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Teachers' Intercultural Competence: a requirement or an option in a culturally diverse classroom?

Ibis Marlene Álvarez Valdivia and Iosbel González Montoto

Department of Basic, Evolutionary and Education Psychology, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Cerdanyola del Vallès, Spain

ABSTRACT

This paper reports an exploratory study of the development of intercultural competence (IC) in elementary school teachers in Catalonia, Spain, utilising mixed-method quantitative and qualitative assessments. Through enrolment in a teacher training activity, the starting point was the administration of the Intercultural development inventory (IDI) to assess IC. Later, a discussion group was held to reflect on the results of the evaluation and to discuss educational practices in the face of cultural diversity. The quantitative IDI findings indicated that, regardless of the presence of foreign origin students at schools, participant teachers overestimate their level of intercultural sensitivity; there is a tendency to emphasise similarities in all cultures, which can minimise significant cultural differences. Nevertheless, the teachers became interested in cultural diversity after considering their potentially controversial and problematic educational context. Beyond admitted limitations of this study, inherent to small-scale methodological approach, our practicebased reflective proposal highlights obstacles and potentialities for managing cultural diversity in the classroom. These findings support the conclusion that IC is distributed throughout members of a community rather than being strictly an individual attribute. At the same time, the study thus demonstrates a mixed-method training design as an effective means of developing and assessing IC.

Introduction

Over the past decade, the immigrant population in Spain has grown significantly, especially in Catalonia, where immigrants make up 15.8% of the net population (OECD 2010). This is particularly noticeable in educational settings, where students of foreign origin stand out for their great diversity in terms of cultural, linguistic and religious backgrounds.

There is growing interest in cultural diversity in the educational context, but this interest is usually only evident when conflicts arise, and diversity is rarely seen as a positive and enriching element (Aguado, Ballesteros and Malik 2003). Thus, the significant presence of a culturally and linguistically diverse student population in our

schools does not necessarily mean that teachers would easily embrace the need to train in culturally sensitive pedagogies (Gay 2002).

A comprehensive study about schools and cultural diversity in Catalonia (Garreta 2004) showed that, at the level of model and discourse, most teachers in compulsory education, mostly from primary education and public schools, shared the belief that all schools should have intercultural education as one of their referents. However, the investigation showed that translating intercultural discourse into practice was rather poor as teachers expressed, among other things, that this was a "problem" that was only relevant for those centres and teachers with ethno-culturally diverse studentship.

It seems that inclusive education is still a project and not a reality in many educational settings, where diversity is rejected and instead there is a drive to impose similarity, uniformity and standard behaviour for the sake of cohesion (Garreta 2006; Pinyol Jiménez 2016). These practices epitomize current views on the educational response to cultural diversity, which is often understood as summative, rather than transversal, actions and are not representative of this diversity. In short, we are referring to a "light" conception of intercultural education, which tends to rely on specific practices and on cultural "folklorization" (Leiva 2009).

The great challenge for inclusive education is to unlearn the rejection of diversity and instead learn to appreciate it so as to build new educational alternatives from the perspective of intercultural attitudes and behaviours (Armstrong, Armstrong, and Spandagou 2011). According to Han and Thomas (2010), teachers in such environment must be aware of their own prejudices and assumptions about human behaviour; they need to understand the specific group of children they are working with, and be able to use culturally appropriate strategies to work with children from diverse

cultural backgrounds. Also, teachers should set examples for their students by showing how to be culturally responsive in a diverse society.

Specifically, we are referring to the need to develop intercultural competence (IC) in culturally-diverse socio-educational contexts, as in Catalonia's case, in order to achieve a culturally inclusive school, where students and staff alike recognise, appreciate and capitalize on diversity, aiming to enrich the overall learning experience.

In this study, intercultural competence (IC) is understood as the ability to change cultural perspective and adapt our behaviour to deal with cultural differences. Similarly, intercultural sensitivity is highly valued as a favourable condition to learning and behaving effectively in an intercultural interaction. This presupposes a gradual process of change and development to acquire the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes – and as such, critical reflection becomes a powerful tool.

According to Deardorff (2006) this process begins with the acquisition of attitudes (respect, openness, curiosity and discovery), and then the development of skill (to listen, observe and interpret, to analyse, evaluate and relate) and knowledge (cultural self-awareness; deep cultural knowledge, including context, role and impact of culture and others' world views). This model —namely, the pyramid model— views the development of IC as a process that goes from the personal level (attitudes) to the interpersonal level of interacting with other people (outcomes). Deardorff further argues that process orientation (mindfulness) throughout is essential in the process of building from attitudes and moving toward desired external outcomes. 'This means being aware of the learning that takes place at each level and the necessary process skills that are needed for acquisition of intercultural competence' (255).

