

# **Intercultural Communication and Education In Multicultural Societies**

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As societies throughout the world become more culturally diverse, there is a subsequent increase in intercultural contact among people in various contexts of their daily lives. Communication across cultural borders is subject to the often-invisible concept of culture and requires an expanded repertoire of communication skills. Competence in intercultural communication is becoming an essential ability for participants in culturally diverse contexts. However, an understanding of the influence that culture has on our lives and knowledge and skill in intercultural communication is generally not part of our common knowledge or the educational curriculum. This paper argues for the inclusion of principles and practices of the field of intercultural communication in educational theory and policy as a major component of multicultural education. In this study I investigate the role of intercultural communication in the educational process and present an intercultural communication approach to cultural diversity for educators.

## **Increasing Cultural Diversity**

There was a time not long ago when the idea of cultural difference was limited to abstract discussions and textbook study of exotic people and lands outside one's national borders. Terms such as "cultural diversity" and "multiculturalism" were not part of our vocabulary or considerations in educational theory and policy. However, the reality is that cultural diversity has been the nature of human populations as long as people have been migrating across geographical areas. In the United States changes in immigration patterns and other demographic trends are resulting in an increased contact among people from different cultural backgrounds. In addition, there is now more recognition of the distinct cultures of various ethnic groups within the country whose historical presence and contributions have been ignored or blended into oblivion through years of assimilationist policies once thought appropriate to national development. The increasing visibility of these co-cultures, along with the arrival of new immigrant groups and changing demographics, is revealing the true nature the United States and other countries throughout the world as culturally diverse societies. Furthermore, the contact zones of our lives are beginning to expand beyond regional and national boundaries as technological advances in communication and transportation systems have increased the momentum, quantity, and quality of intercultural interaction across national, cultural, and linguistic borders.

## **Communication Across Cultures**

As populations become more culturally diverse, social relationships are becoming more dependent on the ability to communicate competently with people from other cultures whose values, behaviors, and communication may vary from one's own cultural practices. The increased connection of people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds has focused attention on the problems that can arise when we attempt to communicate with people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Communicating across cultures often reduces the certainty and expectations that words and behaviors have the same meanings to all people and increases the potential for doubt, misunderstanding, and conflict in everyday encounters. People may find themselves communicating beyond their comfort zones of commonality in a context that requires constant attention to the negotiation of meaning from different cultural perspectives and worldviews. As the nation's population continues to grow and change, there is an increasing need to understand, appreciate, and critically affirm cultural diversity.

One of the most important challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be to develop the communicative competence necessary to participate effectively in multicultural communities and the evolving global society. Competence in communicating with people from a different cultural

background is known as intercultural competence. Intercultural competence requires knowledge of culture and the extent to which culture influences our lives and the communication process. Intercultural competence also requires the skill and ability to translate this cultural knowledge into communication behaviors that result in successful intercultural interaction. In addition to cultural knowledge and behavioral skills, intercultural competence requires the recognition of cultural difference as a natural part of human existence.

Intercultural competence is especially important to educators, who must prepare all students for democratic life in a multicultural society. Teachers at all levels are experiencing an increase in the cultural and linguistic diversity of student populations. Consequently, they must rethink and possibly reform their educational practices to meet the needs of their diverse learners. This challenge requires new knowledge and a varied repertoire of teaching strategies that are inclusive of diverse cultural and linguistic factors. In fact, the scope of educational curriculum in the United States is in a state of expansion as teachers seek to educate students with a wider range of languages, cultures, exceptionalities, talents, learning styles, and multiple intelligences (Melnick and Zeichner, 1988). This new knowledge of intercultural communication can be found in the field of intercultural communication.

### **The Field of Intercultural Communication**

The investigation of culture and its impact on human communication is the focus of the field of intercultural communication. This scholarly field has a considerable history and has resulted in theories and practices that are useful in helping people achieve mutual understanding through the development of intercultural knowledge and communication skills (Levy, 1980). The study of intercultural communication traditionally focused on the ways in which people of different cultural backgrounds achieve understanding when they do not share a common cultural experience. The current focus has broadened to define the kind of communication needed to enable diverse groups in pluralistic societies to achieve national unity in the creation of common goals while preserving their cultural integrity (Bennett, 1998). An intercultural communication approach to cultural diversity positions cultural difference as a positive aspect of our human existence. The concepts developed in the field of intercultural communication and the methodologies and strategies of intercultural training provide a useful approach to educating people to be competent participants in multicultural societies. Understanding the human experience from this perspective expands our thinking to make room for the multiplicity of meanings, mindsets, and modes of living.

