performed for each of the projective methodologies is a content-orientated, qualitative-quantitative analysis applied to “process and

refine data from projective methodologies” (Ivanov 2006, p. 284). The processing and classification of the set of communicatively meaningful fragments and their allocation into separate categories were carried out according to the following criteria (Gospodinov 2016): type of messages: opinion/response, content; type of message producer: persons studied (students); place of distribution: text produced by pupils; frequency of occurrence: frequency of identical answers/opinions reported; minimum volume: one word/one expression.

3. Results

The opinions of a total of 240 students were analysed. The distribution of the surveyed persons, relative to the different classes, is as follows: primary stage (116 persons), 4th grade (21 persons), 4th grade (20 persons), 4th grade (19 persons), 4th grade (16 persons); 3rd grade (21 persons), 2nd grade (19 persons); junior high school stage (124 persons), 7th grade (19 persons); 7th grade (25 persons); 7th grade (19 persons); 6th grade (20 persons); 6th grade (17 persons); 5th grade (24 persons).

Children in grades two through four record what they think are the key characteristics of an ideal classroom, including relationships, interactions, shared activities, and respond to a question - if they would like any of the children in the photos (posted by opinion leaders) to be in their class. The content analysis conducted on the base of children's opinions/answers includes one category, the “Ideal class”.

The key classifier contains the most frequently used words/expressions: “good relations”, “friendly relations”, “friends”, “respect”, don't insult, don't fight, don't mock, and quarrel. All responses are separated into 4 distinct units of analysis, illustrated in Table 1. The total number of answers is 1231, as each child records several items that are constituents of the perfect class.

Table 1. Units of analysis for the “Ideal class” category

Units of analysis	Frequency of manifestation	
Features	270	21.93%
Relationships	265	21.53%
Interactions	594	48.25%
Other	102	8.29%

The first unit of analysis comprises 270 responses connected to the personal qualities and characteristics of students in the ideal class. Overwhelmingly, children think that “perfect” classmates should be kind/good-natured (61 people), nice (54 people), and able to listen to others (31 people). It is important for students to be understanding (29 people), polite (28 people), well-mannered (25 people), patient (23 people), and tolerant (19 people).

The exemplary relationships are defined as “good”, “kind”, and “friendly” by 62 of the surveyed persons, for 56 respect is important, and 46 and 43 (respectively) emphasize friendship and support. Twenty-six of the children consider friendship relations to be significant, with thirty-two identifying kind/good/respectful/cultural behaviours towards the teacher as crucial.

The third unit of analysis consists of the largest number of responses, and they are related to the ideal interactions in the classroom. Students mostly describe interactions they would not prefer to observe – fighting between children (70 people), exchanging insults, teasing and rudeness (65, 64, and 29 people), quarrels (58 people), shouting (32 people), lying (22 people). Collective participation in activities is also highlighted – sharing (45 people), playing (42 people), helping each other (40 people), and having fun (30 people). Also key for students is following rules (27 people), making projects (20 people), celebrating (19 people), and solving problems together (13 people). Of interest are the variations on the statement shared by 18 of the children – not everyone in the ideal class is friends with one another, but they understand/respect/get on well with each other.

Both in class and in society at large, universal friendship is not possible. People have different opinions, interests, and needs (cognitively, personally, and socio-emotionally). But maintaining polite, affable, respectful relationships and interactions, regardless of differences in personality, is of great importance. It is the ability to be courteous not only to friends and family but to all individuals in the community that is an indicator of high levels of developed social and intercultural competence.

The last unit of analysis contains responses registered with a low frequency of occurrence - less than 10 people. Here the following statements stand out: children “behave badly/evilily” (4 people); quarrel (3 people); “sometimes are mean” (1 person); “quarrel but not much/often” (9 people). The reason for the expressed opinions is the belief of some children that their class is ideal, i.e., they describe real, existing interactions. The conclusion is confirmed by the answers “this is my class”, “we are ideal”, “the class is ideal as it is”, etc.

