

INTERCULTURAL LEARNING – AN EDUCATIONAL APPROACH TO SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

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Abstract: *There is a wide variety of practices in intercultural learning, yet there are very few evidences of the impact of those practices. In order to ensure quality of the intercultural learning processes, educators need to go beyond celebrating diversity to creating learning environments in a human rights-based approach, in order to stimulate meaningful interactions, social transformation and access to social rights. This article argues for the need for more research, more quality assurance instruments and more coherent approaches at European level in the field of intercultural learning. And invites practitioners in this field to test and feedback the instrument. One of the tools recently developed by the Partnership between the European Commission and Council of Europe in the field of youth, entitled Indicators for Intercultural Dialogue in Non-formal Education Activities is currently available for educators to test it into practice.*

Key words: *intercultural learning; social rights; interactions; learning environments*

The intercultural perspective in plural and dynamic societies

The perspectives on culture have evolved from a static, essentialist view to a dynamic, constructivist one (Gray and Thomas, 2006). The essentialist view on culture is based on the idea that culture has fixed characteristics, variation among members being considered as secondary. This approach is inadequate in nowadays context in which people often migrate from one place to another, travel so much physically and virtually and live in continuous interaction with the others. Moreover, this reductionist view on culture has the effect of limiting human understanding to theories and methodologies that are not adequate to the realities of people and that promote simplistic analysis and solutions to complex problems.

In the constructivist view, culture is defined in interaction with others, it is fluid in expression and continuously evolving and adapting to the realities lived and perceived by its members. Culture evolves and reshapes itself throughout the years; it is influenced by the interaction of its members with members of other cultures, with the surroundings, by cultural and economic exchanges, by globalization.

In people's everyday discourse about culture there are both inflexible and flexible approaches to ethnicity, religion and nationality. In some situations, those who are interested to present a rigid view of culture (mainly extremist groups, politicians, media, etc.) describe it as fixed and closely related to ethnicity and religion. In political discourse there are still tendencies to claim for 'purity of culture' and to use culture for politics of exclusion.

Another type of discourse refers to culture as a *making* process, which views culture as multifaceted and diverse in its range of values, beliefs, practices and traditions – some of which may be recent inventions – and hence as negotiable and subject to personal choice, and as a dynamic process through which both meanings and the boundaries of groups or communities are renegotiated and redefined according to current needs (Byram, Barrett, Ipgrave, Jackson, Mendez Garcia, 2009).

All too often, culture has been considered as completely overlapping with nationality, with the borders of nation states, or even an entire region (e.g. Arab culture). In intercultural learning processes we must acknowledge that there are general characteristics of a culture, but there is also a multitude of specificities related to how a culture is lived.

Moreover, people have multiple cultural affiliations, they identify with characteristics of different cultures, they create their own cultural identity and that cultures themselves are internally heterogeneous. We often receive messages that assume there can only be one cultural identity (e.g. Where are you from? Do you consider yourself Serbian or German? How come you go to church if you are gay?). This type of worldview has a great potential to create a cognitive dissonance (a discomfort caused by holding simultaneously conflicting ideas, emotions, beliefs, values, etc.). In order to avoid this, and to reach a coherent narrative about ourselves, we need to go through a process (both conscious and unconscious) of accommodating the different facets of our identity, to feel that we are a unique and complete human being. For this reason, the Council of Europe published the *European Manifesto for Multiple Cultural Affiliation*, which openly affirms that at a given time or at different stages in their lives, people may adhere to different cultural affiliations:

Multiple cultural affiliations make it possible both to conceive and to experience the complex, differentiated development of cultural identity in mature democratic societies. It firstly recognizes communities which bring with them different references in terms of identity and secondly allows each individual to have a number of specific identities expressed through belonging to various cultures. Multiple belonging is perceived as the possibility for everyone, either individually or in a group, to feel simultaneous or successive affiliation with a set of values or cultural references shared by several groups or communities of beliefs or interests.

