Educating Communities for the Development of Intercultural Competence

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Abstract

The main purpose of the educational and training system, especially in today's increasingly complex and multicultural context, is to promote the development of intercultural competence, the possession of which is arguably essential for the conscious exercise of world citizenship. To achieve this, we cannot refer merely to a single technical-professional group of teachers, educators or trainers, but must instead extend responsibility to all categories without exception: parents, instructors, facilitators, etc. The reason must be sought in the construct of intercultural competence itself, which emphasises the active role of the individual to mobilise and orchestrate their resources by acting on material and social reality (Pellerey, 2004); therefore, in order to be appropriately monitored and assessed, it is necessary to adopt the use of various stakeholders. This article is written as a critical appraisal of the concept of intercultural competence and especially some key issues in the appraisal process, which should be addressed through consultation with the educating community sector.

Keywords: Community education; Community engagement; Globalisation; Intercultural competence; Intercultural education.

1. INTRODUCTION

> If I am in California and speak to a friend in Paris directly or by e-mail; if I follow political and cultural events anywhere in the world without leaving my house; if data containing my personal profile is used by governments and industry groups around the world, without my knowing or being able to prevent it; if I shop at home using the computer, then where am I? Who am I?

The question posed by Poster (1997, p. 201) neatly frames modern man's disorientation when faced with the unprecedented phenomenon that emerged with the new millennium: globalisation. It originated in the wake of computer technology macro-structures and the new flexible capitalism and has made the world increasingly complex and interdependent; while existence continues to be spent primarily in the local area, reality is determined by global events and phenomena (Portera, 2013a). The differences become more and more standardised, distorting our understanding of personal identity and cultural belonging, necessitating the adoption of a hermeneutical gaze characterised by an anti-dogmatic, multilateral, dialoguing mindset capable of observing, understanding and negotiating a multiplicity of viewpoints. This is because cultures are not empty boxes and abstract references entirely detached from the dimension of people's lives, but instead are mobile, symbolic and intercomparable systems that intersect and influence each other (Anolli, 2004). In other words, they are all artificial constructs whereby a group produces a definition of the Self and the Other, attributing to itself internal homogeneity and, at the same time, differs itself from others. However, cultural symbols are reified only when they are used, shared and socialised, and they must necessarily be separated to be rendered historical and political, creating an opportunity to investigate the spaces for comparison and exchange. The path to take is therefore to jointly create, through dialogue and discussion, a new *paideia* that includes the collective construction of values; accordingly, school – together with the intentionally educational and training agencies – will play a crucial role. Students must be provided with new axiological pillars and ethical-social coordinates to be able to decode current-day complexity and interact with diversity; in other words, fully intercultural competences. This is the challenge facing pedagogy today: educating people to be interculturally competent means educating towards, among other things, responsibility, solidarity, understanding of the historical self and capacity for cooperation. And it is this ability to weave formal and informal networks with other stakeholders (individuals, organisations and citizens) that invokes the pedagogical model of the educating school community, which itself highlights the need to safeguard and practice, within the scholastic context, the values of fairness, pluralism and democracy through

a closely cooperative, equally active and dynamic relationship among all educational components operating there and that can be called on to act (Tramma, 2009; Catarci, 2013).

This article will therefore investigate first of all the construct of intercultural competence and its characteristic dimensions, before considering the challenges and possibilities inherent in its assessment. The final paragraph will consider the concept of educating community – a necessary paradigm since the observation of intercultural competence «in action» requires a redistribution of evaluative responsibilities among the various stakeholders involved in the educational process.

2. The «grammar» of intercultural competence

The concept of intercultural competence has been studied relatively recently but still proves to be a contentious matter since the theoretical keystone of the notion appears uncertain, protean and hard to define unequivocally. Barrett (2011, p. 23) describes it as

> A set of attitudes, skills, knowledge and behaviours which are required for appropriate and effective interaction and communication with people who are perceived to be from a different cultural background from oneself. The term «appropriate» means that interactions do not violate the cultural rules and norms which are valued by one's objectives in the interactions. Intercultural competence involves a wide range of attitudes, skills and knowledge.

