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# Intercultural Competence Needs and Approaches for Teachers and Educators in the Global Context

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**Abstract:** The present era of globalization, interdependence and multicultural societies has brought about both opportunities and crises in educational institutions and has shown that there is a growing need for intercultural competences at the cognitive, emotional and relational levels enabling teachers and educators to operate in linguistically and culturally complex contexts. However, the concepts of “intercultural education” and “intercultural competences” are often misunderstood and require a more precise definition. The present paper – based on a comprehensive review of literature on intercultural competence – intends to give further impulse to the discussion of intercultural competences and to offer concrete indications applicable to the field of education.

**Keywords:** Intercultural Competences, Intercultural Education.

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## 1. Introduction

The beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century saw tremendous changes. These transformations –which include advances in science and technology, above all things –have made society complex, plural, multiethnic and multicultural, with people, information and knowledge being transferred more easily and at greater speed than ever before.

As a result of free exchange theories and the removal of economic barriers, the world has now become economically, culturally, technologically, scientifically and politically interdependent. Such changes, resulting from mankind’s ability to control the environment based on its needs, have undoubtedly opened up economic and political opportunities and have expanded knowledge and access to healthcare. However, humanity is currently facing new risks, above all a profound sense of uncertainty (Morin, 2000). This uncertainty questions mankind as a whole, including its ability to

respond to the inherent difficulties that come with globalization. These difficulties include a number of areas: the speed at which culture and knowledge change; uncertainty about the future; instability in the labor market, and the difficulties resulting from people of different cultural backgrounds living together, which often leads “the locals” to take a nationalistic, if not outright xenophobic, stance in order to defend their “identity”. While on the one hand globalization has made the world smaller, on the other hand it has initiated a movement of “return to the origin of one’s ancestral identity” (Morin, 1999).

Investing in education, training and pedagogy is undoubtedly a way out for our crisis-ridden postmodern society. Society is bound to become ever more flexible, diverse, multiethnic and complex, and yet its profound social and relational emergencies point to a tendency to mistrust and reject “the other” and “the different”. In this context, the presence of



competent educators who are motivated and aware of learners' specific needs is a fundamental factor to building a learning environment that learners' families and the social communities at large can trust.

Given this situation, the present article will first try to find a definition and semantic clarification of the concept of intercultural competences based on a review of literature and empirical studies. The paper then reflects on the consequences of these studies for education.

## 2. Multicultural Societies, Complex Identities and the Need of Intercultural Competences

The processes of globalization, cultural cross-fertilization and the frequent contacts and exchanges among different people which characterize today's world highlight the complexity of the ethical and spiritual world lying behind these issues, and place emphasis on the changes in the way the traditional notions of "nation" and "citizenship" are meant and applied. Therefore, with respect to what U. Beck calls the "world risk society" (Beck, 1997, 2008) – which faces dangers ranging from a global financial crisis and environmental calamities to growing criminal and terrorist networks as well as the fight against poverty and the promotion of human rights – one needs to introduce the sense of a multiplicity of "memberships". Action needs to be taken at both local and global levels to bring about a real social and cultural change, sustained by the ripening of a dynamic and inclusive identity by individuals and of a "competent" and responsible citizenship at manifold levels of participation. Nowadays, the cohabitation in the same environment of people belonging to different cultures is very important, particularly in western countries, the favorite destination of people driven from the poorest areas of the world toward the richest and most developed countries in the search of a better life.

The issues arising from the presence of large numbers of immigrants in the wealthiest regions of the world cannot be tackled simply from an economic and political point of view, although this is indispensable in order to

ensure the migrants' peaceful existence as well as the recognition and protection of their basic human rights. Effective educational brokerage is needed to foster cohabitation based on the values of respect, acceptance and "conviviality". The goal that has to be achieved is to promote the transition from a multicultural reality – one where several cultures co-exist in the same territory without necessarily establishing meaningful contact and exchanges – to intercultural society, which implies dialogue and fruitful communication among those belonging to various cultures, in order to create a climate of co-habitation in which the indispensable tenets of acceptance and of positive tolerance toward difference can be reinvigorated through striving toward mutual recognition, sharing, empathy, mutual trust, conviviality and the pleasure of proximity.

