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NAVIGATING DIVERSITY IN SERBIAN SCHOOLS: SCHOOL ETHNIC SOCIALIZATION APPROACHES AND ADOLESCENTS' ETHNIC IDENTITY

RÓŻNORODNOŚĆ W SZKOŁACH W SERBII: SZKOLNA SOCJALIZACJA ETNICZNA A TOŻSAMOŚĆ ETNICZNA MŁODZIEŻY

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Abstract: Schools are a central socialising context in which young people encounter cultural diversity and construct a sense of belonging. During adolescence, a developmental period characterised by identity exploration and consolidation, school-based approaches to diversity may be associated with students' understanding and commitment to their ethnic background. Therefore, the present study examined the relationships between various school-based ethnic socialisation approaches and students' ethnic identity in Serbia. The sample comprised 1,504 secondary school students. School-based ethnic socialisation approaches were assessed using the Ethnic-Racial Socialization Scale encompassing four dimensions: Promotion of Cultural Competence, Cultural Socialization, Critical Consciousness Socialization, and Colorblind Socialization. Ethnic identity was measured using the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure–Revised (MEIM-R), capturing exploration and commitment. The results indicated that practices emphasising learning about one's own culture were positively associated with both exploration and commitment, while colourblind approaches were positively associated with commitment. Multilevel analyses further showed that Cultural Socialization was positively associated with both dimensions of ethnic identity among majority students, but not among minority students. These findings highlight the relevance of school-based practices for adolescents' ethnic identity and the promotion of intercultural values in culturally diverse societies.

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Keywords: cultural diversity, multicultural education, ethnic identity exploration, ethnic identity commitment, secondary school students

Streszczenie: Szkoła stanowi jedno z kluczowych środowisk socjalizacyjnych, w którym młodzi ludzie stykają się z różnorodnością kulturową i kształtują poczucie przynależności. W okresie adolescencji, będącym etapem rozwojowym charakteryzującym się eksploracją i konsolidacją tożsamości, szkolne podejścia do różnorodności mogą wiązać się ze sposobem, w jaki uczniowie rozumieją swoje pochodzenie etniczne i identyfikują się z nim. Celem badania było zatem określenie związków między różnymi formami szkolnej socjalizacji etnicznej a tożsamością etniczną uczniów w Serbii. Próba obejmowała 1504 uczniów szkół średnich. Szkolne podejścia do socjalizacji etnicznej mierzono za pomocą Skali Socjalizacji Etniczno-Rasowej (Ethnic-Racial Socialization Scale), obejmującej cztery wymiary: rozwijanie kompetencji kulturowych (Promotion of Cultural Competence), socjalizację kulturową (Cultural Socialization), rozwijanie świadomości krytycznej (Critical Consciousness Socialization) oraz socjalizację opartą na podejściu „niedostrzegania różnic" (Colorblind Socialization). Tożsamość etniczną mierzono za pomocą zrewidowanej Wielogrupowej Skali Tożsamości Etnicznej (Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure–Revised, MEIM-R), uwzględniającej dwa wymiary: eksplorację i zaangażowanie. Wyniki wykazały, że praktyki kładące nacisk na poznawanie własnej kultury były pozytywnie związane zarówno z eksploracją, jak i zaangażowaniem w tożsamość etniczną, natomiast podejście oparte na „niedostrzeganiu różnic" było pozytywnie związane z zaangażowaniem. Analizy wielopoziomowe wykazały ponadto, że socjalizacja kulturowa była pozytywnie związana z obydwoma wymiarami tożsamości etnicznej wśród uczniów należących do grupy większościowej, natomiast związku takiego nie stwierdzono wśród uczniów z grup mniejszościowych. Wyniki podkreślają znaczenie praktyk stosowanych w szkołach dla kształtowania tożsamości etnicznej adolescentów oraz promowania wartości międzykulturowych w społeczeństwach zróżnicowanych kulturowo.

Słowa kluczowe: różnorodność kulturowa, edukacja wielokulturowa, eksploracja tożsamości etnicznej, zaangażowanie w tożsamość etniczną, uczniowie szkół średnich

Introduction

In recent years, young people have been growing up in increasingly complex and rapidly changing social environments, shaped by intersecting social, political, economic, and cultural challenges. These conditions include social uncertainty, political tensions, population mobility and migration, and increasing cultural and ethnic diversity. Such developments are particularly relevant to adolescents, whose personal and social identities are formed through interactions with family, peers, school, and wider social environments. Multiethnic societies in the Balkan region provide a particularly important context for examining ethnic identity development, given the region's complex history of ethnic diversity, intergroup relations, and social and political transformations.

Ethnic identity refers to *an individual's sense of self as a member of an ethnic group and the attitudes and behaviours associated with that sense* (Phinney, 1990). More recent conceptualisations emphasise that ethnic identity is not a static characteristic but a developmental process through which individuals explore, interpret, and develop commitments regarding their ethnic group membership (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014).

Adolescence is considered a particularly important period for identity development (Erikson, 1968), making it a key developmental stage for understanding the formation of ethnic identity. As cognitive capacities develop, adolescents become increasingly able to reflect on the meaning of group membership and to consider their ethnic identity independently of their parents' perspectives (Cross & Cross, 2008; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004). This growing capacity for reflection and self-definition enables adolescents to develop a more differentiated understanding of their place in society, consider their future roles, and form personal values and beliefs that may also shape their attitudes toward broader social and political issues.

