

## THE ROLE OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERS IN DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCES OF TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

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***Abstract:** In a global world, educational leaders play a crucial role in developing intercultural communicative competences of teachers and students. The article discusses the notions of culture and intercultural communication competencies based on different definitions and models. Then, it stresses the role of educational leaders in developing such skills in teachers and students. Finally, it presents several successful attempts made in this direction at the level of policy makers, institutions of higher education and schools.*

***Keywords:** intercultural communication competence; educational leaders; policy makers*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In the global world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century it is almost impossible to find homogeneous societies. People travel a lot, some are born in one country, move to another one, work in a third one or in more than one simultaneously. Even in the same country or in the same city, one can encounter different cultures. In order to respond to the challenges of life and work in the global world and in order to ensure peace and understanding between people, it is crucial to develop intercultural communication skills. Intercultural competence is not something one is born with, but rather an attitude and skill that people can develop over lifetime. The National Council for Cultural Competence (NCCC, 2009) asserts that each organization should value diversity and should institutionalize cultural knowledge as an ongoing process. The European Commission (2010) stressed the importance of teacher education programs and policies in preparing teachers who are effective in culturally diverse settings.

### 2. DEFINING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE (ICC)

In spite of the fact that there are many definitions of "culture", the common denominator that most people would agree on is that it involves values, beliefs and norms held by a group of people and passed from generation to generation. People who belong to a certain culture share the way they look at their past, the way in which they live their lives working with other people and their hopes for the future. Any culture influences the behavior of a certain group, the stories people tell each other about the way in which they understand life and their communication with people

outside their own group. Culture shapes both the personal identity and the group identity and it influences every aspect of daily life: the way people talk, dress and behave, their religion, the symbols they use and pass to their children and grandchildren, sometimes without even realizing it. When people from different cultures and different ages meet and/or work together, they face intercultural situations in which people have different views of life, different religious beliefs, different views on politics, gender and sexuality. There are even more subtle differences between people from different cultural backgrounds. They may have different habits regarding how to greet someone (to shake hands, to bow, to kiss on the cheek, to kiss a lady's hand, etc.), how to talk to each other (on a formal or informal way), how to know if a person is serious about making a deal or is simply polite, etc. The interaction between people from different cultures does not promise intercultural learning (Amir, 1969) unless certain conditions are met. Cultural competence includes the ability to understand, appreciate, respect and interact in a positive way with people from different cultures.

Fantini (2006) analyzed different terms related to interculturalism, including "intercultural effectiveness" and finally proposed the term **intercultural communication competence** (ICC). As stated before, there is no consensus regarding a definition of culture and the terms intercultural communication and/or intercultural competence are even harder to define, but the literature presents certain common terms and models which help clarify this notion. The main concept refers to the ability to function in an effective way in intercultural situations, with people from different cultures, to be able to communicate, work and live with people from different backgrounds (Fantini & Tirmizi, 2006).

Intercultural situations are encounters with people who are perceived by a person as culturally different. Each interpersonal situation has the potential to become an intercultural situation. When we look at people as being part of a certain cultural group instead of paying attention to each individual, we risk to fall in the trap of stereotypes and to assume that all have certain characteristics that belong only to that specific group.

There is a consensus in the literature that intercultural competence is a lifelong process. It starts with self-awareness, with the knowledge of one's multiple identities, of those of other people and to the way these identities can affect different situations (Grant & Portera, 2011; Holiday, 2011). According to Byram (1997), it is important to avoid dividing people between 'us' and 'them' since such an approach is always based on stereotypes and differences, but rather to be empathic, flexible and tolerant of ambiguous situations. When a person respects human rights and democratic values, it is easier to be open to think in a critical manner and to develop conflict resolution skills. In order to help people gain intercultural competence, there is a need for planned and meaningful learning. Deardorff (2009, 2011) uses the definition of intercultural competence as "the effective and appropriate behavior and communication in intercultural situations." However, she stresses the fact that in any intercultural situation, while *effectiveness* can be determined by any person, *appropriateness* can only be determined by the other individual, since appropriateness is related to cultural sensitivity and respect for the cultural norms of that person.

### 3. INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE: MODELS AND ASSESSMENT

Intercultural competence is not easily defined and several models were proposed in order to help grasp the concept and to find different ways to develop it. All the models have one thing in common: they deal with the way in which people perceive their own culture, other cultures and their relation to these cultures.

