

Forewords / Cyprus

Challenging interculturality

Book title: The Role of Education in a Multicultural Cyprus

Some reflections and ideas on approaching intercultural practices.

Professor Alicia Cabezudo

Index of this paper

- a. Introduction
 - b. Reflecting on the concept interculturality
 - c. Justifications for working under this umbrella in education
 - d. Some basic conditions for successful results
 - e. Possible general steps to work on Intercultural Education Research and On Field Work in Cyprus
 - f. Challenges
 - g. Some policy approaches
- Summary

a. Introduction

Managing Europe's increasing cultural diversity in a democratic manner rooted in the history of the continent and enhanced by globalization has become a priority in recent years. This is reflected in the national school systems and in the research field where students and investigators of the whole world work together at such intercultural contexts. How shall we respond to diversity in educational research and work when peers and partners are coming from different cultures, backgrounds and histories? What is necessary to exchange and talk while working in specific themes? What are the challenges, the obstacles, the basic conditions and the possible steps to follow in order to try to succeed in this reality of today's world and particularly in Cyprus?

This foreword chapter tries to respond in a brief way to the present questions and set some reflections on intercultural education coming from life-long experience working as instructor of multicultural groups in education and team partner in intercultural education research along many years.

b. Reflecting on the concept interculturality

For the purpose of analyzing interculturality in education research and on-field work it is necessary to reflect on the concepts of "learning" and "culture" and how these concepts were understood under the light of

governments, institutions , educators, parents and students and even team partners engaged in a starting phase .

Today when referring to learning we can talk about many considerations on learning: cognitive learning, emotional learning, behavioral learning and even learning as an structured process or simply as a dynamic process. Actually *all those kinds of "learnings"* occurred when facing interculturality in education work.

Same happened with the word "culture", a huge concept that have been discussed along years but rarely deepen by team work methodology in order to exchange views and discuss about its meanings and interpretations .The "cultures" from where educators and students as well as parents are embedded such as their social, religious and educational background set the "format" of their thoughts and behavior in their on coming way of facing and developing their educational experience as teachers or pupils. These "formats" are reflected in their own activities in both roles and particularly in the ways of interaction with "the others" as many times those of different culture are called or seen between them. Hence culture perspectives are necessary to be talked openly, particularly in environments where very many culture and education styles/ formats are combined as the case of specific multicultural environments like Cyprus.

The path from multiculturalism to interculturality is exactly this exercise of exchanging, confronting and discussing together in order to find common approaches to the goals we expect to reach. The methodology to be applied is the intercultural dialogue that will not solve all the problems - as no existing methodology really do - but will help to open new ways for thinking and relating for further purposes.

Setting this necessary clarifications on key concepts as "learning" and "culture" and the need to deep on them in intercultural education planning and work I shall display my own vision on interculturality .

I understand interculturality as a process that comprises an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious, economic , social and linguistic backgrounds and heritage, on the basis of mutual understanding and equal opportunities to communicate their views. This process requires the freedom and ability to express oneself, as well as the willingness and capacity to listen to the others.

The term interculturality can be understood on different levels. On a more literal level, the inter-learning that this educational context creates refers to an individual process of acquiring knowledge, attitudes or behaviors that is connected with the interaction of different cultures . Very

often , however, intercultural learning is seen in a larger perspective to denote a concept of how people with different backgrounds can live together peacefully, and the process that is needed to build such a society. Learning in this context is consequently understood less on a purely individual level, *but emphasizes the opened character of the process towards the construction of an intercultural society which is one of the main goals on intercultural education.*

Working intercultural education *is a process* for educators and students . This process demands that you have to know yourself and where you come from - before being able to understand others. It is *a challenge* also, as it involves very deeply rooted ideas about what is good and bad, about structuring the world and your life and about how you are going to face multicultural issues in whole life. Intercultural learning is a challenge to one's identity - but it can become a way of living, certainly a way of thinking and relating to the others at the same time than enriching the own identity and history. The history that all human beings built through individual and collective experiences interacting with the micro and macro contexts. That is why *interculturality has a social-political dimension* and this is the perspective from where we have to investigate and approach the concept nowadays.