As regards to the idea of «knowing», it can be defined as the set of information skills that a person possesses, i.e. the cognitive resources – in terms of knowledge of cultural systems, of value, of the various communication and professional styles – needed for interaction with the Other different to itself (Cambi, 2004). However, paramount importance is attached to not only what a person knows, but also what they do with what they know (that knowledge), which is the ability to perform complex and well organised patterns of thought and action in adaptive form in order to achieve a specific result or purpose. Then there is the set of provisions to enact, which affect and determine the behaviour of the subject in dealing with the situation in which he operates (Castoldi, 2016). As a common denominator between the different macro areas there is the aspect of metacognition, for outlining the construction modes of thinking and evaluating the outcome resulting from actions carried out. And when the individual reflects on the outcome of her experience, she tries to place their meaning within a consistent biographical

framework. This pattern is accentuated when the person shares their meaning and their biographical integration with others (Berger & Luckmann, 1969). It is an idea that therefore allows us to develop more abstract conceptual models to enhance mediation between personal development needs and the constraints of social context, and also to introduce a proactive dimension, since there is cyclical sequence in which they foster questions and experiences from which to draw new knowledge and capacity for action (Jarvis, 1987).

Intercultural competence is different from cultural intelligence, with which it is quite often confused because of the many similarities and affinities between the two constructs; both are in fact made up of four core «intelligences»: meta-cognitive, cognitive, motivational and behavioural. The first refers to «an individual's mental capability to acquire, be aware of, comprehend, and monitor cultural knowledge»; the cognitive reflects «the specific knowledge of content and mental maps concerning a target culture that is gained through meta-cognitive mechanisms»; motivational cultural intelligence refers to the «individual capability to derive energy and motivation towards learning and developing intercultural competences»; and, finally, behavioural cultural intelligence refers to «individual capability to display adequate verbal and nonverbal actions in cross-cultural scenarios or environments» (Moon, 2013, p. 2416). However, while cultural intelligence is defined generically as «the ability to function in another culture or a culturally diverse setting and facilitate understanding, adaptation, communication, and coordination in those settings» (Adair, Hideg, & Spence, 2013) or, from a markedly assimilatory perspective, «a person's capability to adapt effectively to new cultural contexts» (Earley & Ang, 2003, p. 59), the concept of intercultural competence finds its specificity in the form of relationship, to the extent that it considers the subject in its globality and in its dynamic and ameliorative tension. Its distinctive feature lies in its inseparable core of thought and action, of personal and intersubjective significance, and develops into a situation through proactive processes and retroactive constants. For this reason, the development of intercultural competence never really has an arrival point (Deardorff, 2009a; Portera, 2013b; Milani, 2015); on the contrary, this dynamism contemplates the possibility of reversal and contraction, so it can develop – but it could also regress. Being a multi-factor construct and involving different variables related to the context in which it acts, it becomes an engine of innovation, developing generation and creation mechanisms that transcend the boundaries of the *hic et nunc* to explore the unknown outcome that arises from mutual exchange with the environment in which they operate. The very core of intercultural exchange is found within that uncertain, sometimes destabilising outcome, represented by the encounter of multiple viewpoints which, inevitably, churn up and/or scatter

value-based, cultural and axiological coordinates in the habitual spheres of movement, giving rise to unusual narratives (Pinto Minerva, 2002; Santerini, 2003; Portera, 2006).

Truly competent action takes place when reality is approached not through a form of investigation that seeks to pigeonhole it within preconceived schemas or outcomes, but rather from an awareness of the otherness of reality with respect to self-sufficient thought because one must «[…] be able to grasp signals, revive visions, structure opportunities, probe unseen prospects, weave relationships and relaunch synergies. Competence is action but also relationship, multi-belonging but also identity, result but also transformation, accreditation but also responsibility» (Costa, 2015, p. 41). It is therefore necessary to adopt an anti-deterministic vision of intercultural competence that negates all possible crystallisation within predetermined standards to enhance its irreducibly situated and diachronic character. This leads to two important consequences: competence is not reducible to simple formal learning experiences; it is primarily the result of contextual learning opportunities that cannot be defined a priori but which must be progressively refined, monitored and assessed.

3. «It takes a whole village to assess   intercultural competence»

The very complex and detailed nature of intercultural competence makes its assessment limiting when applied only to scholastic settings and pushes us to broaden our vision to other areas, to observe how the subject uses his knowledge in accordance with personal needs and social demands. These are the so-called «tacit intercultural competences», enacted in the practice of daily experience, in so-called «informal learning contexts» (leisure, travel, non-institutional courses, volunteer work, …) [1]. The development of the student's competence in fact takes place in the wake of a dense network of relationships both inside and outside the school walls: teachers, families, pupils, significant others who interact with the student (tutors, teachers, peers, instruc-