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One important component of ethnic identity is *exploration*, which refers to the process through which young people actively seek, encounter, and reflect on information about their ethnic group and the meaning of ethnic group membership (Syed et al., 2013). Exploration may involve learning about one's ethnic background, reflecting on cultural experiences, and considering the relevance of ethnicity to one's sense of self. Its developmental significance is supported by research indicating that greater awareness of the role of ethnicity in one's life, emerging through the process of ethnic identity exploration, is associated with more positive psychosocial outcomes (Umaña-Taylor & Rivas-Drake, 2021). A second central component of ethnic identity is *commitment* (Phinney & Ong, 2007), referring to the degree to which individuals have developed a sense of clarity, attachment, and commitment regarding their ethnic group (Mastrotheodoros et al., 2021). It reflects the extent to which adolescents perceive their ethnic group membership as a meaningful and integrated aspect of their self-concept. Previous research suggests that stronger ethnic identity commitment is associated with a greater sense of belonging, more positive feelings toward one's ethnic group, and more favourable psychosocial outcomes (Hachem & Toro, 2022; Umaña-Taylor, 2023).

Importantly, ethnic identity develops within the social contexts adolescents inhabit, with schools serving as a particularly important setting in which young people encounter diverse social experiences, norms, and messages that may shape their identity development (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). As adolescents spend an increasing amount of time interacting with peers and adults beyond the family context, school becomes an important setting in which they encounter perspectives on their own and other ethnic groups (Huang & Stormshak, 2011). Through learning about ethnic and cultural groups, as well as through everyday experiences of cultural diversity and intergroup relations, adolescents may acquire knowledge and messages that contribute to how they understand their own and other ethnic groups.

School approaches to ethnic and cultural diversity may therefore play an important role in ethnic identity development. Examining how such approaches relate to adolescents' ethnic identity can provide insight into the role of schools in supporting identity, belonging, and intergroup relations. This is particularly relevant in the Balkans, where ethnic diversity and intergroup tensions intersect with ongoing social change and the challenges of the contemporary polycrisis.

Schools as Contexts for Ethnic Identity Development

Schools may address cultural and ethnic diversity in different ways, ranging from approaches that recognise and value cultural differences to those that emphasise similarities across groups or minimise the relevance of ethnic and cultural distinctions. These approaches have been examined within several related but conceptually distinct frameworks, including multicultural education, cultural diversity climate, and ethnic-racial socialisation. The term *multicultural education* broadly refers to educational approaches that recognise cultural diversity and seek to promote educational equity and positive intergroup relations (Banks, 2010). A *cultural diversity climate*, in contrast, concerns students' perceptions of how cultural diversity is recognised, valued, and addressed within their school environment (Schachner et al., 2016). *Ethnic-racial socialisation* refers to the processes through which young people receive and interpret messages about ethnic-racial group, cultural differences, and intergroup relations (Byrd, 2015, 2017). Although ethnic-racial socialisation has traditionally been examined in family contexts, such processes may also occur within schools, where adolescents encounter messages about culture, ethnicity, and relations between social groups.

In the present study, we focus on school ethnic socialisation, conceptualised as different ways in which schools communicate messages about cultural and ethnic group , cultural differences, and intergroup relations. These approaches are examined through the ethnic-racial socialisation domain of the School Climate for Diversity–Secondary Scale (SCD-S; Byrd, 2017). The original framework includes five dimensions, but the version used in the present study comprised four: Cultural Socialization, referring to messages and opportunities related to learning about one's own cultural background; Promotion of Cultural Competence, involving opportunities to learn about other cultures and ethnic groups; Colorblind Socialization, reflecting messages that encourage students to minimise or overlook cultural and ethnic differences; and Critical Consciousness Socialization, referring to messages that promote awareness of inequality and unfair treatment of particular social groups (Byrd, 2015, 2017). Mainstream Socialization was excluded, because its content was considered less appropriate for the Serbian sociocultural context[1]. These four dimensions represent different approaches to addressing cultural and ethnic diversity and should not be interpreted as *a priori* positive forms of multicultural education. In particular, Colorblind Socialization differs conceptually from the principles of multicultural education because it emphasises the minimisation of group differences rather than their recognition and appreciation.

The different dimensions of school ethnic socialisation may be differentially associated with adolescents' ethnic identity exploration and commitment. Cultural Socialization has been positively associated with both dimensions of ethnic identity (Byrd & Legette, 2022), although some of the available evidence comes from research conducted in family contexts (Huguley et al., 2019). Evidence concerning Promotion of Cultural Competence is more mixed. Camacho et al. (2018) found associations between support for cultural pluralism and ethnic-racial identity development, while Schachner et al. (2016) reported associations between a cultural-pluralism climate and identity-related outcomes. However, these studies examined related but conceptually distinct school approaches and identity dimensions. In research directly examining school ethnic-racial socialisation, Byrd and Legette (2022) found no significant associations between Promotion of Cultural Competence and ethnic identity. Similarly, Critical Consciousness Socialization was proved not to be significantly associated with ethnic identity (Rivas-Drake et al., 2009; Byrd & Legette, 2022), whereas Colorblind Socialization was negatively associated with ethnic identity commitment, but not with exploration (Byrd & Legette, 2022).