Fantini (2006) distinguished between four dimensions of intercultural competence: intercultural **knowledge, attitude, skill** and **awareness**. People must be first knowledgeable of their own historical roots and aware of their beliefs and values. Only after this initial step, one can learn about other cultures and interact with people from different groups in an appropriate way. During this

process, they can discover or develop their own openness, their empathy and their ability to be tolerant and adopt a flexible behavior in their interaction with people from different cultures.

Cross' Cultural Competence Model (1988) stresses the importance of **self-awareness, culture specific knowledge** and **skills** that promote effective cultural interactions. He developed a framework which emphasizes the fact that the process of achieving cultural competency occurs along a continuum and includes six stages:

1. *Cultural destructiveness* includes policies and attitudes that are harmful and demean people and groups.

2. *Cultural incapacity* includes stereotyping people and being extremely bias towards them.

3. *Cultural blindness* occurs when people have an ethnocentric view and pretend not to see the differences. "I don't see color/ race/ religion, for me they are all the same".

4. *Cultural pre-competence* implies the recognition of and the respect for differences between people from other cultures.

5. *Cultural competency* is a step one reaches when s/he is willing to learn about other cultures and to look at the world from their perspective.

6. *Cultural proficiency* is achieved when a person becomes proactive in advancing and institutionalizing cultural and intercultural competence in organizations and in society at large.

Deardorff (2006) developed the **Intercultural Competence Framework/ Model**, built as a pyramid which includes five main elements: **attitudes, knowledge, skills, internal outcomes** and **external outcomes**. The *attitudes* imply curiosity, tolerance of ambiguity and the ability to value other people. *Knowledge* implies that each person learns about his or her culture and about the way in which it has shaped his or her identity. It includes the understanding of globalization and its impact on people and communities. It also has to do with the ability to look at reality from other people's perspectives, as well as the will to make an effort to gain socio-linguistic abilities. The *skills* a person needs to develop are the ability to listen empathically, to observe, evaluate critically and interpret reality.

Once the first three elements are achieved, one can move to the *internal outcomes* that include flexibility and empathy for the other, and to the external outcomes which are based on the first four elements and demonstrate a person's behavior and communication in intercultural settings. Deardorff (2009), stresses the fact that intercultural competence can only be achieved if it is cultivated.

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Since nobody is ever “completely intercultural competent”, it is important to reflect on the way one can get the knowledge, skills and attitudes that will influence the internal and the external outcomes.

Being a lifelong process, intercultural competence can never be fully achieved, and its assessment is very complicated. Deardorff (2006) stresses the importance of assessing the ongoing change in a qualitative and formative way. She proposes to use her pyramid model by focusing on three dimensions related to intercultural competence that will influence the internal outcomes (flexibility, adaptability and empathy) and the external outcomes. The assessment of the internal outcomes will show the degree of flexibility, adaptability and empathy that has been achieved. It can also determine to what extent a person is able to look at reality from other people's perspectives and to treat them according to the way in which they want to be treated. The external outcomes can be revealed through observations and interviews that will show the behavior and communication of a person, as it is seen by others.

Fantini *et al.* (2006) conducted a mixed methods study in which they used a two way assessment of intercultural competence, based both of self and of the other using research tools in different cultural settings (Ecuador, Great Britain, and Switzerland). Since Fantini is a sociolinguist, he was aware of the impact language can have and therefore this study was conducted in different languages. The results point out that intercultural competence requires a complex of abilities, and the advantages of learning another language in its natural setting affect the development of intercultural competence and such an experience can be defined as "life altering." A study conducted by the National Center for Cultural Competence (2009) shows that preservice teachers have positive beliefs about cultural diversity but they don't have the necessary skills to transfer these values to their students.

### 4. EDUCATIONAL LEADERS' ROLE IN PROMOTING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

For the purpose of this article, educational leaders are defined as educators who can be found at different levels of the educational systems. Ermenc (2005, 2007) asserts that a systematic restructure and a significant change of perceptions are needed in order to erase from the curriculum stereotypes and ethnocentrism and to make it flexible enough for teachers to be able to alter it according to their

students' needs. As far as the teacher education is concerned, such programs must have *informed aims* (teaching the teachers to know what), *formative aims* (educating them to know how) and *professional aims* (to know why). Figueredo-Canosa et al (2020) distinguish between three ways of integrating cultural diversity in pre service teacher education curriculum: transversal, specific and project based. They also differentiate between four types of in service teacher training: courses, seminar, working groups and training in centers. In order for all these programs to be effective, they should combine theory with practice, be reflective, collaborative and participatory. The results of this study show that intercultural communication is positively linked with wellbeing and performance.