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[1] «Formal learning» is defined as learning delivered in a structured and organised context (such as an educational or training institute), specially designed as such (in terms of learning objectives, times and resources). Formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view. Non-formal learning, however, is provided as part of scheduled activities not specifically designed as learning while the informal emerges from daily activities related to work, family or leisure; it is not structured in terms of learning objectives, times and resources and, in most cases, it is not intentional from the learner's point of view (Marcone, 2015).

tors, coaches, …) and moves away from an assessment model that reads it in terms of mere performance; rather, it is the completed, finalised dimension, aware of the person's experiences of learning, discovery, questioning, choice and action (Costa, 2015). In order for there to be competence, there needs to be full awareness that learning experiences contain action and transformation (Allal, 1999), creative response and recognition. This perspective provides the opportunity to identify and reconstruct, from experience, the wealth of intercultural competences acquired through rootedness in real events and situations in which skills, knowledge and psychosocial resources have been enacted. The detailed monitoring of interactions and management modes of any conflict, the analysis of extracurricular experiences, the opportunity to create links, establish contacts, reinterpret experiences, identify strengths and weaknesses are all activities that allow competences to be made explicit. Furthermore, other aspects of competence (especially emotions) may also emerge; these are not always explicit but may nonetheless reveal valuable resources when it comes to investing in training and future planning. The educational value of a model centred on intercultural competence is identified, therefore, in the ability of everyone to invest in learning processes and development in the fullest sense within the various educational relationships people are engaged in.

Evidently the privileged gaze remains that of the teachers, who not only have the task of explaining social expectations faced by the students and their competence, in relation to age and other personal characteristics, but also have the chance to interact with them on a daily basis and to organise *ad hoc* situations to assess their intercultural competence (Milani, 2017). When it comes to observing the teacher, we look first to daily interaction with the students, then move to informal modes of observation that, day by day, let the teacher gain an understanding of the student's personality and monitor the quality and development of his experiences with others. Along with this daily and informal observation – which remains the most significant – there can also be instances of systematic observation and documentation by the teacher (Castoldi, 2016). However, since the person as a whole must be taken on board, the observation – and subsequent measurement – of intercultural competence cannot be entrusted to a single actor, but instead requires the establishment of a sort of team to act in a cooperative and integrated manner using proactive and effective methods; this inevitably leads to the capacity to enter into relationships with various professionals and others, based on the principle of plurality of the evaluative gaze. In the first place this is the family, which must be ascribed with an indisputable value as it has great potential for the human and social development of the young (Portera, 2004). But young people themselves can – and should – contribute to the

co-development of the assessment, not as passive receptors of «judgement», but as active subjects in terms of both self and peer evaluation. The latter in fact has great educational potential, as it allows the student to step back from the image of himself (and its misrepresentations) and may emerge as more authentic and effective than that coming from adult figures precisely because of its horizontal nature.

The use of multiple lenses of interpretation as a source of information for assessing intercultural competence requires, however, the sweeping away of a stereotype still widespread in the educational-scholastic sphere: the idea that parents (or relevant parental figures), the pupils themselves, coaches and instructors, etc. should not interfere with the assessment of competence, for fear of «polluting» it and reducing the reliability of the data (Castoldi, 2016). In contrast, the consideration of different points of view not only not weakens the assessment, but rather strengthens it: both regarding its validity – since intercultural competence exists not only at school but needs to be observed also in real-life contexts – and its reliability, as the «plurivocity» makes the assessment more rigorous. At the same time, multi-person involvement in the assessment process does not result in confusion of roles, since a distinction must be maintained between the assessment's preliminary phase and the actual judgement, when the evaluation of competence is entrusted exclusively to teachers. Only a holistic approach to assessment can provide an opportunity for the layering and reworking of intercultural competence and not only – and not so much – occasions for the inefficacious assessment and classification of performance (Black & William, 1998; Varani & Carletti, 2005).

The construct of competence tends to have a very wide scope and considers the globality of the subject and its behaviour and attitude. So it is about seeking a balance between accuracy and breadth of vision, between an operational definition of the idea of competence – which singles out some dimensions to be prioritised – and a consideration of the globality of the person, since a specific competence refers to the deep structure of the subject and its characteristic invariants (Castoldi, 2016).

This is why today the introduction of an assessment system must go hand in hand with the establishment of a system of lifelong learning capable of encouraging practices of shared reflection, supported by the relational value of the educating community. The subject is thus seen to operate within a complex systemic framework [2] that exhibits unmovable ecological, cultural

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[2] Although it is possible to distinguish the individual parts in every system, these are not considered as isolated and the nature of everything is always understood as different from the mere sum of its parts. The reference is to the phenomenological theory of human development of Bronfenbrenner (1986), which stresses the importance of the external environment

and social features. All this results in the ability to impact through its actions on the social structure from a standpoint of active participation, responsibility and reflexivity.