The relevance of school-based ethnic socialisation may also vary by students' ethnic group in a specific context. Research conducted in other multiethnic contexts in the Balkan region suggests that majority-minority status may be associated with differences in adolescents' experiences of intergroup relations. For example, Pehar et al. (2023) found that associations between school, peer, and parental norms and intergroup outcomes varied according to adolescents' majority-minority status and the broader intergroup context in Croatia. Similarly, Tomovska Misoska et al. (2020) found that the relationship between interethnic contact and outgroup attitudes varied according to majority status in North Macedonia.

Despite growing research on intergroup relations in multiethnic contexts in the Balkan region, relatively little is known about the relationship between specific dimensions of school-based ethnic socialisation and adolescents' ethnic

[1] Given the exclusion of Mainstream Socialization and the cultural adaptation of the remaining dimensions to the Serbian context, we use the terms *school-based* or *school ethnic socialisation* throughout the manuscript to refer to the school-based messages and approaches assessed through the selected dimensions of the ethnic-racial socialisation domain of the SCD-S.

identity. In particular, school-specific evidence concerning the dimensions assessed by Byrd's framework remains limited, and it is unclear whether their associations with ethnic identity differ between majority and minority students. This gap is particularly relevant in the Serbian context, where schools bring together adolescents from diverse ethnic backgrounds and represent an important setting for negotiating questions of identity, belonging, and intergroup relations. Accordingly, the present study examined the associations of students' demographic characteristics and school-based ethnic socialisation with ethnic identity exploration and commitment among secondary school students in Serbia. We additionally examined whether the associations between school-based ethnic socialisation and ethnic identity differed according to students' majority-minority ethnic status.

The present study addressed the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent are students' demographic characteristics (gender, age, and majority-minority status) associated with ethnic identity exploration and commitment?

RQ2: To what extent are different dimensions of school-based ethnic socialisation associated with ethnic identity exploration and commitment, beyond students' demographic characteristics?

RQ3: Do the associations between school-based ethnic socialisation and ethnic identity exploration and commitment differ according to students' majority-minority ethnic status?

Methodology

Procedure and participants

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of the Department of Psychology, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade, Serbia (#2023-009). Data was collected between May and September 2023. Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous. Students provided informed consent, and data were collected during school hours.

The sample comprised 1,504 students from twenty secondary schools across Serbia. Schools were selected from three regions: Vojvodina, Central Serbia, and Sandžak, based on their willingness to participate, and included both secondary schools and vocational secondary schools. Seven participating schools were secondary schools and thirteen were vocational schools, providing economic and commercial, cosmetology, technical, agricultural, chemical-technological, biotechnical, and transportation courses. Overall, 64.2% of students attended vocational schools and 35.8% attended secondary schools. Within each participating school, classes were randomly selected, and all four grades of secondary education were represented.

The participants were of a mean age of 16.24 years (SD = 1.07; range = 13–19), and 54% were female. In terms of self-reported ethnic background, 68% identified as Serbian, 11% as Bosniak, 10% as Hungarian, and 8% as Roma. Each of the remaining ethnic minority groups accounted for less than 1% of the sample. Given the small size of several minority groups and the resulting limitations for reliable group-specific analyses, the participants from all minority groups were combined into a single ethnic minority category for the purposes of the present analyses. This analytical aggregation was used to ensure sufficient statistical power, and does not imply that the diverse minority groups represented in the sample are homogeneous or share identical experiences.

Data collection instruments

Sociodemographic data included participants' gender, age, and ethnic group . Ethnic identity was assessed using the *Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure–Revised* (MEIM-R; Phinney & Ong, 2007), which comprises two dimensions: ethnic identity exploration and ethnic identity commitment. In the present sample, the MEIM-R demonstrated good internal consistency, with

a Cronbach's alpha of .89 for the total scale and coefficients of .81 and .83 for the exploration and commitment subscales, respectively.

School-based approaches to ethnic socialisation were assessed using the *Ethnic-Racial Socialization (ERS)* domain of the *School Climate for Diversity–Secondary (SCD-S) Scale* (Byrd, 2017). The version used in the present study comprises four dimensions: *Promotion of Cultural Competence*, *Cultural Socialization*, *Critical Consciousness Socialization*, and *Colorblind Socialization*. In the original validation study, Cronbach's alpha coefficients for these four dimensions ranged from .70 to .91 across two independent samples (Byrd, 2017). In the present sample, internal consistency coefficients ranged from .68 to .84.

The instruments were translated into Serbian using a double-blind translation procedure. As a part of the cultural adaptation of the MEIM-R, references to *ethnic group* and *ethnic background* in the original measure were adapted to *ethnic/national group* and *ethnic/national background*, reflecting terminology commonly used in the Serbian sociocultural context. We acknowledge that this adaptation may introduce some ambiguity between ethnic and national identity, which is considered as a limitation of the study. The full English and Serbian versions of the items are provided in appendix 1.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics 23. Prior to the main analyses, the assumptions of linearity, normality, and homoscedasticity were examined, with no substantial violations identified. Multicollinearity was assessed using variance inflation factor (VIF) and tolerance values, and no evidence of problematic multicollinearity was found.

Two hierarchical regression analyses were initially specified, with ethnic identity exploration and ethnic identity commitment as the dependent variables. In the first step, gender, age, and majority–minority ethnic status were entered as demographic predictors, followed by the four dimensions of school ethnic socialisation in the second step. The interaction between majority–minority status and each of the four dimensions of school-based ethnic socialisation were entered in the third step. Because students were nested within schools, intraclass correlations were examined to assess the extent of between-school variance. Given the multilevel structure of the data, the final analyses were conducted using two-level linear mixed-effects models, with a random intercept specified for school. Continuous predictors were mean-centred before the interaction terms were computed. Missing cases were excluded using listwise deletion.