**4.1. Policy makers** should look at education in a systemic way, should make decisions regarding a national curriculum and should have clear objectives which can be implemented in schools. For example, in the French speaking areas of Switzerland, in the school curriculum (Plan d"études Romand PER, 2011), one of the goals advanced by the Ministry of Education is to help students develop their "transversal capabilities" which include the abilities to collaborate, to communicate, to think creatively, to develop strategies of learning and to express feelings. These capabilities allow students to better know themselves and to optimize learning. They are considered to have a positive effect on the organization of class work and represent an important condition for the social and professional integration of students in the future (PER, 2011). The Swiss model is based on Fantini's intercultural competence model, and therefore the curriculum includes resources which have been made available to teachers, such as "Looking at 'The Other' in the media, the movies and the internet". These materials are developed in order to encourage reflection and they include four steps: *knowledge, behavior, attitudes and feelings* and *action* and they are conceived in order to encourage reflection.

**4.2. Faculty professors in universities and colleges and especially in institutions of teacher education** should help both pre-service and in-service teachers develop intercultural communication skills, so that they can educate their students in the same direction and prepare them for the global world of this century. The purpose of education in general and teacher education in particular is to promote social justice and critical thinking (Cochran Smith & Power, 2010; Hinojosa,

& López, 2016). Therefore institutions of higher education that prepare psychologists, social workers, doctors, nurses, lawyers and other professionals should make a conscious effort of institutionalizing intercultural communication competence in their programs and should promote students exchange. Departments of teacher education should work together with institutions that initiate programs for the professional development of teachers as well as with schools and their administrators. The common goal should be to develop the *knowledge*, the *skills* and the *attitudes* that were mentioned in the relevant literature. Hill-Jackson, Sewell & Waters (2007) distinguish between *resisters* (people who perceive cultural diversity as a problem) and *advocates* (who have positive views).

An interesting approach in this direction is that of the University of Oulu, Finland. This institution offers a BA in Intercultural teacher education geared for elementary teachers. Its curriculum provides competences for “international educational tasks” which enable the graduates to work in a regular Finnish school, in an international school where subjects are taught in English or to work as international experts in this field. In order to achieve this goal, the students are exposed to the theoretical concepts related to intercultural education such as culture, identity, equity and equality, they learn about the practices and research in the field so that they can critically analyze this field. (<https://opas.peppi oulu.fi/en/programme/14692>). Tarozzi (2014) stresses the importance of committed teachers with intercultural beliefs, values and competence. Given the fact that teachers sometimes show a naïve and superficial view of cultural diversity, such a program offers a long-term process and makes a firm commitment to equality and social justice.

Lopez & Hinojosa (2016) created an inventory of preservice teachers' beliefs about cultural diversity. The University of South Australia created indicators for graduates that can prove international perspectives as professionals and citizens. A study conducted at the University of Granada found significant differences in their beliefs regarding cultural diversity between preservice teachers according to their field of studies. The students with the most positive approach were from the fields of elementary education, special education and foreign languages. Some of the student teachers have displayed a limited view of cultural diversity and therefore short-term courses on this subject are not enough in order to create a deep and long lasting change.

Gordon College of Education in Israel ([www.gordon.ac.il](http://www.gordon.ac.il)) is a teacher education institution situated in the multicultural city of Haifa and which has a very diverse student and faculty body: Jews, Arabs, Christians, Muslims learn and work together with new immigrants from the former Soviet Union, from Western countries (France, England, US, South America) as well as from Ethiopia. It is therefore crucial for pre-service and in-service teachers who learn at the undergraduate level and for future school administrators who study at the graduate level to develop intercultural competence skills. Intercultural situations occur in natural settings in every class. Several courses in different departments (English, Communication and Humanities at the undergraduate level and Educational Administration and Leadership at the Graduate level) expose the students to vignettes that allow them to effectively act in intercultural situations. Two different models have been used in order to help students develop intercultural competences. Both models use the vignette technique, a method that can elicit perceptions, opinions, beliefs and attitudes from responses or comments to stories depicting scenarios and situations (Finch, 1987; Hazel, 1995; Hill, 1997).