On a theoretical level approaching the topic of interculturality is problematic since the terminology is vague. Terms like "multiculturality", "interculturality" and cultural diversity are not only associated very closely, but also often used interchangeably (Portera, 2011). However, there seems to be a predominance of the term "multiculturality" in northern America, whereas "interculturality" and "interculturalism" are more often used in European countries. From a semantic perspective, the terms differ in the way that multiculturality has a rather descriptive value, since it emphasizes the existence of more than one culture represented in a political system. The prefix *inter-* rather highlights relationships, interaction and exchange between groups. One important factor in the perception of intercultural difference is that it should not be seen as two opposing cultures or even perceived in hierarchical order in which one culture is regarded as inferior to a second. Intercultural education does not have to be conceived as related to abstracted cultures, habits and to all those peculiarities which shape each of them in a way that is unique, but in relation to individuals, each of which represents an original interpreter of their own cultural tradition, a tradition which is marked by history, needs, suffering and by individual hope. It is individuals that are called



upon to meet and establish relations in order to shape a new common identity, one that is richer than individual identities. This makes it possible to create new cohabitation values based on respect, mutual enhancement, openness and communion. These values are the outcome of a fecund exchange between individuals of different cultural heritage: relating to each other with humility and a spirit of partnership, the two parties are bound together by the outcome of their encounter, which does not belong to either one of them or their respective cultural backgrounds. However, while aiming at mutual appreciation and growth, the resulting brokerage need not weaken or lead to the loss of different cultural identities. Individuals can remain faithful to their respective cultural traditions, which are in any case dynamic and in constant transformation and as such qualify individuals' identities in terms of complexity and plural "memberships". Interculturality in this context implies more than the simple recognition of different coexisting cultures in one place, but entails the establishment of relations between these cultures with the overall aim of guaranteeing that one culture does not acquire second-class status (Leclercq, 2003).

That is why in today's complex and multicultural society, anyone who aims to become a "competent" and expert citizen has to have knowledge, skills and attitudes to face the global processes in which they are involved. Among social institutions, schools have represented a sort of testing ground for teachers, who need to be able to deal with these differences and complexities. This evolution requires a new professional profile for teachers, who cannot simply rely on traditional working virtues such as diligence, cleverness and creativity, but must also have complete intercultural competences, especially when the multicultural match is dense and demanding.

### 3. Intercultural Competences: Theory and Models

Providing a clear definition of intercultural competence is difficult, as it has not been unequivocally defined by scholars. Extensive international literature on the subject seems to

converge toward the definition of intercultural competence as a composite dimension where knowledge, self-awareness, attitudes and experience come into play in an ongoing process, as pointed out by J.M. Bennett (2008, p. 97): "(there is) an emerging consensus around what constitutes intercultural competence, which is most often viewed as a set of cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills and characteristics that support effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural contexts". One could define it as: «a multifaceted concept involving aspects of emotional, contextual, and interpersonal intelligence to combine to form a person who is emotionally caring yet controlled, sensitive to interpersonal dynamics, and genuinely perceptive when in complex and highly interactive situations» (Lonner & Hayes, 2004, p. 92) or, using D.K. Deardorff's (2009, pp. xi-xiv) incisive definition: "(an) appropriate and effective communication and behavior in intercultural situations".

As pointed out by B.H. Spitzberg and G. Changnon (2009), research in intercultural competence started in North America in the late 1950s; in spite of its short history, five major trends and models, mainly Anglo-Saxon, can be identified: compositional, co-orientational, developmental, adaptational and causal process models.

- Compositional models: these models identify hypothetical components of competence without specifying the relations among those components. Such models provide lists of relevant or probable characteristics, traits and skills thought to be important or relevant for competent interaction in multicultural settings.
- Co-orientational models: these models are primarily devoted to conceptualizing the process leading to intercultural understanding or any of its variants, such as empathy, accuracy of perception, clarity, comprehension, etc. Such models share some of the features of other models but are focused on a particular criterion of mutual communication and the shared meanings enabling it.



- Developmental models: these models place great emphasis on the time dimension of intercultural interaction and focus on an evolutionary approach to intercultural competence, which is achieved through a number of stages of progression or maturity.
- Adaptational models: these models tend to have two distinctive characteristics: firstly, they envision multiple parties to the interaction process; secondly, they emphasize the interdependence of these multiple interactants by modeling the process of mutual adjustment. The adjustment process characterizing interaction is seen as a crucial component of intercultural competence.
- Casual process: these models reflect interrelationships among intercultural competence components and are formalized or expressed in the form of testable propositions. These models typically take a form similar to path models, with an identifiable set of concepts at different distances, indicating a gradually increasing criterion of competence.

The Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) has been often referenced in the literature on this subject. It is based on the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) by M.J. Bennett (2008), which differentiates the experience of cultural differences into six hierarchical stages: denial, defence, minimization, acceptance, adaptation and integration. These six phases form a continuum from minimal to maximal competence. The IDI includes only five of the six stages in a 50-item inventory, which contains five sub-scales identified by a confirmatory factor analysis: Denial/Defence, Reversal, Minimization, Acceptance/Adaptation and Encapsulated Marginality (all with alpha coefficients between 0.80 and 0.85).

The model proposed by M. Byram (1997) has a different origin: it stemmed from intercultural competence development in standard language education in European schools. Byram's theoretical framework starts from the notion of linguistic competence,

with particular reference to D. Hymes' (1974) definition, whereby linguistic competence is not limited to grammatical skills but encompasses the pragmatic skill of interacting adequately with the world around us. In his work, M. Byram extends this notion further, on the grounds that pragmatic effectiveness is dependant on the knowledge of different cultural codes that influence message decoding. This means that foreign-language speakers need intercultural competence to interpret native speakers' linguistic as well as non-linguistic behavior correctly, that is they need to be familiar with behavioral and paralinguistic codes. Byram places particular emphasis on the intrinsically educational dimension of intercultural competence, going beyond the study and description of linguistic-pragmatic effectiveness. The author knows that European schools have a task to pursue: creating citizens whose values are open to cultural and democratic pluralism. Therefore, Byram reverses the traditional discourse of linguists and intercultural educators by turning intercultural competence from a means to achieving effectiveness in communication to the end of education in intercultural communication. In Byram's model of intercultural communicative competence, the two factors of knowledge and skills are regarded as pre-conditions that may change as a result of the communication process itself. Skills can be divided into two main categories: 1) interpreting and establishing relationships between aspects of two cultures (the ability to analyze data of one's country and the other country and the potential relationship between them); 2) discovering and interacting (the ability to discover can be used in different circumstances independent from and in combination with other interaction skills.) In addition to this, attitudes represent the foundation of intercultural competence: they are pre-conditions for successful interactions and they change and develop with learning. Attitudes include curiosity and openness, de-centering, willingness to suspend judgement toward meanings, beliefs and behaviors that differ from one's own. It is important to note that the notion of attitude is defined as a set



of positive qualities (such as availability and openness) which have an intentional core; it is no coincidence that interculturally competent individuals should not only be able to interact in a way that is effective and respectful, but should do so intentionally and knowingly. Another crucial notion is that of knowledge, which does not refer to the knowledge of a specific culture, but rather the way human groups generally work and the factors which come into play in multicultural interactions. Individual knowledge used in the encounter with an individual from another country can be divided into two main categories:

- 1) knowledge of social groups, their products and practices.
- 2) knowledge of individual and social interaction processes.

The former is always there, while the latter - which involves knowledge of concepts and processes - is fundamental to ensuring a successful exchange. However, it is not automatically acquired. Knowledge is not only declarative but also involves “knowing that there are many kinds of knowledge” (meta-level) and the way they work from a procedural point of view. On the other hand, skills - which involve different cognitive levels - are more complex:

- skills of interpreting and relating: the ability to interpret a document or an event relating to a different culture, to explain them and relate them to one’s own culture;
- skills of discovery and interaction: the ability to acquire new knowledge and cultural practices, and to put knowledge and attitudes into practice in real interaction and communication.

Skills enable individuals to translate events and communication from one culture into another, i.e. to take specific action. At the same time, they are also related to the notion of “know-how”, i.e. using resources in a way that is orientated toward relation and interaction. Finally, the meta-cognitive/meta-reflective level of critical cultural awareness is based on one’s

degree of critical awareness when assessing cultural differentials (behaviors, values and traits).

Recently, a promising model (Portera, 2010) has been developed by D.K. Deardorff (2008). Unlike M.J. Bennet, Deardorff argues that linguistic skills, learning experience, cultural “contact”, and in-depth knowledge on specific cultural characteristics are not sufficient criteria for real intercultural competence. Intercultural competencies are analyzed in their complex and multidimensional form, and the process leading to their acquisition is described as: “complex and multidimensional and can take on a variety of forms. The acquisition of intercultural competence can be construed as a continuous, dynamic process and one that involves diverse dimensions while developing and enriching itself” (Deardorff, 2008, pp. 6-7). This process takes the form of an upward spiral, where learning is not understood as additional learning but rather as an integrated process where individual aspects are expressed through different forms of learning and at different levels. Opportunities for appropriate intercultural exchange arise in many different ways: through interaction with individuals who have a different framework of values, travelling abroad, moving to different learning environments, and so forth.