4. On the concept of educating community

Society is not synonymous with community. There is, in fact, a substantial difference between the two terms: the first refers to a group of subjects not united by a single goal, but committed to the pursuit of individual goals; the second refers to a social grouping marked by a profound unity of purpose, a unity that goes beyond the interests of the individual. The groups differ also in terms of the social will holding the constituent members together; Tönnies (1963) identifies two types: «natural» and «rational». The first connotes the *Gemeinschaft* and is embodied in three forms: affinity, place and thought. Affinity is the sense of identity, place is about sharing a common environment, and thought refers to people's unity around common ideals and purposes. The second type has to do with the *Gesellschaft* – the artificial arrangement of a group of individuals who resemble the *Gemeinschaft* only superficially, insofar as they live in peace with each other. The concept of «community» was then reprised by various scholars (Durkeim, 1893; Parsons, 1951), including Weber (1922), who asserted that one can speak of community if, and to the relevant extent, the provision of social action is based on a feeling – affective or traditional – of common belonging of its members. His theory of social action also contemplates the construction of «association» whereby the disposition to act rests not so much on the value or purpose of the action, but on an identity of interest or a bond of intentionally motivated interests. However, it is with Cohen (1985) that the focus shifts from the structure and function of the community to the meaning attributed to it by its members, freeing it from the constraints represented by physical or geographical proximity. This leads us to consider the community no longer (or at least not only) in territorial terms, but to recognise the subjective and intersubjective value through which it gains accession, investigating the cognitive, moral, ethical dimensions, etc. that give shape and substance to the community itself.

Over the years, then, there has been a succession of different categorisations, varying in accordance with the type and degree of internal regulation

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for the acquisition of identity through an ecological model linked to the human context, as resulting from the interaction of four structures: the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem and the macrosystem.

and continuity of relationship (Fernback & Thompson, 1995; Pravettoni, 2002; Mascio, 2008); a particularly interesting category for the purpose of this discussion is the «Communities of practice» (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 2000), i.e. groups that form around shared work interests, nurtured by contributions and mutual commitment, based on an awareness of taking part in a «common undertaking». This is basically a social perspective that refers to a shared repertoire in which the individual and collective identity is constructed through active participation in practice. From this perspective, the development and assessment of intercultural competence lies in social participation in a practice understood as the set of behaviours enacted by social actors engaged in the most varied relational activities with the world/context. The elements that make up a community of practice are: recognition of the thematic field that forges the identity, the values and goals of its members; the community understood as a social context for learning and a setting for multicultural exchanges and practice that captures the collective knowledge that the community develops, maintains and shares (Wenger, 2000).

The idea of community school and school as part of the community, which had already been outlined over a century ago by Dewey (1916) in the belief that the school itself is a form of social life, a miniature community, a system open to the extra-scholastic environment with instances of experience linked to beyond the school walls. But if it is true that an educational system devoid of self-referentiality must open to the surrounding world to valorise and bring together a multiplicity of educational subjects to activate a common terrain of experience and sharing, it is equally true that the various stakeholders who inhabit this area of governance – parents, associations, unions, public bodies – must also bear their share of responsibility in the development of intercultural competence, each fulfilling its primary role, rather than grant blank proxies to the school, seen as a top-down, bureaucratic structure separated from the wider society. In this respect, as evidenced by Capogna (2014, p. 9),

> an educating community is possible only if based on the recognition and valorisation of authentic relationships where mutual listening, personal responsibility and solidarity prevail. The educating community invokes, alongside the institutional mission of promoting learning, the much more important mission of «teaching to be» and the pursuit of social justice – by no means easy goal in the social complexity that characterises what we have seen this millennium, and to which no one should feel indifferent.

Moving towards an educating community is therefore not just about focusing on an educational model open to the recognition and enhancement of the social fabric, but refers to the immediate urgency of summoning the

entire society to recognise the substitutive and integrative action that it is called on to perform with a view of developing social capital. The concepts of educating community school and social capital are in fact closely linked. Social capital is intended as

> the network of trust and cooperation-based relationships that a subject, whether individual (a single person) or collective (an entire community), has in its life context, in its assumption that the subject in question can draw from these relations material and immaterial resources relevant to its action. (Donati & Colozzi, 2006, pp. 9-10)

Schools come to develop social capital with the community «being» ensuring that they give care (Sergiovanni, 2000; Mortari, 2015), research and learn in respect of standards, obligations, goals and values, but always in the name of mutual trust. When social capital grows, so does its human counterpart, as observed by Coleman (1988, pp. S100-S101):

> Human capital is created by changes in people who produce skills and capacities that make them able to act in new ways. In any case, social capital is created through the changes in relationships between people who facilitate the action […] human capital facilitates productive activity as well as social capital. For example, a group widely endowed with mutual trust and loyalty is able to achieve much more than a group that does not have these qualities.