Individuals subjectively identify with more than just a single social group. In addition, people frequently use their personal attributes (such as fun-loving, conscientious, conservative, tolerant, etc.) and their interpersonal relationships and social roles (such as mother, friend, son, employee, etc.) as further components of their self-concepts. These multiple identifications with social groups, attributes, relationships and roles help individuals to orientate position and define themselves in the social world relative to other people (Byram et al., 2006).

As Titley (2007, p. 72) states: “The tendency to see and valorize people as belonging to cultural groups underplays and simplifies identity and the importance of gender, class, sexuality, disability and political allegiances in practices of identity as well as practices of discrimination. [...] The question is not whether or not culture should be engaged with, but how, in relation to whom, to what extent, in interrelation with what, and with which underlying meanings”.

All individuals have the tendency to maintain a positive self-identity and to feel secure in their identity. Different strategies are used in order to attain this. One of them is to make a distinction between in-groups (‘us’) and out-groups (‘them’). When people define their group belonging in opposition to others groups, an artificial categorization is created, one that accentuates differences and reduces similarities, saying basically that ‘we are good and they are bad’. Therefore, it is important to accept that no culture is better or worse than other, that there is no hierarchy of cultures.

One of the recurrent themes of the consultations realized for developing the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue was that old approaches to the management of cultural diversity (such as

multiculturalism) were no longer adequate to societies in which the degree of that diversity was unprecedented and ever-growing. *Multiculturalism is now seen by many as having fostered communal segregation and mutual incomprehension, as well as having contributed to the undermining of the rights of individuals – and, in particular, women – within minority communities, perceived as if these were single collective actors. Intercultural dialogue is seen as the route to follow in order to achieve inclusive societies.* If multiculturalism was a policy aiming at respecting cultural identities of people living in the same social space, interculturalism goes beyond mere coexistence, towards living together in a space of respect, but also of interaction, communication and genuine exchanges. In this understanding, “interculturalism has already processed the lessons of multiculturalism’s limitations, replacing a static parallelism with an emphasis on dynamic interaction and exchange” (Titley, 2012, p. 164).

At the core of an intercultural society lays the concept of integration, understood as a situation in which all citizens (beyond any categorization as national, migrants, minorities) are given the opportunity to affirm their cultural specificities, as well as to participate in communication and dialogue processes with the rest of the society, based on democratic collaboration.

Intercultural perspective first requires us to recognize that reality is plural, complex, dynamic and changing, and that interaction is an integral part of all lives and cultures. Intercultural perspective asks us to ensure that such interaction fosters mutual respect and the enrichment of mutually supporting communities and individuals, rather than the strengthening of relationships based on domination and rejection. The aim is therefore to search for the truth through dialogue and to work towards mutual understanding (Olafsdottir, 2011).

Interculturality refers to the capacity to experience cultural otherness, and to use this experience to reflect on matters that are usually taken for granted within one’s own culture and environment. “Interculturality involves being open to, interested in, curious about and empathetic towards people from other cultures, and using this heightened awareness of otherness to evaluate one’s own everyday patterns of perception, thought, feeling and behavior in order to develop greater self-knowledge and self-understanding” (Byram et al., 2006, p.10).

When speaking about diversity there are both the risk of *dilution* (to consider every aspect of life, every experience, every difference in the concept of diversity) and the risk of *essentialisation* (to consider that a person that belongs to a certain group that is ‘different’ necessarily represents the viewpoint of that particular group). In the first case, there is too much emphasis on the individuality in detriment of group belonging, while in the second case there is too much emphasis on group belonging and presupposed homogeneity within groups. For example, in the first case we might believe that we have diversity in a group of straight men with the same religious and cultural background just because they had very different life experiences. In the second case, we might have the tendency to always look at the African participant, or search his approval when speaking about things related to Africa, as if he/she would represent the point of view of an entire continent.

All human beings are different and unique in their individuality, talents, potential, desires, but they are equal before the law, as citizens and with regard to their human rights. “He who reduces political language to difference only will come out as an individualist and social Darwinist, he who does the same with regard to equality will end up as collectivist. It is only by keeping the concepts of difference and equality in balance that one can speak of a fair and just society” (Ohana & Rothmund, 2008, p.138).