Of course, tensions, arguments, and disagreements are natural elements of human relations, there is no communication that is completely and thoroughly deprived of negative emotions and sporadic conflicts. However, the key is how these conflicts will be resolved, overcome, and replaced by constructive interactions – skills the basis of which is laid precisely at this age, through the formation of social and intercultural competence. It would be productive in this case (and not only) to focus on peaceful problem-solving, constructive criticism, adequate expression of one's own emotions, and consideration and respect for the feelings of others, thus achieving understanding and harmony in communication.

The students are also challenged to think about which children they would like to be a part of their class (through the displayed diverse images). Here, the overwhelming

number of surveyed individuals share the view that they want “the kids in the pictures” to be their classmates because “they might have good hearts”, we should “help them”, and “they are like us”, “no one is different” and “everyone has a chance to try”. There are categorical opinions that “no matter what the children are like, we have to respect each other and accept them as they are”, because “no matter what kind of child is in the class, we have to accept him”, “even if he is of Roma origin, he is still a child”. According to the children, “we will all support each other and be happy”, it is important “to get along, not to be ashamed of themselves and not to be lonely”.

There are children on the autism spectrum in two of the classes. The students from these classes (and 30 others) mostly agree that they should be “tolerant,” “accepting of all children,” and that “we would love to have more children come.” One response focused on the responsibilities of leadership – “I don't know, whatever the principal decides”.

Comparatively, 25 of the surveyed individuals state “I don't want them”. The reason for the large proportion of negative responses is not rooted in the students' intolerance, but in their practicality, which is highlighted by the additions: “I don't know them”, “it depends on how they behave with other children”, “my class is perfect”, “I don't want any, the ideal class is perfect”. That is, on the one hand, they believe that they should first get to know a person before building close relationships, which is not contrary to the basic principles of interculturality and social competence. On the other hand, it is evident that some of the students consider their class to be perfect as it is – they do not want other children for this reason alone.

Those are not the motives of 9 people, six of whom say they don't want “children with problem in the class”. The remaining three explain their answers with the statements “they don't seem very well behaved to me”, “they are stupid”, and “they pretend to be famous”. The responses are problematic in terms of the children's level of development of intercultural and social competence. A number of discussions should be held on these issues, with a focus on respectful relationships, acceptance, and understanding. Publications from influencers could be integrated within value-oriented educational interactions, in order to raise awareness, facilitate taking into account the richness of differences and diversity, to promote the importance of constructive interactions. The conclusion stems from the fact that it is the pictures/videos shown to the students that prompt them to reflect on the topic, hence the use of such resources, in combination with explanations, discussions, and other methods/activities, could lead to full insight into the subject matter.

The pupils in the junior high stage of education describe not the perfect class, but the perfect city. The derived category for content analysis is again one – “The ideal city”. The responses divided into separate units of analysis total 1,550, as each of the adolescents shares several characteristics of their dream community. The key classifier covers the most frequently used words/expressions: “schools”; “park”; “gardens”; “transport”; “safe”; “good relations”; “respect”; “friends”.

Table 2. Units of analysis for the “Ideal city” category

Units of analysis	Frequency of manifestation	
Structure and layout	651	42%
Socially relevant components	310	20%
Relationships	512	33.03%
Other	77	4.97%

The first unit of analysis includes notes specifying the structure and layout of the city – the presence of schools and nurseries (71 and 43 people); animal shelters (47 people); parks/gardens, nature (80 people); libraries (14 people); monuments (11 people) and theatres/cinemas (18 people); shopping malls (54 people) and restaurants (29 people). Students imagined a variety of buildings (glass, patterned, low, high, houses, skyscrapers – 82 people) and described the city as clean (73 people), environmentally oriented (electric transport, environmental protection, pollution reduction – 79 people) and full of entertainment (50 people).

In the second unit of analysis are distributed the responses related to socially significant components of the “perfect city”: the absence of crime and the city's characterization as “peaceful”, and “safe” (57 people); the availability of job opportunities and people aspiring for desirable positions (42 people); the care for nature (40 people); the provision of adequate care for homeless/sick people and animals (35 people); free education and medical care (20 people); the guarantee of equity, equality and equal rights, and respect for duties (17 people). Providing help and support (36 people), charitable activities (23 people), clear rules (21 people), and learning (19 people) are also noted as important.