D.K. Deardorff identifies the following aspects of intercultural competence:

- attitudes: it is essential to have a positive attitude towards diversity, to be open, curious, respectful and tolerant toward ambiguity;
- knowledge and skills: comprehensive cultural knowledge is based on a number of core elements, which may vary based on the context: understanding different points of view on the world as a result of cultural self-awareness; recognizing the role and the impact of a given culture on behaviors and communication as well as on the historical and religious context; specific cultural information; socio-linguistic awareness, understood as the awareness of the





relationship between language and meaning in a given social context. D.K. Deardoff points out that an increasing number of scholars are acknowledging the importance of behavior-related communication skills (volitional) over elements pertaining to knowledge (cognitive). Among the skills enabling individuals to increase their cultural knowledge are: listening, observing and interpreting, analyzing, evaluating and relating cultural elements, as well as relating to different cultures using one's own difference-management and conflict-resolution models, including the use of tools such as mediation;

- internal outcome: the ability to change perspectives by moving, enlarging or relativizing one's own reference framework. Internal outcomes include: adaptability, flexibility, empathy and de-centering;
- external outcome: the ability to adapt communication and behaviours depending on the situation.

Based on the components of intercultural competence, two visual representations have been created: the pyramid model and the process model. These models bring together the individual level (attitudes) on the one hand and the level of cultural interaction (outcomes) on the other. Deardoff also points out that intercultural competence development is a process that stems from self-awareness and unfolds throughout an individual's learning experience. This process requires intent, cohesion and coordination and does not come about by chance.

#### 4. Competence training

In the world-risk society it is necessary to promote the development of a dynamic and inclusive identity and a responsible citizenship model characterized by plural competences and active at different levels of participation. According to U. Beck (2003), a new idea of citizenship should be inspired by the need for mutual recognition and acceptance, justice, peace building, forgiveness and shared efforts aimed at creating a different public space and a positive outlook on the future. However,

this cannot be achieved without investing in lifelong learning. A constantly changing world and the growing demand for ever greater and more relevant skills mean that education cannot be limited to one phase of individuals' lives or promoted *ex cathedra*: it has to become permanent (lifelong learning) and revolve around new players, new ways of doing things, and tap into new resources. As argued by P. Bosello (2010, p. 75), "the traditional notion of education was primarily based on needs analysis, teaching and student assessments: this model is no longer in line with adult learners' new needs, both quantitatively and qualitatively". Educators must be educated in intercultural competence in a "multidimensional" way.

Drawing upon the results of recent research (Milani, 2015), this new type of education in intercultural competence should be rethought around three main points: 1) extending comprehension in human sciences to the historical, social and political implications of migration; 2) building methodological and teaching tools to integrate an intercultural perspective into disciplines; 3) personal development, which involves educators working on their own stereotypes and prejudices. Consequently, intercultural competence programmes should be based on a number of points:

- culture should be understood as a dynamic and subjective notion (relations are established by individuals, not by cultural systems) and should account for all human differences, without neglecting social, political and economic differences, gender, power relations, disability (Portera, 2013), etc.;
- developing self-building skills, i.e. working on one's self through ongoing self-assessment as well as meta-cognitive and meta-reflective skills. Self-analysis and self-reflection provide a solid foundation for self-learning: they should not, however, be limited to a given phase, but should be carried through the whole learning journey;
- promoting cooperation-based relationships through the acquisition of communication



competencies while investing at the same time in the creation of inclusive contexts. Educators have to invest in promoting positive social relationships by making the most of any cooperative work opportunities that may arise in schools. Schools should be educational and inclusive communities, a “form of community life”, as described by J. Dewey (1897). For this to happen, schools should be characterized by relational “conviviality” between teachers and students and among teachers themselves, and should also include families and the surrounding area, in a new dimension of synergy and integration. In other words, a school which constitutes a real community is a group of people that learn to communicate honestly, build relations that go beyond calm and self-control, and develop some significant commitment which they rejoice in or cry over together; they are happy for one another and make each other’s condition their own. Therefore, investing in communication and educational paths that get pupils to see dialogue as a resource for constructive exchange, is of paramount importance. Communicative-relational competencies as well as linguistic and plurilinguistic competencies are important; however, one should not lose sight of the fact that languages do not simply equate with pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar, but are part of a much more complex reality intertwined with cultural factors:

[...] Knowing how to put words into a sentence is only the start of communication; speakers must also gain familiarity with a wide variety of social and cultural contexts, so they will know when to produce utterances at appropriate times, taking into account a host of contextual factors. Learning to communicate appropriately with cultural others requires far more than learning the basic grammar rules for a language; one must learn the rules of use as well in order to achieve communicative competence. What can be said to whom, in what context and with what connotations is never a simple matter (UNESCO, 2013, p. 13);

- bringing differences to the fore and valuing them: educators must value differences, which should be understood as both individual human experiences and cultural experiences, in order to foster the potential and the resources of each individual; as M. Scheid (2000, pp. 17-18) writes:

Diversity can relate to equity when it helps to address fairness through civil rights, human rights, liberation movements, and compliance laws and policies. And diversity can also help promote respect and understanding, as well as the utilization of differences to maximize the potential of all individuals.

