EWC Statement Series

Intercultural Competence

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Statement Summary

Introduction

The Council of Europe's White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue (2008) proposes that intercultural dialogue offers the best approach for managing issues of cultural diversity within contemporary societies. The White Paper defines intercultural dialogue as the open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups from different ethnic, religious, linguistic and national backgrounds on the basis of mutual understanding and respect, and it argues that such dialogue is crucial for promoting tolerance and understanding, preventing conflicts, and enhancing societal cohesion. However, the White Paper also observes that the competences which are required for participating in intercultural dialogue are not acquired automatically by individuals. These competences instead need to be learned, practised and maintained, and the White Paper assigns to education professionals the specific responsibility of fostering intercultural competences in learners.

However, a difficulty confronting education professionals in fulfilling this responsibility is the bewildering array of conceptualisations of intercultural competence that are currently available. Over the past twenty years or so, there has been a proliferation of different models of intercultural competence across the social sciences, in disciplines as diverse as management, health care, counselling, social work, psychology and education.

Models of Intercultural Competence

These various models have recently been reviewed by Spitzberg and Changnon (2009), who classify them into five types:

(1) Compositional models, which identify the various components of intercultural competence without attempting to specify the relations between them – these models

therefore simply contain lists of the relevant attitudes, skills, knowledge and behaviours which together make up intercultural competence.

(2) Co-orientational models, which focus on how communication takes place within intercultural interactions, and how perceptions, meanings and intercultural understandings are constructed during the course of these interactions.

(3) Developmental models, which describe the stages of development through which intercultural competence is acquired.

(4) Adaptational models, which focus on how individuals adjust and adapt their attitudes, understandings and behaviours during encounters with cultural others.

(5) Causal path models, which postulate specific causal relationships between the different components of intercultural competence.

In their review, Spitzberg and Changnon observe that many of the terms used to describe intercultural competence in all five types of model (e.g., adaptability, sensitivity, etc.) have not yet been properly operationalised or validated in empirical research, and that many of the models may well have ethnocentric biases due to the fact that they have been developed within western European and North American societies and probably lack cross-cultural generalizability. Certainly, most of the models reviewed by Spitzberg and Changnon are underdetermined by the available evidence: they contain many speculative elements and, when they have been subjected to empirical examination, are typically tested in very restricted situations with limited numbers of participants drawn from only a small range of cultures or sometimes only a single culture.

Compositional models make the fewest assumptions concerning the nature of intercultural competence, as they modestly attempt only to identify the various attitudes, skills, knowledge and behaviours which together make up intercultural competence, without speculating about the interconnections, casual pathways or developmental interdependencies between them. Interestingly, and despite the large number of models of intercultural competence, there is considerable consensus among researchers and intercultural professionals concerning the components that comprise intercultural competence. For example, Deardorff (2006), in a survey which collected data from scholars of intercultural competence and university international administrators, found that 80% or more of the respondents agreed about 22 of the core components of intercultural competence. Deardorff also found substantial agreement over the definition of the term intercultural competence. The definition which was endorsed the most strongly by the scholars was "the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes" (where the term effectively means that one is able to achieve one's objectives in these interactions, and the term appropriately means that the interactions do not violate the cultural rules and norms which are valued by oneself and by one's interlocutors).

Components of Intercultural Competence

So what are the core components of intercultural competence? Drawing on the range of research that has been conducted in this field, and the numerous conceptual models that have

been proposed, it is possible to argue that all of the following components form the core of intercultural competence:

- *Attitudes*: respect for other cultures; curiosity about other cultures; willingness to learn about other cultures; openness to people from other cultures; willingness to suspend judgement; willingness to tolerate ambiguity; and valuing cultural diversity.

- *Skills*: skills of listening to people from other cultures; skills of interacting with people from other cultures; skills of adapting to other cultural environments; linguistic, sociolinguistic and discourse skills, including skills in managing breakdowns in communication; skills in mediating intercultural exchanges; skills in discovering information about other cultures; skills of interpreting cultures and relating cultures to one another; empathy; multiperspectivity; cognitive flexibility; and skills in critically evaluating cultural perspectives, practices and products, including those of one's own culture.

- *Knowledge*: cultural self-awareness; communicative awareness, especially of the different linguistic and communicative conventions within different cultures; culture-specific knowledge, especially knowledge of the perspectives, practices and products of particular cultural groups; and general cultural knowledge, especially knowledge of processes of cultural, societal and individual interaction.

- *Behaviours*: behaving and communicating effectively and appropriately during intercultural encounters; flexibility in cultural behaviour; flexibility in communicative behaviour; and having an action orientation, that is, a disposition for action in society in order to enhance the common good, especially through the reduction of prejudice, discrimination and conflict

The relationship between these various attitudes, skills, knowledge and behaviours which together comprise intercultural competence has not yet been established. This is a matter for empirical investigation rather than a priori theorising, and there is a very large research agenda which needs to be addressed here. Questions which still need to be answered include:

- How does each of these components develop within the individual learner?