Intercultural learning – a key educational approach at European level

The main purpose of intercultural learning – to inflect ethnocentric perspectives, fight prejudices and promote solidarity actions that support equality in human dignity and respect for the plurality of cultural identities – remains fully valid and more relevant than ever in European societies whose futures are further intertwined and interdependent with the rest of the world (Cunha and Gomes, 2009).

In order to contribute to this purpose, certain key aspects of intercultural learning need to be taken into account. Unfortunately many of the approaches to intercultural learning promote simplistic analyses and solutions for change that are at odds with the fine-grained knowledge many participants have of their context. Despite unquestionably good intentions on the part of most people who call themselves intercultural educators, most intercultural education practices, instead of challenging the dominant hegemony, actually support prevailing social hierarchies, and inequitable distributions of power and privilege (Gorski, 2008). Good intentions need to be backed up by intercultural competence, understanding and promotion of intercultural learning principles.

The shift in intercultural learning needs to go from celebrating diversity and cultural events to redressing inequality and fostering social change, so that everyone can have the opportunity to use their capacity to contribute to community development, to be active citizens, to influence policies and get involved in structural changes in their own reality.

Intercultural learning is never a completed fact. It is a lifelong, on-going process. The concept of *process* implies systemic aspects of on-going or continuous change over time, functional interdependence, equifinality (different paths to the same outcome) and multifinality (one path to multiple outcomes) (Spitzberg and Chagnon, 2009).

In the process of learning we pass through different stages of development. In each stage our worldview is re-shaped based on the new knowledge, skills and attitudes that we acquired. Not only our perception of reality changes based on new learning, but reality also changes, new variables come into play, complex situations need to be faced. Therefore, we can never say that our intercultural competence is fully developed, but it is always in process, just like the construction of our identity.

The activities aiming at developing intercultural competence, which are realized mainly in the non-formal education sector, need to ensure a certain quality standard for intercultural learning processes. No matter how diverse the activities are in themselves, in order to ensure quality intercultural education certain principles are to be respected. These principles are summarized in figure 1 and described below.

Intercultural learning is an **educational approach**; it is a quality of education, not a purpose in itself. It is a process aimed at the development and stabilization of all individuals' willingness and ability to acculturate, to live together in diverse societies (Nedelcu, 2008). It is holistic and transversal; it is a lifelong process that concerns all ages.

Intercultural learning intersects with education for democratic citizenship and human rights education. Intercultural learning is not about disparate models and theories thrown into a training programme or about mere techniques for group work and simulations of culture, but about unmasking and engaging with desires, politics and assumptions (not just associate them with

education about culture), in order to involve all citizens in shaping the societies they live in, so that they reflect the pluralism of their own realities.

Intercultural learning **carries a potential for social transformation**, it is a tool for social change that provides a framework for the analysis one's own living context and working context and ways to assess when the framework of "culture" is (not) useful in understanding and acting in their context. It needs to take place in everyday life and to be evaluated against the world we are living in (Otten, 2007). Intercultural learning provides models and theories to help us understand the world we live in, and should not create expectations that the world will have to fit theoretical models. It is heuristic; it encourages learners to discover solutions by and for themselves in order to reach a fairer world, a world of **solidarity, social cohesion**.

Another important principle is **multi-perspectivity**, an understanding of the complex nature of the people and society and the uselessness of trying to find the absolute truth in relation to interpersonal interactions. The way in which people perceive reality is the reality for them. Intercultural learning operates at the level of perceptions. Shifting of perceptions leads to changes of reality, which is why empathy and tolerance of ambiguity are key aspects of intercultural competence. Intercultural learning works against the tendency of a majority-centered vision of the world and presentation of the history. It denies any reminiscent idea of a race superiority, or hierarchical distribution of ethnic groups.