The field of intercultural communication is not only a valuable resource for individuals seeking to improve their intercultural communication skills, but it is also an essential resource for educators who face a two-fold responsibility in their professional roles. Teachers today must first expand their own cultural knowledge and competence in intercultural communication in an effort to meet the educational needs of increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse student populations. Secondly, teachers must help *all* of their students develop intercultural communicative competence as part of their preparation to be effective participants in diverse democratic communities and the global society.

This paper argues that since intercultural communication is becoming a part of lives in a multicultural society, the principles and practices of the field of intercultural communication should become part of the educational process and should be included as a major component in the field of multicultural education. The following research questions guided this inquiry: (1.) What is the role of intercultural communication in the educational process in a multicultural society? (2.) How can the field of intercultural communication contribute to the process of multicultural education? (3) What recommendations can be made from the context of this analysis that will inform teachers as they educate culturally and linguistic diverse students in their classrooms?

I initiated this inquiry out of a heartfelt concern for the missing link in the efforts of so many people and organizations to become truly multicultural. It was a personal challenge for me to unite two academic fields- multicultural education, in which I include culturally responsive pedagogy, and intercultural communication -to form a bridge in human understanding. Through this research, I have endeavored to transform my intuitive feelings into a substantial argument for

the importance of the role of intercultural communication and the development of intercultural communicative competence in the process of education and schooling in multicultural societies. The discussion that follows is a summary of my argument in the form of a response to the questions that guided this inquiry.

### **The Role of Communication in Education**

The major focus of this paper is the question of communication and its role in our lives. I have always been perplexed at its invisible nature. Much like culture, it guides us through our daily life and either enables or disables our relationships with others. Yet, the communication instruction manual is missing. We turn our attention to the communication process only when problems occur. The invisible role of communication in the educational context has become apparent to me through academic study and personal experiences in schools. While numerous factors are considered as possible reasons for underachievement of students, communication between teachers and students is rarely mentioned. In fact, a recent newspaper article addressing the factors that contribute to the racial achievement gap in a suburban school district failed to list teacher-student interactions or social relationships among possible factors. I have yet to hear teachers mention the nature of their relationships with students or communication as a possible factors in discussions of underachieving or “problem” students. However, is it not the meaningful, caring, relationships with teachers that result from genuine communication practices to which so many people, as adults, attribute their success in life? Communication deserves a prominent place in pedagogy.

Perhaps it takes the confounding force of cultural diversity to bring communication into the conscious awareness of educators. To initiate my research into the nature of effective communication practices in a multicultural world, I investigated the role of intercultural communication in the process of education and schooling in multicultural societies.

### **Dewey on Communication and Education**

This investigation began with an examination of the educational and social philosophy of John Dewey, who believed that nothing new is ever developed that can be totally removed from the context of past experiences (Dewey, 1929/1960). The educational and social thought of John Dewey focused on promoting a form of democracy that reached out to all participants in a culturally diverse society. Dewey’s ideas provide contemporary educators with valuable insight into the communication process and the ingredients of social unity in the context of cultural diversity. His conception of the process of communication and its importance in creating meaningful relationships among people in social groups is an effective means to dealing with difference in social and educational contexts.

Dewey (1985) defined communication as the “process of sharing experience till [sic] it becomes a common possession”(p.12). The purpose of communication, according to Dewey, is to reach mutual understanding through acting together, rather than simply self-expression or persuasion. Dewey states, “the heart of language is not expression of antecedent thought but the establishment of communication in which the activity of each is modified and regulated by the partnership (p.179). To reach out to another person with words is to engage in a process of sharing meaning that involves participation on the part of the speaker and the listener. The meaning of concepts, ideas, and expressions is not universal, but is created within each person’s mind as they encounter the experiences of life. Successful communication requires that people share the mental images we call meaning. Collaboration in the search for meaning requires that all people involved in the conversation actively engage in the process with the intent of achieving mutual understanding.