c. Justifications on working under this umbrella in education

People from different cultural backgrounds, if such can even be said to truly exist, have lived in close proximity to each other forever. It was only with the recent drawing of nation - state borders that people began to think otherwise. For the inhabitants of most modern cities in Europe and elsewhere in the world, cultural diversity has come to be a normal state of affairs, with which they live in relative peace. For many people, cultural diversity is a resource and asset. Nevertheless, in some situations cultural differences are perceived and portrayed as a social and political liability. In recent years, the ways in which distinct groups representing different backgrounds interact have come to the centre of political and social attention, Often and unfortunately, this attention is negative, because of the perception that the meetings of different communities result in social disorder. ¹

Nevertheless, intercultural mechanisms have demonstrated its contribution to political, social, cultural and economic integration and have contributed to the cohesion of culturally diverse societies. Fostering equality, human dignity and a sense of “common purpose”, interculturality - as a political social concept - have deepened a better understanding of

¹ See “On Intercultural Dialogue”. An approach by Yael Ohana in *Euromed School Forum*. Publication of the Interkulturelles Zentrum ,Vienna, 2008.pp23

diverse world views and practices , increased cooperation and participation, have allowed personal and collective growth and transformation , the freedom to make choices and have promoted respect for each other .

Hence, more than ever before, being the global more frequent and necessary and multicultural environments those where the world is constructing its new shape , interculturality showed that we are linked to others on every continent,

- Socially through the media and telecommunications.
- Culturally through movements of people crossing borders everywhere
- Environmentally through sharing one planet and its goods and basic materials
- Economically through intercontinental trade & finances as well as flow of capital
- Politically through international bodies, international law and common systems of regulations of all kind.

Intercultural education certainly deal with this inter-linked reality as a whole and have to recognize its existence and impact in the learning process as well as in the formation of educators and training. Due its inherent characteristics the proposed teaching strategies have to be,

- active (learning to be, to know and to do)
- interactive (through discussions and debates)
- relevant (focused on real challenges in the field)
- critical (encouraging critical thinking while supporting autonomy)
- collaborative and cooperative (fostering mutual learning)
- participative (giving voice to different actors while recognizing their roles)

d. Some basic conditions for successful results

Successful results teaching in an intercultural environment required basic pre-conditions in educators , instructors and teachers. Very many of these conditions are based in attitudes fostered *by a democratic culture*.

Some of the most relevant I want to point out here are,

- acceptance of democracy, human rights and the rule of law as basic pillars in building society
- recognition of equal dignity and mutual respect for cultural and religious diversity as well as gender equality
- capacity to reflect on and find the barriers that prevent intercultural dialogue

- open mindedness
- willingness to engage in dialogue and allow others to express their point of view
- capacity to resolve conflicts by peaceful means
- recognition of the well - founded arguments of others
- critical thinking
- ability to argue effectively
- sense of identity and self-esteem
- empathy and sense of common humanity
- value and respect for diversity
- recognition of complementary identities
- capacity for cooperation
- belief that people can make a difference
- take responsibility for their own actions

**e- Possible general steps to work on Intercultural Education
Research and On Field Work in Cyprus**

It is certainly different the steps that have to be taken considering each region and country when planning intercultural education. Anyway some general steps when working at intercultural level can be isolated and they were presented here as *a mere proposal* in order to be a platform for further development at theoretical or practical level.

- identify clearly the interests and concerns of the members of the intercultural team
- explore own values and attitudes related to that interests and concerns . Confront them with the others'
- choose appropriate methodologies to start the work. Discuss different strategies coming from diverse academic backgrounds of team members
- make global connections
- explore your interests and concerns at local and global level
- confront your interests and concerns with the others
- try to find common strategies, methodologies and adequate paths for developing a collective working plan
- debate on evaluation processes considering diverse views according different backgrounds. Establish who should participate in the evaluation, what should be evaluated, how should be evaluated the process and the results.