Measurement invariance analyses were conducted separately in R version 4.6.1 using the lavaan package for structural equation modelling (Rosseel, 2012). Measurement invariance of the SCD-S was examined across majority-minority status and gender using multigroup confirmatory factor analysis. Configural, metric, and scalar invariance were tested sequentially. Because the SCD-S items were ordinal, analyses were conducted using the DWLS estimator. Changes in CFI, RMSEA, and SRMR were examined across increasingly constrained models, using the criteria proposed by Chen (2007): ΔCFI $\leq$ .010, accompanied by ΔRMSEA $\leq$ .015 or ΔSRMR $\leq$ .030 for metric invariance and ΔCFI $\leq$ .010, accompanied by ΔRMSEA $\leq$ .015 or ΔSRMR $\leq$ .010 for scalar invariance.

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations. Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations among the study variables are presented in table 1. No substantial departures from normality were detected.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
Promotion of Cultural Competence	2.91	.95	-					
Cultural Socialization	3.29	1.02	.66**	-				
Critical Consciousness Socialization	2.84	.88	.63**	.59**	-			
Colorblind Socialization	3.19	.92	.33**	.36**	.38**	-		
Ethnic identity exploration	2.73	1.13	.19**	.20**	.14**	.12**	-	
Ethnic identity commitment	3.06	1.18	.09**	.13**	.08**	.16**	.77**	-

Note. Values below the diagonal are Pearson correlations. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$.

Measurement invariance. Measurement invariance of the SCD-S was examined across majority-minority status and gender using multigroup confirmatory factor analysis. Configural, metric, and scalar invariance were supported for both grouping variables based on changes in CFI, RMSEA, and SRMR (see appendix 2).

Hierarchical regression analyses. The results of the first hierarchical regression analysis are presented in table 2. For ethnic identity exploration, the demographic variables entered in step 1 explained 2.0% of the variance, $R^2 = .020$, $F_{(3, 1500)} = 9.968$, $p < .001$. Gender was negatively associated, whereas age and majority-minority status were positively associated with exploration. The addition of school-based ethnic socialisation approaches in step 2 significantly increased the explained variance, $\Delta R^2 = .059$, $p < .001$, resulting in $R^2 = .078$. Promotion of Cultural Competence and Cultural Socialization were positively associated with ethnic identity exploration. The interaction terms entered in step 3 did not significantly improve the model, $\Delta R^2 = .005$, $p = .099$. However, the interaction between Cultural Socialization and majority-minority status was statistically significant.

Table 2

Hierarchical multiple regression analyses predicting ethnic identity exploration

Predictor	Model 1 B (SE)	β	*p*	Model 2 B (SE)	β	*p*	Model 3 B (SE)	β	*p*
Gender	**–.203 (.058)**	**–.089**	**.001**	**–.228 (.057)**	**–.100**	**.000**	**–.220 (.057)**	**–.097**	**.000**
Age	**.072 (.027)**	**.068**	**.009**	**.083 (.027)**	**.078**	**.002**	**.081 (.027)**	**.077**	**.002**
Majority-minority status	**.162 (.063)**	**.067**	**.010**	**.178 (.061)**	**.074**	**.004**	**.175 (.061)**	**.072**	**.004**
Promotion of Cultural Competence	-	-	-	**.140 (.043)**	**.116**	**.001**	.076 (.054)	.063	.155
Cultural Socialization	-	-	-	**.143 (.039)**	**.127**	**.000**	**.213 (.049)**	**.189**	**.000**
Critical Consciousness Socialization	-	-	-	–.002 (.044)	–.002	.955	.021 (.054)	.017	.691
Colorblind Socialization	-	-	-	.065 (.034)	.051	.059	.062 (.042)	.049	.147
PCC × status	-	-	-	-	-	-	.177 (.091)	.085	.051
CS × status	-	-	-	-	-	-	**–.190 (.081)**	**–.100**	**.020**
CCS × status	-	-	-	-	-	-	–.071 (.092)	–.032	.438
CB × status	-	-	-	-	-	-	.005 (.072)	.002	.942

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Predictor	Model 1 B (SE)	β	*p*	Model 2 B (SE)	β	*p*	Model 3 B (SE)	β	*p*
R^2	.020			.078			.083		
ΔR^2	.020			.059			.005		
ΔF	9.968			23.801			1.953		
***p* for ΔF**	**< .001**			**< .001**			.099		

Note. B = unstandardised regression coefficient; SE = standard error; β = standardised regression coefficient; PCC = Promotion of Cultural Competence; CS = Cultural Socialization; CCS = Critical Consciousness Socialization; CB = Colorblind Socialization. Gender was coded 1 = male and 2 = female. Majority-minority status was coded 0 = majority (Serbian) and 1 = minority. Continuous predictors were mean-centred before creating interaction terms. Dashes indicate that the predictor was not entered at that step. $N = 1{,}504$. ***p*** < .05, ***p*** < .01.