Dewey (1985) believed that through language and communication a social group becomes a community as its individual members build and share a common understanding and purpose through action. Commitment to a shared purpose connects individual members and, consequently, acts to regulate their individual actions with a regard for the emotional and intellectual welfare, as well as the consent, of the other members of the group. In a community the benefits of cooperative activity are valued and desired over isolated individual action that is motivated by self-interest and

personal gain. Social relationships are developed and maintained through discussion that is aimed at achieving a common understanding through consensus. Dewey wrote, "society not only continues to exist *by* transmission, *in* communication, but may be fairly said to exist *in* transmission, *in* communication (Dewey, 1985 p.7). Therefore, it is the process of communication that underlies the realization of all human relationships and the key to the formation of community out of mere human aggregation.

When I first encountered Dewey's (1939/1988) conception of the communication process as the sharing of experience until it becomes a common possession and the value of creating a common, shared purpose in our relationships with others in social groups, it became clear to me that this approach to communication was an effective means to deal with difference *in any form* that threatens social unity at the interpersonal, national, and international levels. When we communicate from this perspective, we do so with the intent of making our "selves" clear to another's "self" by considering the personal reality of that other person and framing our discourse so that the listener will become part of the process of creating a shared experience. Interactants engage in a process similar to a dance in which each partner follows the rhythm and flow of the other, at times leading and changing the form of the dance steps while also responding to the lead of the other with sensitive awareness. The tempo of this dance, much like conversations, is dynamic and fluid in relation to the context of the situation. The key to this process is in the act of considering the mindset of the other person, which takes a great deal of effort, energy, sensitivity, and patience.

While abstract in description, this process is one that we can all recognize as occurring in our most successful relationships. When commonality, or like-mindedness, is present among interactants, the process occurs with less effort and shared meanings are more easily created. As social distance increases, the potential for differences also increases, often creating obstacles to be circumvented on the path to understanding. When culture enters the communication process, it does so as an invisible specter with the power to destruct. Cultural differences, like social distance, occur along a continuum and can potentially prevent communication from achieving the desired goal. Successful intercultural communication depends on an understanding of the communication process and an understanding of the influence of culture our lives and its role in the communication process (Hall, 1981,1959; Bennett, 1998. 1993; Samovar & Porter, 1998).

Dewey considered the essence of human relationships as the process of communication. He situated this process at the heart of the educational process as the medium of communication between teacher and student and among students in the classroom.

### **Culturally Responsive Pedagogy**

This idea has been restated by other educators through the years and is now echoed by those theorists who are concerned with the underachievement of the nonmajority students in American schools (Melnick & Zeichner, 1988; Liston & Zeichner, 1996; Shade, 1997; Delpit, 1995; Chisholm, 1994; Gay, 2000, 1995, 1993; hooks, 1993; Nieto, 1999,1996; Villegas, 1991). In their efforts to transform classrooms into sites in which dialogue replaces dictation as the predominant method of instruction, these educators are beginning to discuss the impact of culture on the process of teaching and student learning. Intercultural communication is the nature of human interaction in classrooms of culturally and linguistically diverse students. Students come to school with cultural identities that, as integral part of their personal identities, provide the foundation for their future intellectual, emotional, social, and educational development. Intercultural communication is the foundation of the process of education in multicultural contexts.

Therefore, in my judgment, it is the responsibility of teachers to recognize, understand, and respect the *whole self* of *all* the students in the classroom. If teachers are to engage students from diverse cultures in the schooling process with the intent of developing their natural abilities, then these teachers must extend their communicative competence to include intercultural interactions. Failing to do so will result in more of the same treatment of inequality that has marked the nation's approach to nonmajority populations in the past. By excluding the cultural dynamic from the communication, and hence, educational process, students whose cultural and linguistic backgrounds are different from that of the dominant majority culture and language of the schools will be forced to accept their invisibility in order to achieve to academic success. The

development of intercultural communicative competence is essential to students who must become responsible communicators not only in the classroom, but also in the increasingly culturally diverse society of today and tomorrow. Therefore, teachers are faced with the dual challenge of becoming cognizant of and skilled in intercultural communication and of helping their students to develop the same intercultural communicative competence.