- What are the social, educational, cognitive and motivational factors which influence the acquisition of each component?

- Are there particular sequences in which the various components are acquired?

- Is the acquisition of some components a necessary prerequisite for the acquisition of other components?

- How are the different components cognitively and affectively inter-related?

- To what extent does the development of intercultural competence vary depending on the specific cultural setting in which an individual lives, and the specific intercultural encounters which an individual experiences within that setting?

That said, there is existing research evidence to support all of the following conclusions about the development of intercultural competence:

- Intercultural competence can be enhanced through intercultural education and training (e.g., Klak & Martin, 2003; Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn & Terenzini, 1996).

- Intercultural competence can also be enhanced through a range of intercultural experiences, for example by attending international schools, attending multi-ethnic institutions which have a non-discriminatory environment, or by having extensive contact with people from other countries (e.g., Pascarella et al. 1996; Straffon, 2003; Zhai & Scheer, 2004).

- Females, older individuals and minority individuals tend to have higher levels of intercultural competence than males, younger individuals and majority individuals, respectively (e.g., Pascarella et al. 1996; Zhai & Scheer, 2004).

- Intercultural competence may be related to holding a more global, international perspective and lower levels of ethnocentrism (e.g., Caligiuri, Jacobs & Farr, 2000).

- Some individual and personality characteristics such as optimism, openness and extraversion may also be related to higher levels of intercultural competence (e.g., Caligiuri et al., 2000).

- Advanced proficiency in one or more foreign languages is also sometimes related to higher levels of intercultural competence (e.g., Olson & Kroeger, 2001).

Given the known impact of intercultural education on intercultural competence, and the Council of Europe's call for teachers to take on a more central role in fostering the intercultural competence of learners, there is clearly a need for the development of educational tools and materials which can be used within educational settings to help teachers achieve this goal.

The CoE and Intercultural Competence

The Council of Europe itself has already developed a number of toolkits and materials that may be used towards this end, such as the Intercultural Learning T-Kit and the All Different All Equal Education Pack. These contain a large range of activities, methods and resources that can be used to enhance students' intercultural competence.

A further instrument that has recently been developed by the Council of Europe is the Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters (AIE), which is based on an explicit compositional model of intercultural competence derived from the work of Byram (1997) and the INCA project (2004). The AIE aims to foster the development of a number of components of intercultural competence (including respect for otherness, empathy, tolerance of ambiguity, behavioural flexibility, communicative awareness, skills of interpreting and relating, and critical cultural awareness) by supporting learners' critical reflection on encounters with people from other cultures which they themselves have personally

experienced.

In addition, a companion tool, the Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters through Visual Media, is currently under development – this new tool is being designed to assist learners to reflect critically on specific images depicting people from other cultures which they have encountered in the media (for example, on television, in a film, on the Internet, etc.).

While all of these instruments make an important contribution to the range of materials that teachers can use for enhancing the intercultural competence of their students, there is a need for further materials to be developed, especially materials tailored specifically to the circumstances and requirements of the particular cultural settings in which students live.

However, all such materials need to be formally evaluated for their effectiveness in actually bringing about change in learners. It is one thing to develop activities, methods and resources which both teachers and learners find satisfying to use within the classroom, but another to show that these actually bring about the desired developmental changes in learners. Thus, a further challenge for future research is the evaluation, using methodologically sound procedures, of the different materials which are available to teachers in the area of intercultural education. Given the significance of the intercultural approach for contemporary European societies, it is crucial that the choice of educational means is based on robust evidence concerning their effectiveness.

Some Council of Europe resources for intercultural education

Brander, P., Cardenas, C., de Vicente Abad, J., Gomes, R. & Taylor, M. (2004). *All Different All Equal Education Pack - Idea, Resources, Methods and Activities for Informal Intercultural Education with Young People and Adults (2nd edition)*. Strasbourg, France: Council of Europe Publishing.

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About the contributor

Martyn Barrett is Professor of Psychology in the Department of Psychology at the University of Surrey, UK. He is a developmental and social psychologist but has a strong commitment to multidisciplinary research, and he is currently working with political scientists, anthropologists, sociologists, policy analysts and educationists. He works on processes of national and ethnic enculturation, the development of prejudice and stereotyping, the identifications and cultural practices of ethnic minority and mixed-heritage individuals, the development of the intercultural competences which are required for successful intercultural dialogue, and the development of political cognition, attitudes and active citizenship. He is currently leading an FP7 project funded by the European Commission entitled *Processes Influencing Democratic Ownership and Participation (PIDOP)*, which is running from 2009-2012. He is also working as an expert advisor to the Council of Europe. He is Academic Director of the multidisciplinary Centre for Research on Nationalism, Ethnicity and Multiculturalism (CRONEM) at the University of Surrey, and an Academician of the Social Sciences.

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