For ethnic identity commitment, the demographic variables entered in step 1 explained 0.7% of the variance, $R^2 = .007$, $F_{(3, 1497)} = 3.552$, $p = .014$. Gender was negatively associated with ethnic identity commitment, whereas age and majority-minority status were not significantly associated with commitment. The addition of school-based ethnic socialisation approaches in step 2 significantly increased the explained variance, $\Delta R^2 = .032$, $p < .001$, resulting in $R^2 = .039$. Cultural Socialization and Colorblind Socialization were positively associated with ethnic identity commitment. The interaction terms entered in step 3 significantly increased the explained variance, $\Delta R^2 = .010$, $p = .004$. Significant interactions were observed between Promotion of Cultural Competence and majority-minority status and between Cultural Socialization and majority-minority status (table 3).

Table 3

Hierarchical multiple regression analyses predicting ethnic identity commitment

Predictor	Model 1 B (SE)	β	*p*	Model 2 B (SE)	β	*p*	Model 3 B (SE)	B	*p*
Gender	**−.161 (.062)**	**−.068**	**.009**	**−.164 (.061)**	**−.069**	**.007**	**−.150 (.061)**	**−.063**	**.014**
Age	.022 (.029)	.019	.456	.026 (.029)	.023	.371	.024 (.028)	.022	.391
Majority-minority status	.096 (.066)	.038	.147	.110 (.065)	.043	.093	.105 (.065)	.041	.107
Promotion of Cultural Competence	-	-	-	−.026 (.047)	−.020	.581	−.101 (.057)	−.079	.080
Cultural Socialization	-	-	-	**.129 (.042)**	**.108**	**.002**	**.239 (.053)**	**.201**	**.000**
Critical Consciousness Socialization	-	-	-	.003 (.047)	.002	.951	.014 (.058)	.010	.809
Colorblind Socialization	-	-	-	**.160 (.037)**	**.121**	**.000**	**.174 (.046)**	**.131**	**.000**
PCC × status	-	-	-	-	-	-	.204 (.098)	.092	.037
CS × status	-	-	-	-	-	-	**−.298 (.088)**	**−.150**	**.001**
CCS × status	-	-	-	-	-	-	−.038 (.099)	−.016	.698
CB × status	-	-	-	-	-	-	−.041 (.077)	−.018	.599
R^2	.007			.039			.049		
ΔR^2	.007			.032			.010		
ΔF	3.552			12.394			3.887		
***p* for ΔF**	**.014**			**< .001**			**.004**		

Note. B = unstandardised regression coefficient; SE = standard error; β = standardised regression coefficient; PCC = Promotion of Cultural Competence; CS = Cultural Socialization; CCS = Critical Consciousness Socialization; CB = Colorblind Socialization. Gender was coded 1 = male and 2 = female. Majority-minority status was coded 0 = majority (Serbian) and 1 = minority. Continuous predictors were mean-centred before creating interaction terms. Dashes indicate that the predictor was not entered at that step. $N = 1{,}501$. ***p*** < .05, ***p*** < .01.

School-level clustering and multilevel analyses. As students were nested within schools, intraclass correlations (ICCs) were examined to assess the proportion of variance attributable to differences between schools. ICCs ranged from .014 to .072 across the four dimensions of school-based ethnic socialisation, and were .037 for both ethnic identity exploration and commitment. Given the observed school-level clustering, final analyses were conducted using two-level linear mixed-effects models with a random intercept for school.

The final multilevel models yielded a pattern of findings largely consistent with the hierarchical regression analyses, with only one difference – Promotion of Cultural Competence was no longer significantly associated with ethnic identity exploration. Although the signs of the gender and majority-minority coefficients differed from those in the hierarchical regression models, this reflected the different parameterisation of these categorical predictors, with female and minority students serving as the reference categories. Thus, the multilevel results were substantively consistent with the hierarchical regression findings, with male students reporting higher levels of both dimensions of ethnic identity and minority students reporting higher levels of ethnic identity exploration. The remaining significant associations and interactions were unchanged (table 4).

Table 4

Two-level linear mixed-effects models predicting ethnic identity exploration and commitment

Predictor	Exploration B (SE)	95% CI	*p*	Commitment B (SE)	95% CI	*p*
Gender	**.280 (.060)**	**[.162, .398]**	**.000**	**.180 (.064)**	**[.053, .306]**	**.005**
Age	**.083 (.027)**	**[.030, .135]**	**.002**	.020 (.029)	[–.036, .077]	.477
Majority-minority status	**–.145 (.066)**	**[–.273, .016]**	**.028**	–.108 (.070)	[–.246, .030]	.126
Promotion of Cultural Competence	.091 (.053)	[–.014, .196]	.090	–.068 (.058)	[–.181, .045]	.240
Cultural Socialization	**.217 (.049)**	**[.120, .313]**	**.000**	**.238 (.053)**	**[.134, .342]**	**.000**
Critical Consciousness Socialization	.038 (.053)	[–.066, .142]	.474	.020 (.057)	[–.092, .132]	.729
Colorblind Socialization	.035 (.042)	[–.048, .117]	.411	**.141 (.045)**	**[.052, .230]**	**.002**
PCC × majority-minority status	.150 (.090)	[–.025, .326]	.094	.181 (.097)	[–.009, .370]	.061
CS × majority-minority status	**–.163 (.080)**	**[–.320, –.006]**	**.042**	**–.283 (.086)**	**[–.452, –.113]**	**.001**
CCS × majority-minority status	–.071 (.090)	[–.248, .106]	.431	–.026 (.097)	[–.217, .165]	.788
CB × majority-minority status	.013 (.071)	[–.125, .151]	.849	–.031 (.076)	[–.181, .119]	.685

Note. B = unstandardised regression coefficient; SE = standard error; 95% CI = 95% confidence interval. Gender was coded as 1 = male and 2 = female, with female students as the reference category. Majority-minority status was coded as 0 = majority and 1 = minority, with minority students as the reference category. Continuous predictors were mean-centred before creating interaction terms. ***p*** < .05, ***p*** < .01.