This notion of gradual development and the importance of attitudes also lies at the core of the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), created by

Bennett (1986) as a framework to explain how people experience and engage with cultural difference. ‘The development of intercultural sensitivity describes how we gain the ability to create an alternative experience that more or less matches that of the people in another culture’ (Bennett 2004, 11). According to Bennett, the development of this skill goes through a gradual process through six orientations (stages) that individuals use to deal with cultural difference. Each stage indicates a certain worldview with certain attitudes to interculturalism, and they are distributed along a continuum from the most ethnocentric orientations (denial, defense, minimisation of cultural difference) to the most ethno-relative (acceptance, adaptation, and integration of cultural difference). Bennett (2004) describes a major change in the quality of intercultural perceptions when people move from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism and he links this process to the development of IC:

In general, the more ethnocentric orientations can be seen as ways of *avoiding cultural difference*, either by denying its existence, by raising defenses against it, or by minimizing its importance. The more ethnorelative worldviews are ways of *seeking cultural difference*, either by accepting its importance, by adapting perspective to take it into account, or by integrating the whole concept into a definition of identity (62).

Ultimately, these models seek to explain the types of attitudes, knowledge and skills individuals need to function in culturally diverse settings and the processes they undergo in developing the skills and abilities needed to become interculturally competent.

Of course, IC does not develop naturally; it must be taught purposely (Byram 1997). In this process, the affective component of IC plays an important role because it is what leads to increasing motivation and interest in learning about other cultural realities, to having a suitable predisposition to learn from others, to intercultural reflection, to validating plurality, to accepting the relativity of truth and to wish to

reconstruct our own identity from intercultural contact. Thus, as argued Bennet (2004) greater intercultural sensitivity creates the potential for increased IC.

Similarly, we believe that a person's life experiences are also an important condition, if not a determining factor, in their development of intercultural sensitivity. We are referring to a person's previous experience of living in contact with and within an intercultural context, which promoted learning and mutual understanding in intercultural relations. This makes sense if we take into account the so-called 'contact hypothesis', according to which mutual ignorance is fostered by the daily physical and social barriers established between ethnically-differentiated groups. In the educational context, this ignorance fosters false, reductionist and negative beliefs, on an irrational basis, which gives rise to hostility among those groups, whilst at the same time promoting practices and discourses of social and political discrimination among the minority groups (Alegre 2005).

Inclusive education is all about being proactive in identifying the barriers and obstacles learners encounter in attempting to access opportunities for quality education, as well as in removing those barriers and obstacles that lead to exclusion (UNESCO 1990). Nevertheless, as noted in Boer, Pijl, and Minnaert (2011) the majority of teachers hold neutral or negative attitudes towards the inclusion of pupils with special needs in regular primary education. Recent research in Catalonia about the integration of immigrants has also shown deficiencies, highlighting the need for improved training and educational practices aimed in this direction (Pinyol-Jiménez 2016).

On this premise, the present study aims to explore the development level of IC in a group of elementary school teachers working in a school located in a multicultural context in Catalonia. Specifically, the level of IC of this group of teachers was assessed

and this result was then contrasted with the evaluative discourse of their educational experiences with cultural diversity.

Method

The study took place in a municipality in Barcelona, which since the late nineties has been experiencing rapid population growth and now ranks as the fourth largest city of Catalonia in population terms. This growth is largely due to the great influx of immigrants, who in over just a decade increased from 3% to almost 14% of the total population. The immigrant population comes mainly from North Africa and the Maghreb, especially Morocco (46.16% of all foreigners in the city). The immigrant population, although present throughout the city, are mainly concentrated in two districts, accounting for 50.5% and 35.3%, respectively.

Participants

The study was carried out at a publicly owned elementary school located in a district bordering the two with the highest concentration of foreign population in the city, as previously mentioned. At the time of the study, the school had 498 enrolled students, of which only 7.1% were students of foreign origin. Most of these students came from Morocco, although there were also others from other origins, such as Ecuador, Bulgaria, Guinea, China, Honduras, Bolivia, Argentina and Haiti. The school's educational project included a plan to cater for cultural diversity but it was not being implemented because, according to the school's management, the composition of the school enrolment did not justify it.

Participation was voluntary, in response to a call to take part in a teacher training activity. To begin with nine teachers signed up, one of whom withdrew later after learning about the procedure. Finally, the group was composed of eight participants,

who were mostly representatives of different educational cycles in Preschool and Elementary cycles (four pre-school teachers, two of the second cycle, one of the third cycle and one of the foreign languages - 50% of the total number of teachers in the school). All were Spanish nationals, educated to degree level, mostly women and only one of them had previously taken part in any programme related to cultural diversity and inclusion. Interestingly, most of the participants were preschool teachers. This may be due to an increase in enrolment at this level from the year 2012-2013, in response to the growing demand for enrolment of foreign students at the centre.