Many times during the process of planning and during on-going research and class work intercultural groups suffered processes *where*

intercultural sensitivity is very explicit causing steps back in the work result and complex - resolving interactions, very much attached to the subjectivity of education group members.

We can divide these processes of intercultural sensitivity in those so-called

ethnocentric stages that caused

- denial , in the form of isolation and / or separation
- defense, in the form of denigration, feel of superiority and/ or reversal
- minimization , of “the other” thoughts, ideas, universe or physical appearance

ethnorelatives stages that caused

- acceptance , that is to say respect for the other, for different behaviour and value difference
- adaptation , in the form of empathy and / or pluralism
- integration , to the thoughts / ideas of the others , to the general context

e. Challenges

Intercultural education as a predominant trend of our contemporary world offer us a number of new opportunities - but at the same time they raise questions that make us aware of a number of challenges that we have to consider while developing research and studies.

I have met many challenges dealing with multicultural groups along my path as international student myself - when young and non experienced “citizen of the world ”- as instructor in international courses in very many geographical settings and as team member of several international teams on teaching and research. Regarding interculturality, the most important challenges at structural level I may point here - according my experience and observations are,

- the challenge posed by the globalisation, demishing the impact of cultural mixing of diverse identities and the possibilities of social enrichment from the differences .
- the challenge posed by the media, that widened the opportunities of many but it has also widened the divide between those who have access to tech / virtual knowledge and information and those who do not have such access.

- the multicultural challenge, as cultural interests and identities of minorities are gradually being excluded from the global economic system.
- the challenge posed by the relationship between technology and ethics, posing the question if it is possible to reconcile technical research and progress with an ethics that is in favor of persons and the planet.
- the environmental challenge , as the ecological texture of our time is beginning to tear.
- the challenge posed by violence and war, as violence and war have been rehabilitated as plausible options within the mind of an increasing number of people and nation-states based in the superiority of one civilization or groups over the others.

f. Some policy approaches

According to the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue “Living Together as Equals in Dignity” launched by the Council of Europe Ministers of Foreign Affairs at their 118th Ministerial Session in May 7 2008 and published by the Council of Europe in June 2008, there are five yet distinct interrelated dimensions to the promotion of intercultural dialogue and education , which involve the full range of stakeholders.

Taking in consideration this fundamental document for setting policies on interculturality, the basis for its conceptual development and practices have to be embedded on ,

- a) The democratic governance of cultural diversity, that includes,
 - a political culture valuing diversity
 - human rights and fundamental freedoms
 - from equality of opportunity to equal enjoyment of rights
- b) Democratic citizenship and participation
- c) Learning and teaching intercultural competences by considering
 - democratic citizenship , language and history
 - primary and secondary education
 - higher education and research
 - non formal and informal learning
 - the role of educators
 - the family environment
- d) Spaces for intercultural dialogue
- e) Intercultural dialogue in international relations

g. Summary

Intercultural Education can be one tool in our efforts to understand the complexity of today's world, by understanding others and ourselves a bit better. Moreover, it can be one of the keys to open the doors into a new society. Intercultural education may enable us to better face the challenges of current realities. We can understand it as empowerment not just to cope personally with current developments but to deal with the potential of change, which can have a positive and constructive impact in our societies. That is why the creation and practice of "intercultural learning capacities" are needed now more than ever.

In this perspective, intercultural research *is a learning process* that leads to personal growing with collective implications. It always invites to reflect in global dimensions asking ourselves about the roots of the main themes and problematiques emerging in the present society. This learning process have not to be taken as a personal acquisition or a luxury for a few people working in an international environment.

It is about observing, reflecting and acting in an increasing diverse world that would never return to be as our parents and grandparents' times - a learning process that can be made by any person .

In this learning process *systematic intercultural education work is particularly relevant for how we live together in our societies and how we can build the vision of the future with the others in a transformative process - celebrating diversity and differences towards a better country and world for All.*

Professor Dr. Alicia Cabezudo
acabezudo@unr.edu.ar