According to the surveyed persons, the relations in the ideal city are mostly good/wonderful/wonderful/pleasant (73 persons), based on respect (49 persons), acceptance of differences (39 persons), tolerance (38 persons), friendship (29 persons), understanding (23 persons), listening (19 persons). People are kind (56 people), friends (55 people), and smiling (45 people). Relationships between children and between children and adults are respectful, kind, and considerate (62 people). Twenty-four of the adolescents share that residents sometimes argue and don't get along but are respectful/good/civil.

The last unit of analysis includes the less frequently recorded responses – less than 10 people. This includes statements such as antiquity (3 people), observance of traditions (6 people), presence of peace and harmony (3 people each), etc. Of interest are the variations of the statements “it is not perfect” (9 people), “there is none” (8 people), “people do what they want” (7 people), “relations are bad” (4 people).

A perfect city doesn't really exist, as the ideal is impossible, and unattainable for humankind. Flaws and negativities are inevitably present in every country, every city, and every community. But the concept of the assignment also involves imagination

and creativity – the notion of an ideal society, according to the desires and attitudes of the students. The idea behind the assignment is for the interconnections between the reviewed videos/pictures/text to be identified, regarding the adolescents' viewpoints towards characteristics of a well-conceptualized city, and components of social and intercultural competence (tolerance, empathy, solidarity, respect, etc.).

In this context, it is possible to conclude that the students whose answers mark poor attitudes and the possibility for people to “do whatever they want” do not have a high level of development of the basic components of both competences. “Bad” interrelations should not be a dream or a goal, and a central tenet of the concept of human rights is that everyone has freedom of action, decision, opinion, etc., as long as they do not infringe or restrict the rights and freedoms of others (Brander et al. 2020). However, it is also possible to conclude that adolescents are describing a real situation – not an imaginary city, but one in which they were born and/or live. The assumption is underlined by some of the students' statements, such as “my city is like this”, “I live in it”, “my own city is like this”, etc. It is also likely that the children writing “do whatever they want” as a response are not referring to socially undesirable, unacceptable acts, but rather expressing an aspiration to follow their dreams and interests.

In the ideal city, we will “treat others as we want them to treat us” and “accept each other as we are” because people are “different but the same at heart”. Such a society provides the opportunity “to finally feel free” and the option “to be with a girl without anyone hating me”, “to be myself”. At the same time, there should be “help for all families with children with problems” and “courses for parents, because education comes from parents”.

The shared reflections and deeply personal revelations represent children's understandings of a society that highly values caring for people, respect for all, togetherness, reciprocity, and a supportive environment – all essential elements of both social and intercultural competence.

Conclusions and summary

In the interpretation of the data from the study and the systematization of the conclusions, the influence of family upbringing and educational interactions at school leading to the manifestation of already formed competencies in students should not be neglected. However, the effect of the presented publications is also evident, mainly expressed in increasing the interest of adolescents, amplifying the motivation to engage in various activities, and supporting the perception and adoption of morally saturated messages.

Overwhelmingly, students responded positively to the videos/pictures/text produced by influencers, evident in the thought-provoking discussion of significant issues and insight into a range of perspectives. Furthermore, the children's capacity to formulate and express their own position, linked to aspirations for harmonious and fulfilling interactions – in the class community and in society at large – is

highlighted. The conclusion is based on shared opinions, which categorically deny aggressive and discriminatory acts, defining them as unacceptable and undesirable. At the same time, the largest share of adolescents from both age groups emphasizes kindness, good relationships, and respectful interactions, considering them as a necessary basis for constructive communication and a cardinal condition for peace and understanding in the community – fundamental components in the structure of both social and intercultural competence.