5. Final thoughts

Competences are not the results of precoded behaviours, but a developing potential for multiple resources that engage within the person, understood in the broadest sense of cognitive and socio-emotional design grounded in the civil community. Informal learning, in fact, contributes substantially to the development of intercultural competence, and this means that to consider only formal educational-training outcome would severely limit the assessment of human capital. This call becomes especially important today, with pressure from global socio-economic changes that have blurred and diminished the boundaries of a society that is increasingly multicultural, open and undefined, and where the sense of belonging must be built and rebuilt every day.

Assessing intercultural competence therefore means knowing and recognising the evolutionary process that the subject is going through, taking into account the cognitive, affective-emotional, relational, moral and spiritual aspects, and contextualising them in the life environment and the

relationships that the individual has woven. This latter aspect is particularly relevant since the external environment (in the broad sense) with its availability (or otherwise) of times, spaces and places suitable for multicultural encounter influences the type of interaction enacted. And all this requires greater co-responsibility, culture of cooperation and teamwork, and in practical terms means that educational, training and qualification systems must render visible and usable whatever has been learned and developed outside school so that this baggage can be of use for further learning or, more generally, for an individual's career (Di Rienzo, 2012). Otherwise, intercultural skills acquired in informal learning contexts [3] would remain tacit, unspoken and intangible. The community thus becomes a valuable resource that can continually update intercultural competences to be more responsive to the needs of the current environment and to contribute to the construction of new meanings through learning.

However, talking about educating community does not mean giving the community all responsibility for education, but rather to recognising that this responsibility is taken on by the strength and quality of the bonds that hold a community together. In practical terms, it means referring to all the subjects that are part of a particular context and working to ensure that the bonds between the various social partners will continue to strengthen. These are bonds that are not necessarily (and probably) spontaneous, but chosen, desired and built step by step with patience and without delegated authority, so that each one remains faithful to itself, doing its part and trying to offer more support and strength through the relationships established. This process is particularly necessary at such a sensitive time as the present, when the wealth of values, culture and knowledge has critically challenged the individual, hindering the difficult path of realisation of his identity (Portera, 2006).

We can only educate for intercultural competence together with others, leaving behind self-referentiality in order to create new alliances. These are relationships and methods that in some ways are still to be invented beyond spontaneity, with determination, rigour and discipline. We must first of all be aware of the specificity of each actor in order to recognise her value but also the partiality of her perspective. Only this can give rise to meaningful dialogue, bringing together the different educational cultures of the stakeholders involved: the more emotional vision of the family – which has to integrate with the formal outlook of the school – or the vision that encapsulates more the globality of the person of the different territorial environments.

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[3] In other words, in all those contexts in which activities, processes and experiences have not been explicitly designed, realised and assessed as happens in the case of experiences intended directly for learning and realised through planned and systematic curricula.

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Riassunto

Scopo precipuo del sistema educativo e formativo è, specialmente oggigiorno, in una realtà sempre più complessa e multiculturale, promuovere lo sviluppo di competenza interculturale, il cui possesso è da ritenersi irrinunciabile per l'esercizio consapevole di una cittadinanza mondiale. Per raggiungere tale obiettivo, non è possibile fare unico riferimento a una corporazione tecnico-professionale di docenti, educatori o formatori, ma è necessario estendere la responsabilità a tutti, senza esclusione di sorta: genitori, istruttori, animatori, ecc. La ragione va ricercata nel costrutto stesso di competenza interculturale, il quale rimarca il ruolo attivo della persona nel mobilitare e orchestrare le proprie risorse agendo nella realtà materiale e sociale (Pellerey, 2004); pertanto, per poter essere opportunamente monitorata e valutata, è necessario servirsi dell'ausilio di vari «stakeholders». Il presente articolo vuole essere una riflessione critica sul concetto di competenza interculturale e, soprattutto, su alcuni nodi critici legati alla sua valutazione che richiedono di essere affrontati facendo ricorso alla categoria di comunità educante.

Parole chiave: Coinvolgimento della comunità; Competenza interculturale; Comunità educante; Educazione interculturale; Globalizzazione.