The approach and methods of intercultural learning need to move in the direction of placing more emphasis on 'action', to equip its participants for acting in favor of the social change they have identified as necessary (Ohana and Otten, 2012), to take a clear stand **against discrimination, racism and other forms of intolerance and social injustice**. An important accomplishment of intercultural learning is to develop people's abilities to recognize the existence of stereotypes and to understand the impact of prejudices on their lives and on other people's lives. Intercultural learning offers the means and tools to break the stereotypes and to deconstruct the ethnocentric perspectives and promotes attitudes and behaviors that prevent social injustice and foster positive relations.

People need to develop their **critical thinking** towards media and political discourses. They need to learn how to make a balanced discourse analysis, to navigate among what is being "served" to them by the media and to deconstruct the stereotypes launched too often by media, politicians, and the people around them in general. Critical means to stay away from certainties and cultivate doubt. It means having the capacity to formulate questions, to analyze, relate and contextualize, to move away from passively interiorizing the information transmitted by others. Through intercultural learning people learn to deconstruct and reconstruct the reality, to unlearn what they have learned.

Intercultural learning offers an **alternative to multiculturalism** (Rus, 2010, Lentin and Titley, 2011, O'Conneide, 2012). The intercultural approach goes beyond simple recognition of diversity to facilitating dialogue between different socio-cultural groups, addressing power relations and fostering positive relations in the society in general. Intercultural learning aims at the right balance between the freedom of expression and respect of cultural diversity, acknowledges and respects diverse cultural worldviews and practices. This does not mean that any kind of behaviour is acceptably if framed as cultural practice. Human rights framework acts like a guardian which sets the limits of cultural relativism.

Intercultural learning is not only about authentic dialogue, but also about **equal opportunities**. Ensuring a ratio of migrants or minorities in order to satisfy the cultural diversity requests is not enough. The aim is to reach the higher levels of the ladder of participation (Arnstein, 1969), to make sure that everyone has a voice and to ensure cultural diversity in the decision making groups, to empower migrants and minority groups to take initiative. Equal opportunity does not mean equal treatment; it means differentiated treatment with the aim of reaching equality and social justice.

Many recent articles and papers have critiqued the apparent de-politicization of intercultural learning (Özdemir, 2012). Nowadays, the call is to “**re-politicize**” intercultural learning. Tolerance and awareness, even though they are crucially important, they are sometimes presented as the end-game of intercultural learning. This approach assumes that cultural identities are inherently problematic, without taking into account the deep foundations of institutional and state racism (Titley, 2007). Intercultural learning needs to address aspects of structural discrimination and to develop strategies for finding consensus for social action and transformation.

Speaking about intercultural learning without including the power context in which intercultural encounters often occur would exclude a big part of our reality. Too often conflicts are characterized as cultural by the state power that is happily to complicit in the illusion that mere cultural difference is the basis of discrimination. Getting people together in training is not a miraculous way of increasing tolerance and appreciation of cultural difference. Individual changes must work along with state and international policies.

Intercultural education emerges in response to the conflicts that occur in multicultural societies. Its aim is to promote an encounter and an exchange on an equal footing between different groups or communities (Lafraya, 2012). From an intercultural perspective **conflict** is seen as a source for development. Whenever people with different world views come together there is a potential for conflict. Intercultural learning offers the tools for being an active citizen, able to question, and prepared to be questioned by others, to listen and be listen to; to have the courage to disagree, but also the will to go the extra distance to work through and solve a conflict to get a common solution.

Figure 1. Principles of intercultural education



Developing intercultural competence through educational activities

Intercultural competence is not acquired automatically. This competence instead needs to be learned, practiced and developed continuously. The general objective of intercultural education, to prepare individuals for life in an intercultural society implies essentially supporting them in acquiring intercultural competence. In short, the learner needs to acquire knowledge, skills and values that contribute to a spirit of solidarity and co-operation among diverse individuals and groups in society. This is also closely related to the provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which stipulates that the aim of education should be to “promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial and religious groups”.

The White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue assigns to education professionals the specific responsibility of fostering intercultural competence in learners. Bennett defines intercultural competence as “a set of cognitive, affective and behavioral skills and characteristics that support effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural contexts” (2008, p.97), while Moosmüller and Schönhuth (2009) affirm that the aim of intercultural competence is to support the development and growth of individuals and groups.