To further examine the significant interactions between Cultural Socialization and majority-minority status, simple-slope analyses were conducted. Among majority students, Cultural Socialization was positively associated with both ethnic identity exploration ($B = .211$, $p < .001$) and commitment ($B = .236$, $p < .001$). Among minority students, the associations between Cultural Socialization and ethnic identity exploration ($B = .049$, $p = .447$) and commitment ($B = –.045$, $p = .513$) were not statistically significant (table 5).

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Table 5

Simple slopes of Cultural Socialization by majority-minority status

Outcome	Majority-minority status	B	SE	95% CI	*p*
Ethnic identity exploration	**Majority**	**.211**	**.049**	**[.115, .308]**	**.000**
Ethnic identity exploration	Minority	.049	.065	[–.078, .177]	.447
Ethnic identity commitment	**Majority**	**.236**	**.054**	**[.130, .342]**	**.000**
Ethnic identity commitment	Minority	–.045	.068	[–.178, .089]	.513

Note. B = unstandardised regression coefficient; SE = standard error; 95% CI = 95% confidence interval. $p < .05$, $p < .01$.

Discussion

The findings indicate that several dimensions of school ethnic socialisation, as well as students' demographic characteristics, were associated with ethnic identity among secondary school students in Serbia. Overall, the findings support an ecological perspective on identity development, which emphasises that adolescents' identities emerge through the interplay of individual characteristics and the social contexts in which development takes place (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Individual characteristics, including gender, age, and majority-minority status, were associated with aspects of ethnic identity, while some dimensions of school ethnic socialisation showed additional associations with ethnic identity. Further analyses accounting for the clustering of students within schools largely supported this pattern of findings and additionally showed that the association between Cultural Socialization and both dimensions of ethnic identity varied according to students' majority-minority status. These findings underscore the importance of considering both the characteristics of individual adolescents and the broader school and intergroup contexts in which ethnic identity develops.

Gender was a significant predictor of both ethnic identity exploration and commitment, with male students reporting higher levels in both dimensions. Although previous research has yielded mixed findings regarding gender differences in ethnic identity, the present results are consistent with Maehler (2022), who similarly reported higher levels of both exploration and commitment among male adults. The mechanisms underlying this difference remain unclear, particularly because gender differences in ethnic identity may vary across sociocultural contexts and developmental stages. One possible explanation is that 16-year-old girls in Serbia construct their identities around other dimensions that are more salient or meaningful to them at this stage of development; however, further research is needed for more reliable conclusions.

Age was positively associated with ethnic identity exploration, consistent with developmental perspectives, suggesting that increasing cognitive and social maturity may facilitate adolescents' capacity to reflect on and explore questions of identity (Cross & Cross, 2008). This finding is also consistent with the view of ethnic identity as a developmental process rather than a static characteristic. As adolescents become increasingly capable of abstract thinking and engage with a broader range of social experiences, they become more likely to actively consider the meaning and relevance of their ethnic group membership.

Students belonging to ethnic minority groups reported higher levels of ethnic identity exploration than students of Serbian ethnicity. This finding is consistent with previous research showing that ethnic identity exploration may be more pronounced among ethnic minority young people than among members of the majority group (Phinney & Alipuria, 1990; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014).

The positive association between Cultural Socialization and both ethnic identity exploration and commitment was consistent across analyses and was in line with previous research (Huguley et al., 2019; Byrd & Legette, 2022). These findings suggest that opportunities to learn about one's cultural heritage, traditions, and history may be relevant to adolescents' efforts to explore their ethnic background and develop a stronger sense of connection to their ethnic group. Importantly, however, this association should not be interpreted as evidence that Cultural Socialization necessarily promotes ethnic identity in a causal sense. Rather, the findings indicate that the two processes are inter-related within the school context, suggesting that it is equally plausible that adolescents who already have a stronger interest in their ethnic background may also be more attentive to or receptive to such school-based messages.

In contrast, Promotion of Cultural Competence was positively associated with ethnic identity exploration in the initial hierarchical regression, but this association was no longer statistically significant after accounting for school-level clustering or including the interactions with majority–minority status. This instability across analytical models suggests that the relationship between opportunities to learn about other cultures and adolescents' ethnic identity may be sensitive to contextual and group-related factors. It may also help explain the mixed findings reported in previous research (Camacho et al., 2018; Byrd & Legette, 2022). More broadly, the finding suggests that exposure to information about cultural groups other than one's own may not have a uniform relationship with adolescents' own ethnic identity development.

The positive association between Colorblind Socialization and ethnic identity commitment was unexpected, particularly given the negative association reported by Byrd and Legette (2022). Importantly, this association remained statistically significant after accounting for the clustering of students within schools. One possible interpretation is that a sense of commitment to one's ethnic group can coexist with messages that emphasise the limited relevance of ethnic differences in everyday social interaction. Adolescents may therefore maintain a meaningful sense of ethnic group belonging while simultaneously endorsing a more colourblind orientation toward intergroup relations. However, this finding should be interpreted cautiously. Colorblind Socialization is conceptually distinct from approaches that recognise and value cultural differences and should not be regarded as a form of multicultural education. Nevertheless, it may reflect values inherited from the former socialist system, which emphasised unity and equality while often downplaying ethnic distinctions, and therefore it can have a different meaning than in the Western countries.