The difficulty when implementing programs and measures to promote interculturality is the pitfall of one-size-fits-all solutions. Interculturality has to be addressed with all the facets of the backgrounds of all cultures involved, otherwise one will end up with superficial and misleading strategies. This is why H. Gardner’s (1985) theory of “multiple intelligences” may be a useful reference. Gardner’s theory not only allows for diversified and customized learning, but is based on the appreciation of all types of diversity, in line with the diversification of intellectual skills based on socio-economic contexts, environmental factors and reference values;

- paying attention to the way educational and curricular contexts are organized; the effectiveness of competent behavior is only measurable within the context where it is played out. Intercultural competence is “plastic” and results directly from the quality of the educational paths undertaken as well as from the context: these inform the educational strategies to be put in place to achieve competence and facilitate other individuals’ competence. Therefore, curricula should be dynamic and open and should provide an opportunity for the school community to engage in continuous learning. Standard normative approaches to teaching – based on abstract deductive methods and revolving around face-to-



face lessons, distant from real life – prove demotivating and are no longer adequate. Schools are called upon to put forward educational curricula which are connected with everyday life (the Dewey-inspired idea of “learning by doing” as opposed to the “banking education”<sup>1</sup> model harshly criticized by P. Freire), and in line with pupils’ personal inclinations, so as to enhance each and every pupil’s unique personality. Cooperative learning is an effective method in that it does not only see cooperation as its main variable, but also provides a learning strategy, whose characteristics fit the purposes of intercultural education (Johnson & Johnson, 1997; Slavin, 1983);

- investing in continuous education; lifelong learning is a fundamental tool for tackling current changes and promoting individuals’ fulfilment, both personally and socially. One distinction needs, however, to be introduced between formal, non-formal and informal learning in support of global learning, which includes the use of Web 2.0 tools to enhance communication, collaboration and sharing:

The new social media, such as web-based forums, wikis, etc., provide new opportunities for crossing group boundaries and sharing information among diverse cultures (...). Essentially, the goal must be to create a wide variety of open spaces, both online and face-to-face, in which to hold intercultural dialogues among innumerable groups [...] (UNESCO, 2013, p. 30);

- intercultural competence includes an ethical-political dimension, in that it promotes

1- In J.P. Portelli and G.P. McDonough’s (2004, pp. 59-80) thorough analysis of P. Freire’s work, «banking education” is described as: “Education disconnected from experience, education that treats students as objects without agency, education that creates and reproduces violence by alienating students from genuine learning, themselves, and by creating and reproducing the bureaucratization of the mind, education that creates a rigid dichotomy between the teacher and the student, teaching and learning, making students continuously dependent on the teacher and creating the myth of the division between the word and the world where only the word (i.e. the technical and the abstract) is given importance.”

the idea of global and interdependent citizenship, transcending national borders. This dimension is particularly important in that modern educators must not only be able to analyze and interpret the social-cultural context and its values but should also learn to be responsible citizens in ever more complex and multicultural societies.

## 5. Conclusion

Today, particularly in industrialized countries, globalization means that events that happen in other continents, including financial, economic, political, environmental and educational decisions, have direct influence on our local context. As people move increasingly (both physically and virtually), it is necessary for education to respond to the changes currently underway, identifying the risks and opportunities that come with them.

Firstly, it is important to build consensus on the terminology used. (Currently, the notions of multicultural education and intercultural education are often confused, in Italy as much as in the rest of the world, and some are even reintroducing the term “cosmopolitan education”.) The future of education, its standing amid other disciplines and its authority in different areas of life will depend on its ability to renew itself.

Secondly, intercultural competences are necessary and urgently needed: especially for professionals who work in fields that offer services to the community (education, social services, healthcare, mediation), but also in business or government agencies, intercultural training is necessary. Such training needs to borrow insight from the fields of communication, mediation and conflict management, but most importantly they need to be founded on the theories of intercultural education.

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