The first method chosen by teacher educators at Gordon College of Education for intentionally addressing intercultural competences of students is the Dilemma Based Model (DBM), which has been used in different settings with different type of students and school administrators (Reichman, 2017, 2018). This model can be used either as a whole course or as a module in one of the existing courses in any field of study, across the curriculum, either at the undergraduate or the graduate levels. It facilitates opportunities of cultural encounters among students and also between students and faculty members. The model promotes higher-order thinking skills as well as critical thinking, and it empowers the students to creatively take control of their own learning. Students who have been exposed to this type of experience found it easier to learn on their own as well as in heterogeneous groups of people who were or became genuinely interested in a certain subject. The goal is student transformation because these skills help the learners not only in one type of course, but also in dealing with future challenges in their personal lives. (Reichman, 2018).

**The DBM model consists of six steps:**

**First step:** The instructor introduces a story that contains a moral dilemma, the competing values are presented and each student has to answer the question: “What should the protagonist do and

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why?" The students DO NOT share their answers with anyone.

Here is an example of a vignette used for this use of activity:

*Ms. Jones is an ESL teacher in an elementary school in Hope, Iowa. She teaches choir as well as ESL to a class of twenty 4<sup>th</sup> graders who were not born in the US. Some of them are immigrants, others came to the US for a period of a couple of years because their parents work or study there. Among these 20 students, 15 are Christians, two are Jewish, two are Muslim and one is Hindu. Two months before Christmas, Ms. Jones would like to teach them Christmas songs, so that they can perform in front of their parents. She is not sure how the non-Christian parents will react. Should she pull the students out of choir before Christmas? Should she give up teaching them Christmas songs which had been the traditional songs during the winter show? She decides to go and ask the school principal for advice on this matter. What do you think the school principal should say and why? In dealing with this dilemma, you must consider the fact that FREEDOM OF RELIGION is a value guaranteed by the US Constitution, as is the value of SEPARATION BETWEEN STATE AND RELIGION.*

**Second step:** (A variation of De Bono's Six thinking hats model, 1988) The instructor gives each group a specific role ("hat"). The students who are have been assigned the white hat will look for FACTS, the yellow hat explores the PROS and the black hat looks for the CONS, the disadvantages and even the dangers ("Devil's advocate"). The red hat expresses FEELINGS and EMOTIONS, the green one is the CREATIVE one that looks for new ideas and options. The instructor wears the blue hat, which means that s/he MANAGES THE THINKING PROCESS, asking questions about the subject as well as about the process, so that the guidelines are followed. If the class is very large, two or more groups of students can be assigned the same 'hat' (role).

**Third step:** The students, using relevant and adequate sources, with the instructor acting as a facilitator, look for new knowledge that will help them strengthen the position they have been assigned. Since each student has been assigned a role, most conflicts are avoided because the ideas presented are not seen as reflecting their personal views.

**Fourth step:** The students discuss the topic based on what they have learned independently or in the small groups. They prepare their 'roles' and get ready to present the results to the entire class.

**Fifth step:** Each group of students presents their results to the whole class. This can be done using short – TED style – lectures, role-play, artistic work or any other technique that the students may choose. By sharing the information with the entire class, all students reach a similar level of knowledge, which then becomes the basis for the group discussion.

**Sixth step:** The students assess their work (*self-evaluation*) as well as the work of their colleagues (*peer evaluation*) and they reflect about ways to apply their solutions to similar moral conflicts that they might face. At this point the professor also evaluates the students' work (*top-down evaluation*).

Several studies have shown that DBM is effective in increasing the students' intercultural communication competence while also helping them develop critical and creative thinking (Leon, 2019; Levy, 2019; Bekermus, 2019).

A second technique that has been used at Gordon College was Gibbs' Reflective Cycle Model (1988) in order to help students develop ICC competences. The future teachers and administrators have to work on a given task in groups and to follow the six steps of the model:

1. *Description:* What happened? The students discuss a situation in a group and they become aware of the fact that different people look at the same given facts from different points of view.

2. *Feelings and thoughts:* What did you *think* and what did you *feel* about this situation? The students have to reflect on their own feelings and thoughts regarding the given situation.

3. *Evaluation:* What was good and what was bad? What helped us reach our goal? What motivated us and what distracted us from achieving our goal.

4. *Analysis:* what sense can you make of this situation? Who convinced the participants in a certain direction and how? Were the arguments pertinent? Why or why not?

5. *Conclusion:* What else could you have done? In retrospect, the students have to decide if they could have done more or if they could have acted in a different and better way.