If intercultural communication is an essential component of education in culturally diverse societies, then the field of intercultural communication appears to be a valuable resource that should be included in the preparation of future teachers, the professional development of inservice teachers, and the educational process. The theoretical principles of intercultural communication present the concept of culture and its relationship to the communication process. This approach to understanding culture and its impact on our lives positions cultural difference as a natural part of human life and fosters an expanded view of the cultural realities that exist in the world. The natural ethnocentric tendency of people to regard their cultural perspective as the best or only way to live may be offset by an increased understanding of culture. It is interesting to consider that the cultures and languages that determine the realities that we experience are largely determined by our geographic positionality (Whorf, cited in Lee, 1997; Kohls, 1988; Lustig & Koester, 1996; Harris & Moran, 1979; Kaplan, 1970). Our cultural borders no longer constrain human encounters and relationships. Therefore, as responsible, active participants in life in this century, we must broaden our mindsets to accept the multiplicity that is inherent in the human experience.

In my judgment an intercultural communication approach to cultural diversity provides valuable information on culture, language, and the communication process that is both informative and practical to participants in the field of education. I have had personal success in using this approach in professional development programs with teachers. The reactions of teachers in my school district to a system-wide, professional development program that presented this approach was overwhelmingly positive. For months following this presentation, teachers thanked me for providing them with this knowledge and perspective. The general response was that they felt hopeful and empowered to engage in intercultural communication encounters. The long-term effects of this program are resulting in improved intercultural communication with students and their families and openness to understanding more about the influences of culture in the classroom experience.

Based on this experience and my continuous efforts to inform teachers of the principles and practices of intercultural communication, it is my professional opinion that the field of intercultural communication should inform the educational practices of teachers today as they transform monocultural pedagogy into the process of multicultural education. Intercultural communication is the process through which people from nonmajority diverse cultural groups are negotiating with majority culture group members to transform inequity out of societal institutions. Conversations in the borderlands of difference are intercultural conversations that are vulnerable to the effects of culture on communication styles, styles of reasoning and argument, conflict-resolution styles, and much more. Progress toward equity is rooted in effective intercultural communications. The development of intercultural communicative competence is the first step in multicultural education and the essence of effective communication in a multicultural society. Therefore, whether it is in negotiation for structural and curricular change or in classroom communication, the need for competence in communicating across cultures exists in multicultural societies.

### **Developing Intercultural Competence**

Given that this argument for the development of intercultural communicative competence is convincing, the next question to be addressed concerns the development of this competence in educators. It was not the intent of this paper to provide a detailed, description of the developmental stages involved in this learning process. Rather, I will relate eight intercultural communication competencies (Koester & Olebe, 1989, cited in Lustig & Koester, 1996) that are necessary to educators.

Intercultural communication competence refers to the ability to communicate effectively (achieving personal goals) and appropriately (actions and behaviors that fit the demands and

expectations of the specific context) in response to the specific situational and cultural constraints of a conversation (Chen & Starosta, 1998; Martin, 1993). Translated into the educational setting, teachers in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms should develop:

1. An understanding of the vital role that intercultural communication plays in the culturally diverse classroom
2. An awareness of their own cultural perspective and the extent to which cultural assumptions underlie their values, attitudes, and behaviors
3. An awareness of the process of intercultural communication and the ability to translate this awareness into meaningful and effective communication with people from diverse cultural backgrounds
4. An understanding, appreciation, and respect for cultural diversity in human life
5. The ability to deal with the ambiguity that occurs in the process of building shared meanings as well as the ability to respond to miscommunication
6. A sensitivity to the feelings of others and the ability to respond to these feelings
7. An understanding of the relationship between language, meaning, and cultural perceptions
8. An understanding of the relationship between culture and cognitive style as manifested in diverse ways of knowing, logical reasoning styles, and learning styles
9. An understanding that variation is a natural occurrence among people in social groups.
10. An understanding that there are multiple cultural realities throughout the world
11. The ability to reach across difference with respect, care, and love in the art of teaching.