Connected to the two competencies are children's expressed preferences for cooperative and creative relations, based upon helping and supporting, exhibiting sympathy and empathy, and being respectful and cohesive. There is a tendency towards increased aspirations for peaceful resolution of conflicts and problems, harmony, solidarity, and tolerance among classmates and among humankind as a whole. Significant in the context of pro-social behaviour and interculturality are also students' statements regarding the denial of aggressive behaviour, violence and bullying, and unfriendly, destructive interactions. Among the potential opportunities to overcome the problems and challenges in this regard is precisely the development of social and intercultural competence in all students, which would contribute to the formation of moral qualities and values that reject intolerant attitudes and bullying in any form.

The results of the study provide evidence that the aforementioned process of the formation of the two competences could be facilitated through the implementation of publications by influencers in the course of educational interactions. The main advantages of videos/photos/text created by opinion leaders in the context of the formation of students' views, beliefs, behaviour patterns, competences are the possibility of achieving awareness of current topics and issues; the thought-provoking, problem-oriented discussions; the option for children to engage in activities based on their needs and interests; the discussion of both good and negative examples in a calm, protected environment, providing the opportunity to accent on the acceptable behavioural manifestations.

In order to successfully integrate opinion leader publications into the educational process, a number of essential conditions should be met, which is why seven basic recommendations are outlined:

1. The content should be appropriate to the age and level of cognitive, socio-emotional, and mental development of the students.
2. It is also important that the publications are selected in relation to a specific topic, educational goals, objectives, and clearly defined expected outcomes.
3. It is imperative that the publications are reviewed in advance, possibly seeking guidance from the children themselves – which are their favourite influencers. Thereby, the issues addressed will spark and hold the interest of the students while helping to build moral values, attitudes, views, and beliefs.
4. It is significant that the teacher is familiar with the activities of an influencer whose publications he wishes to use, so as not to direct the children's attention

to someone who publishes inappropriate content. The importance of educator awareness also stems from the need to make effective connections and select beneficial posts (Shen, Kuo 2015).

5. It is necessary that any information contained in the selected publications is properly verified to establish its credibility. Constructing beliefs based on inaccurate facts, data, and reasoning would not be conducive to a successful educational process.

6. The use of relevant and appropriate methods and activities, such as role-plays, discussions, game methods, project activities, etc. is key. It is crucial to have a final discussion and reflection to highlight the main messages and to give students the opportunity to share their thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and perspectives and to reflect more fully on the issues discussed.

7. It is recommended to focus on positive patterns of behaviour, respectively publications that present pro-social views and behaviours. Also important is the commentary on negative posts, with the purpose to draw children's attention to the irrelevance of hostile, destructive deeds, and actions.

The negatives associated with the excessive use of social networks, and in particular the consumption of content presented by influencers (Pandya, Lodha 2021) are incontestable. At the same time, it is irrefutable that there are positive outcomes linked to reviewing publications by opinion leaders such as the sense of belonging to a community, shared interests and expression of talents, social skills in the online environment, awareness (Lam, Yau, Cheung 2010), and prospects for personal, social, and professional development (Shen, Kuo, Ly 2017).

The implementation of content created by influencers, subjected to certain rules and conditions, is likely to lead to an increase in students' interest and motivation, encourage the adoption of significant moral postulates and the development of intercultural sensitivity, the formation of common human values, social and moral norms, and incorporating them into one's own value system.

The present study provides additional evidence with respect to the productive integration of content, created by opinion leaders in the educational process, specifically during the formation of social and intercultural competence. The findings suggest that such an implementation is possible and that the achieving of positive educational outcomes is probable. However, more research on this topic needs to be undertaken before the association between the review of influencer publications and the formation of competencies in children is more clearly understood. Further research could also provide the basis for constructing and applying a pedagogical model of educational interactions, consisting of publications, shared by opinion leaders and aimed at addressing children's needs and interests along with supporting them in their growth to become full-fledged, active, efficient, caring individuals.

NOTES

1. ESTAT, UNITSEF, 2020. Mediynoto potreblenie i "influenzarite" na detsata i mladite hora v Bulgaria [online]. [Viewed 10 December 2022]. Available from: <https://www.unicef.org/bulgaria/media/8821/file> [in Bulgarian].
- 2 OFFICIAL JOURNAL of the European Union, 2018. Bulgaria, S 189/2.

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