6. *Action plan:* if a similar situation arose again, what would you do? This step helps students realize that in the future they might encounter similar situations and at this point they can think in advance of better ways of thinking and acting. Therefore, the students are interested in reflecting about *the process* because they understand that it is relevant to their own lives and they can learn from it.

Pre-service and in-service teachers and administrators have used one of these two models or

a combination of both models in their own schools, with other teachers and students. The positive results have been presented in several studies (Leon, 2019; Levy, 2019; Bekermus, 2019). The students have become more motivated and the relationships among them have improved.

**4.3. Intercultural competence in schools.** As it has been mentioned before, intercultural competence is an ability that people should develop over time and therefore it is important to start in schools, with students, led by well-trained teachers who can, in turn, teach the necessary skills across the curriculum and not as a single lesson, in a single subject.

One should start by learning about one's own historical roots and by exploring his or her own values and beliefs. It is obvious that each of us has a CORE of values and beliefs that we cherish and we don't want to give up, but at the same time each person can also be FLEXIBLE about some other values and beliefs. When learning about people from different cultures and by interacting with diverse groups of people, a person gets familiar with the CORE values of other people and focus on the common ground, try to understand the differences in a non-judgmental way. In order to achieve this goal, students have to be open enough so that they can look at reality from another person's perspective, to show empathy towards people who are different, to be flexible and adaptable to unknown situations.

Two examples of attempts to develop intercultural competences in Israeli schools will be presented. The first one is a project called "Roots" that takes place in ALL the Israeli high schools in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. During an entire school year, the students are asked to create a portfolio regarding their own family roots. In order to do so, they interview their parents, grandparents and other relevant people and they collect pictures and different artifacts. They decide what to present and how, they learn a lot about their own family history and about their colleagues' backgrounds. During the last month of the school year each cohort presents their findings, the students share them with their colleagues and with the other parents, discuss the similarities and the differences between them. Since Israel is a very multicultural society, in any class one can find students from very different backgrounds. A teacher who has received special training in coaching such a project advises the students during the entire year (Bekerman, 2019).

The second example is much more complex and challenging because it involves dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on a daily basis

(Bekerman & Horenczykm, 2004). Eight Jewish-Arab schools accept students coming from families that have chosen an entirely different educational experience for their children. These public schools have an equal number of Arab and Jewish students although the Israeli Arabs represent only 20% of Israel's population. Each of these schools has two co-principals, one Jewish and one Arab and each class has two teachers for each subject, once again one Arab and one Jewish. These educators have chosen to work in such an environment because they are not only committed to promoting intercultural competences, but mainly to promoting peace by creating equality, understanding and coexistence between people coming from the two cultures. The teachers do not use any translation in class, all of them are fluent in both languages and therefore they provide full bilingual education during the entire day, year after year. The students also become fluent in both languages and they become familiar with both cultures. They are influenced by the political context of the Arab-Jewish conflict and they learn how to deal with very tough situations of violence which unfortunately occur from time to time, such as wars and terrorist attacks. The resources needed for the operation of these schools with double faculty are considerable but they are justified by the vision of promoting mutual understanding between children from both cultures whose population have been in conflict for over a century (Amara, 2005).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Intercultural communication competence does not happen naturally and can never be fully achieved. Nevertheless, through a lifelong process, these skills can be nurtured and developed. Policy makers in the field of education should make it a priority and make sure that this goal finds a place in the curriculum, both in institutions of higher education in general, and in teacher education in particular. I strongly agree with Ermenc (2005) who recommended that pedagogical principles should guide the entire process of planning, implementing and evaluating education. Additionally, school teachers and administrators should receive adequate training in this field, so that they become able to transmit these skills to their students of all ages. This is not 'a subject' that only needs to be taught theoretically. It must be part of an ongoing process that is based on one or more of the different models that have been offered. Teachers and faculty

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members are not technicians who have to present this material to their students and then check their knowledge through a test. They must be prepared so that they can take charge of the curriculum, so that they can implement these principles across different subjects, in different ways that involve both the thoughts and the feelings of their students in a matter which makes it relevant to their lives. In order to do that, they have to be aware of their own stereotypes and should stress the human dignity and respect that each person needs and is entitled to. Teachers need to take responsibility for each of their students, they need to be supported by systemic measures and should be treated as professionals who have the right and the ability to become policy makers themselves and to see policy as a process and not as a final product.

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