Intercultural learning processes can lead to the development of intercultural competence by creating frameworks in which participants access opportunities for self-realization and social transformation. Intercultural learning creates group situations in which young people deal with uncertainty and ambiguity in order to understand self and others, to understand the socio-political context and to develop their abilities to transform the world together.

Indicators for Intercultural Dialogue in Non-Formal Education Activities – an instrument for quality assurance

One of the tools recently launched by the Youth Partnership between Council of Europe and European Commission is a guide for trainers/facilitators/organizers entitled: *Indicators for intercultural dialogue in non-formal learning activities*. The aim of this tool is to promote an on-going reflection on our understanding of intercultural learning and to reduce the gaps between different interpretations, by helping trainers and facilitators reflect on the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of intercultural processes and concepts. The tool offers a set of criteria and indicators that need to be taken into account in different phases of a learning activity (preparation, implementation, follow-up), and it refers both to activities which focus mainly on intercultural dialogue, as well as to activities that focus on other topics, but which embed an intercultural perspective.

In a process for developing this tool (in which we were closely involved) took place in a period of about three years, using the method of expert consensus. About 20 experts in the field of non-formal education, research, training and project management took part in each meeting.

The feasibility research showed that a wide variety of scientific, practical and political information is available in relevant domains, like inter-religious dialogue, intercultural education, migration, conflict management, but very little information refers concretely to indicators for intercultural dialogue. Nevertheless, intercultural dialogue and intercultural education are present on the agenda of all international organizations that develop non-formal education programs making therefore the definition of indicators for quality in intercultural approach imperative.

The purpose of this instrument is to reduce the gap between different interpretations in the field of intercultural education and to facilitate the reflection of trainers and facilitators of non-formal education activities regarding the processes and concepts in the field.

The instrument comprises 18 criteria, each criterion having a set of indicators for intercultural dialogue on the following dimensions: people, content, process. Each indicator is necessary, but not sufficient to fulfill the criterion to which it belongs. The three dimensions refer to the following aspects: (1) people – all the people directly involved in planning, implementing and evaluating the educational process; (2) process – interaction between participants, both planned and unplanned aspects; (3) content – topics approached at theoretical and practical level.

Criteria and indicators for intercultural dialogue have also been categorized based on the three phases of a training activity, preparation phase, implementation phase and follow-up phase. Preparation phase includes the definition of the framework of the activity, including institutional, cultural and thematic aspects, target group, purpose and objectives of the activity. This phase includes also the creation of a support network, a team of trainers and planning of the training process. The implementation phase includes dimensions of learning during formal and informal time (program, approaches, methods, means of communication and cooperation, etc.). The follow-up phase is focused on a series of aspects like: systematic and participatory evaluation, commitment for future activities, realistic approach of long term objectives and a structured way for supporting future activities and network development.

The *Indicators for Intercultural Dialogue in Non-Formal Education Activities* have both an evaluative and an educational purpose. When it is used retrospectively, the instrument can offer a clear image of the way in which educational activities were realized, of the relationship between the objectives of the course and the outputs. When it is used before conceiving a training course it can serve as a guide for setting objectives, selection of the team of trainers, selection of participants, contents and processes included.

Conclusions

Intercultural learning is an education for all; it is not an education for the culturally different. Therefore, it should be available to all, at every level of education, in the formal and non-formal sector.

Intercultural education is not the answer to all problems in the society, but it is definitely a step forward in addressing aspects related to diversity in a human rights-based approach, in order to stimulate meaningful interactions, social transformation and access to social rights. However, current practices in intercultural learning need to adapt to current realities. Teachers and trainers need to continuously develop their competences in the field, to report their practices in a way that integrates “lessons learned” in order to contribute to future activities and to a more coherent approach in the field of practice, policy and research.

The Indicators for Intercultural Dialogue in Non-formal Education Activities are meant as a support for educators to develop their competences and as a tool for quality assurance of practices in this field. Therefore, educators are invited to test the tool and send feedback on the website or to: oana.nestian@intercultural.ro through November 2013.

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