There is no easy cookbook approach to developing intercultural competence. Rather, it is a developmental process that requires constant self-reflection and ongoing educative actions to increase one's personal cultural knowledge and knowledge of the cultural lives of those whom we encounter. An approach to the study of culture in general, as opposed to the study of a specific culture, provides a framework from which to analyze different cultural patterns and develops a cultural competence that is applicable to a wider variety of situations. This cultural-general approach also inhibits the tendency to essentialize and/or "exoticize" specific cultures and treat them as static forms as opposed to the dynamic, evolving forces that are composed of tremendous variations. It is important to remember that discussions of cultural patterns are descriptions of generalizations of the lives of people. Therefore, cultural awareness is an active process that requires constant verification and validation. Understanding the extent of variation in human life is the key to dealing with cultural diversity.

Teachers who are successful with culturally and linguistically diverse students have developed the intercultural competence that enables them to interpret the total behavior of their students from a perspective that is informed, but not limited, by a view of culture as a guiding force on our lives. They position cultural difference among other individual differences that affect the learning process. Their knowledge of cultural differences, such as communication styles, ways of knowing, attitudes toward conflict, problem-solving styles, discourse styles, and learning styles, becomes a natural part of their analytical thinking. They do not need an intercultural specialist to remind them of these differences. Culture will become part of their pedagogy. These teachers have become multicultural persons who approach the totality of their lives from a perspective that values the rich diversity that exists among people.

### **Professional Development of Culturally Conscious Teachers**

Teacher education programs in colleges and universities should assume the major responsibility for the development of future multicultural teachers (Melnick & Zeichner, 1988); Hidalgo, 1993; Burstein & Cabello, 1989; Chisholm, 1994; Grant, 1994; Dana & Floyd, 1993). The development of intercultural communication competence should become part of the preparation of teachers, not an elective course or an add-on program. If intercultural communication is the medium of instruction in the classroom, then it certainly deserves a thorough treatment in teacher education programs.

Furthermore, inservice teachers that serve culturally and linguistically diverse student populations should be offered professional development programs in an effort to provide them with a foundation for the development of intercultural communication competence. These

professional development programs should also be thorough, comprehensive, and ongoing to allow for the developmental process involved in acquiring the knowledge and skills that lead to intercultural competence. Teachers and administrators should no longer remain silent on issues of culture and its role in education (Miller, 1997). Discussions should focus on the complexities of cultural difference, not simply cultural similarities.

However, educational institutions are responsible for providing only the educational programs. The success of these programs is totally dependent on the personal desire of the participants to engage in the process of self-reflection and personal development that is inherent in understanding intercultural communication. This understanding involves analysis of one's values, beliefs, and behaviors, and it can be a difficult process for some people. It often requires the reordering of ways of being that are firmly rooted in the mindsets of people. Therefore, the primary responsibility for the development of intercultural communication competence rests upon the individual teacher, who as a person living in a culturally diverse world, must be genuinely motivated to develop the abilities to communicate effectively across cultural difference.

This is not to imply that educators have much choice in the matter of becoming culturally responsive educators. If teachers are to engage in the process of preparing the students of today to become active, critical, participants in the increasingly diverse world of tomorrow, they must reach out for new proficiencies that will enable them to connect with their students through meaningful interactions. As the driving force of society, educators are the leaders and agents who can make a difference in how we deal with *difference*. Through the efforts of multicultural teachers, students can acquire the competence that is necessary to function effectively and productively in culturally pluralistic societies.

## **Conclusion**

In my opinion the continued recreation of a democratic society will depend the ability of all participants to engage in mutual collaboration through dialogue that is informed, but not constrained, by cultural, political, and ideological differences. The public sphere can be enriched as members of diverse groups participate in the problem-solving process that will forge a national unity based on mutual understanding and equal representation and participation. The synergistic effect of diversity has the potential to enrich the lives of all people in a democratic, multicultural society. However, this entire process is totally dependent on the ability of people to engage in effective intercultural communications. Therefore, a democratic, multicultural society requires that its members possess the intercultural communicative competence that will facilitate the development of a civic culture that reflects, respects, and fosters the well being of all people. Communication in a multicultural world is intercultural communication. Communication in multicultural classrooms is intercultural communication. Educators bear the responsibility of creating a culturally responsive pedagogy that positions the communication process as the foundation. The principles and practices of the field of intercultural communication are essential to education in multicultural contexts.

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