The most notable finding concerned the moderating role of majority–minority status in the relationship between Cultural Socialization and ethnic identity. Cultural Socialization was positively associated with both exploration and commitment among majority students, whereas these associations were not statistically significant among minority students. This pattern suggests that the meaning and potential relevance of school-based messages about cultural heritage may depend on students' position within the broader ethnic context. Previous research has similarly indicated that associations between ethnic socialisation and ethnic identity can vary as a function of social context, including the ethnic composition of adolescents' schools and their position within the majority–minority structure (Umaña-Taylor, 2004; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014).

One possible explanation is that cultural messages directed toward or reflecting the majority group may be more readily experienced as relevant and identity-affirming by majority students, whereas minority students may encounter a more complex relationship between school-based messages and their own ethnic

identity. In the Serbian context, where Serbs are the majority group nationally but schools differ substantially in their ethnic composition, the meaning of learning about cultural heritage may depend on which cultural heritage is represented and how it is positioned within the school environment.

Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. Future research should seek to address these limitations. First, the SCD-S was developed in the U.S. context, where ethnic-racial socialisation is strongly shaped by the social meaning attached to race and ethnicity in that setting. Although the instrument was culturally adapted for the present study, differences in the meaning and social significance of ethnic categories across contexts may affect the interpretation of some dimensions and their associations with ethnic identity. This issue is particularly relevant to Colorblind Socialization which might carry a positive connotation in the Serbian context, and to the adaptation of terminology in the items, equating ethnic and national identity.

Second, the dimensions of school ethnic socialisation were assessed through students' perceptions, rather than through systematic observations, teacher reports, or school-level documentation. The findings therefore reflect how students perceive and interpret school-based messages about ethnicity and cultural diversity rather than objectively documented practices. Future studies could benefit from multi-informant and multimethod designs combining student reports with teacher perspectives, classroom observations, and school-level data.

Third, the relatively small size of several individual minority groups required all minority students to be combined into a single analytical category. Although this approach provided sufficient statistical power for majority–minority comparisons, it may obscure meaningful differences between minority groups whose historical experiences, cultural backgrounds, and relationships with the majority group differ substantially. Future research with larger and more diverse samples that would additionally apply a qualitative methodology should therefore examine ethnic-group-specific patterns.

Fourth, the cross-sectional design does not allow conclusions to be drawn about the direction or causality of the observed associations. In particular, it remains unclear whether school ethnic socialisation contributes to changes in ethnic identity or whether adolescents with particular levels of ethnic identity are more likely to perceive, attend to, or interpret school-based messages in particular ways. Longitudinal studies would be particularly valuable for examining the temporal and potentially reciprocal relationships between school-based ethnic socialisation and ethnic identity exploration and commitment.

Finally, although the multilevel analyses accounted for the nesting of students within schools, the relatively small number of participating schools limits the precision with which between-school variation and school-level effects can be estimated. The multilevel findings, including the interaction effects, should therefore be interpreted with appropriate caution. Future research involving a larger number of schools or mixed-method case studies would provide a stronger basis for examining school-level characteristics, such as ethnic composition, diversity climate, and institutional approaches to ethnic and cultural diversity, and their role in adolescents' ethnic identity development.

Conclusion

This study highlights the importance of the school context in adolescents' ethnic identity development. At the same time, the findings suggest that different school-based ethnic-racial

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socialisation approaches are associated with ethnic identity in distinct ways. Cultural Socialization showed the most consistent positive associations with ethnic identity exploration and commitment, whereas other dimensions demonstrated weaker or context-dependent relationships. The association between Cultural Socialization and ethnic identity also varied according to majority--minority status, suggesting that the meaning of school-based messages about culture and ethnicity depends partly on adolescents' social position.

Taken together, these results support an ecological understanding of ethnic identity development, in which adolescents' individual characteristics and the social contexts in which they participate jointly shape identity-related processes. In increasingly complex societies characterised by growing cultural and ethnic diversity, schools play an important role not only in the educational process but also in fostering respect for diversity and social cohesion. At the same time, supporting adolescents in the development of a secure ethnic identity may represent an important resource for positive adjustment and resilience.

These findings have implications for educational practice in culturally and ethnically diverse schools. Providing opportunities for students to learn about cultural backgrounds, traditions, and histories may be relevant to creating school environments in which adolescents can explore and make sense of their ethnic identities. However, such approaches need to be sensitive to the diversity of students' backgrounds and social positions, as the same school-based messages may not be experienced or interpreted in the same way by majority and minority students. Teacher professional development could therefore support educators in developing context-sensitive approaches to addressing ethnicity and cultural diversity, while fostering dialogue, mutual understanding, equal treatment, and positive intergroup relations.

The unexpected positive association between Colorblind Socialization and ethnic identity commitment also calls for caution in interpreting approaches that minimise the relevance of ethnic and cultural differences. This finding does not suggest that colourblind approaches constitute a form of multicultural education or that minimising differences is necessarily beneficial. Rather, it indicates that adolescents may simultaneously experience a strong sense of ethnic group commitment and endorse messages emphasising the limited relevance of ethnic differences. In culturally diverse schools, therefore, an approach that acknowledges the significance of cultural and ethnic identities while promoting equality and inclusive intergroup relations may provide a more nuanced basis for addressing diversity.

Finally, the findings should not be interpreted as evidence that particular school approaches cause changes in ethnic identity, given the cross-sectional design. Rather, they point to the importance of examining schools as social contexts in which adolescents negotiate questions of identity, belonging, and intergroup relations. This perspective is particularly relevant for the Balkan region, where young people develop their identities within historically complex and increasingly diverse social environments. Further longitudinal, multilevel and mixed-method research is needed to clarify how school contexts and adolescents' ethnic identities influence one another over time.

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Appendix 1. Original and Serbian Versions of the Study Instruments

The tables below present the original English items and the Serbian versions used in the present study, organised by the dimensions of each scale. The Serbian versions reflect the translation and cultural adaptations described in the *Methods* section.

SCD-S scale

(1) Promotion of Cultural Competence

Table A1

Original English item Serbian version used to assess PCC

Original English item	Serbian version used in the present study
Your classes teach you about diverse cultures and traditions.	У школи учим о традицијама различитих етничких/националних група које живе у Србији.
You have learned about new cultures and traditions at school. You have the chance to learn about the culture of others.	У школи имам прилику да учим о људима других етничких/ националних припадности који живе у Србији.
In school you get to do things that help you learn about people of different races and cultures.	У школи учествујем у активностима које ми помажу да разумем људе различитих етничких/националних припадности који живе у Србији.
Your textbooks show people of many different races/ethnicities.	У уџбеницима које користимо могу се наћи примери који говоре о људима различитих националних/етничких припадности.
At your school, they encourage you to learn about different cultures.	Школа нас подстиче да учимо о људима различитих културних порекла који живе у Србији.

(2) Cultural Socialization

Table A2

Original English item Serbian version used to assess CS

Original English item	Serbian version used in the present study
In your classes you've learned new things about your culture	На часовима имам прилике да учим нове ствари о својој култури.
At your school, you have chances to learn about the history and traditions of your culture	У школи имам прилике да научим о историји и обичајима сопствене националне/етничке групе.
At your school, you have participated in activities that teach you more about your cultural background	У школи сам имао/-ла прилику да учествујем у активностима које су ми помогле да научим више о свом културном пореклу.

(3) Critical Consciousness Socialization

Table A3

Original English item Serbian version used to assess CCS

Original English item	Serbian version used in the present study
Your teachers encourage awareness of social issues affecting your culture.	Наши наставници нам причају о томе како различити догађаји у друштву утичу на етничке/ националне групе којима припадамо.
Teachers teach about racial inequality in the United States.	Наставници нам указују на дискриминацију људи разлитих етничких/ националних припадности у Србији.

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Original English item	Serbian version used in the present study
In your classes you have learned about how race/ethnicity plays a role in who is successful.	На часовима смо учили о томе како етничко/ национално порекло одређује ко ће колико имати успеха у будућности.
You have opportunities to learn about social justice.	У школи имамо прилике да учимо о питањима праведности и друштвене неједнакости.

(4) Colorblind Socialization

Table A4

Original English item Serbian version used to assess CB

Original English item	Serbian version used in the present study
At your school, people think race/ethnicity is not an important factor in how people are treated.	У школи се сматра да етничка/ национална припадност не утиче на то како ће неко бити третиран.
People here think it's better to not pay attention to race/ethnicity.	У школи сматрају да је најбоље да се игноришу етничке/ националне припадности.
Your school has a colourblind perspective.	У школи се понашају као да разлике између ученика различитих етничких/националних припадности не постоје.
Your school encourages you to ignore racial/ethnic differences.	У школи настоје да нас науче да игноришемо разлике које потичу од етничке/ националне припадности.

MEIM-R scale

Ethnic Identity Exploration

Table A5

Original English items and Serbian items used to assess ethnic identity exploration

Original English item	Serbian version used in the present study
I have spent time trying to find out more about my ethnic group, such as its history, traditions, and customs.	Трудио/-ла сам се да сазнам више о мојој етничкој/ националној групи, на пример тргајући за информацијама о историји, традицији, обичајима. . .
I have often done things that will help me understand my ethnic background better.	Често радим ствари које ми помажу да боље разумем своје етничко/ национално порекло.
I have often talked to other people in order to learn more about my ethnic group.	Често разговарам са другима како бих научио/-ла више о својој етничкој/ националној групи.

Ethnic Identity Commitment

Table A6

Original English items and Serbian items used to assess ethnic identity commitment

Original English item	Serbian version used in the present study
I have a strong sense of belonging to my own ethnic group.	Имам снажан осећај припадности својој етничкој/ националној групи.
I understand pretty well what my ethnic group membership means to me.	Разумем какво значење за мене има то што припадам одређеној етничкој/ националној групи.
I feel a strong attachment towards my own ethnic group.	Осећам јаку повезаност са својом етничком/ националном групом.

Appendix 2. Measurement invariance

Table A7

Measurement Invariance of the SCD-S Across Majority-Minority Status and Gender

Group	Model	χ^2 scaled	df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR
Majority-minority status	Configural	1252.036	194	.922	.903	.079	.047
	Metric	1071.711	206	.917	.904	.079	.050
	Scalar	1223.466	238	.924	.924	.081	.048
Gender	Configural	1153.964	194	.921	.902	.078	.050
	Metric	1012.631	206	.915	.901	.079	.054
	Scalar	1143.008	238	.924	.924	.080	.050

Note. Configural, metric, and scalar models represent increasingly constrained models. Changes in CFI, RMSEA, and SRMR were used to evaluate measurement invariance.

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