Instruments

Intercultural Development Inventory (Hammer, Bennett and Wiseman, 2003). It consists of a questionnaire that provides a statistically reliable and cross-culturally valid measure of the level of intercultural sensitivity. The questionnaire comprises 50 items to assess on a Likert-type five-point scale ranging from "agree" to "disagree" and seven questions on the demographic characteristics of the participants. The statements, for example, are of the following types: "I can change my behaviour to adapt to other cultures", "All people are the same, we have the same needs, interests and goals in life", "Too much cultural diversity is creating divisive conflicts" or "Similarities deserve more attention than cultural differences". These questions were answered online in about 30 minutes and software generated individual and group reports, which were managed by the specialised technician in charge. Once the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) is completed, if taken online, the software generates individual and group profiles. Each of these profiles provides two set of scores per participant and per group: one *Developmental* score, which is the actual score of intercultural sensitivity as measured by the IDI, and one *Perceived* score, which refers to participants' self-perception on his/her intercultural sensitivity. These scores are presented in a graphic in the form of

coloured bars extending horizontally from left to right. The scale used in the bars ranges between 35 and 145. These scores are placed within the scales of intercultural sensitivity in the IDI that indicates where in the DMIS continuum the participant stands. Thus, the results obtained and their interpretation correspond to the following information: Perceived Orientation, Developmental Orientation, Orientation Gap, Trailing Orientation, and Cultural Disengagement¹.

Group Discussion. Defined as a carefully planned conversation, this technique provides information on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nondirective environment. For this study all participants formed a group to discuss four areas of interest: coping with conflicts prompted by cultural differences; methodological alternatives for learning a second language; ways to work towards improving families' cooperation and engagement with schools; and organisation and management of the teacher team. The discussion enabled us to collect information on how teachers assess their skills and educational experiences in the face of cultural diversity.

Procedure

This work was possible thanks to our collaboration with the Center for Educational Resources (CER), who are responsible for managing teacher training in the municipality. Specifically, together we put forward a proposal to convene an activity to assess and reflect on teacher's IC and educational practice in the face of cultural diversity. The following figure outlines the procedure we followed to collect the data.

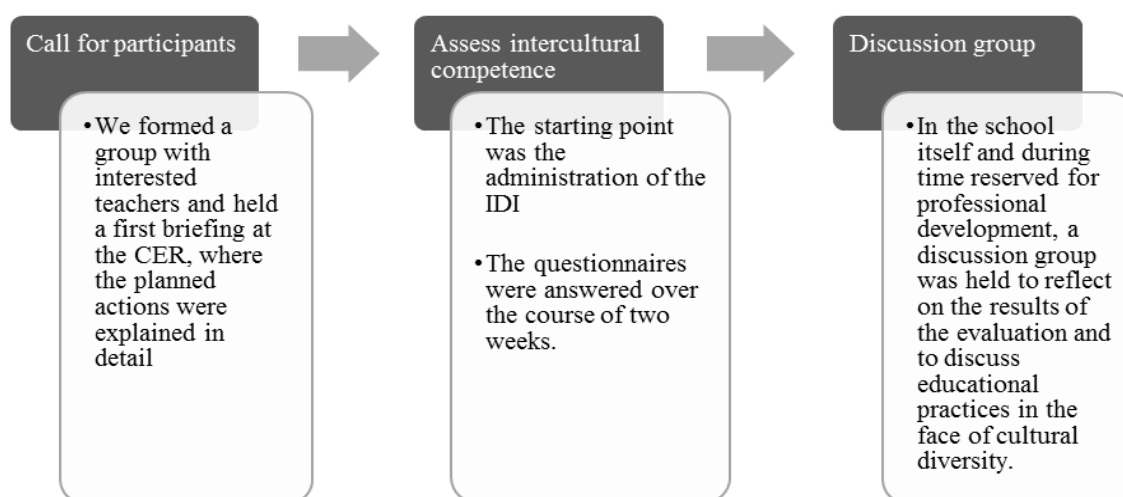


Figure 1. Procedure followed to collect data.

During the presentation of the results of the assessment of intercultural competence through IDI, key concepts necessary for understanding the results were explained, based on the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (Bennett 1986). After analyzing the results of the reports (feedback on group profile), we proceeded to plan the group discussion, taking as the starting point the feedback on the group's profile by means of a graphical presentation. We then proceeded with the four sessions corresponding to the areas of greatest interest to the group, which related to educational experiences in the face of cultural diversity. Thus, each 2-hour session developed as a thematic discussion group.

All sessions were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Finally, a content analysis was performed and then compared with the results of the assessment of IC via the IDI. In this sense, as required by this study's aims, this methodology has been useful to reach a deeper understanding of a particularly complex educational context, by seeking answers to descriptive and explanatory questions. Choosing this qualitative small-scale approach matched the method of the formative activities for teacher training and the participants' characteristics: a group of teachers from an educational institution who all

share the same concerns about how to deal with their students' cultural diversity. Although the method may yield low objective validation, it is of a high quality in subjective profundity and takes ethical considerations in teacher research (Schulz, Schroeder, and Brody 1997).

Results and discussion

This section shows the results of the evaluation of the development level of intercultural competence in the group of teachers participating in the study. In line with this paper's aims, these results are contrasted with the group's evaluative discourse of their educational experiences in the face of cultural diversity. To this purpose, quantitative evaluation results are presented, as well as discourse fragments extracted from the group discussion session.

We deemed important to follow the structure of the main aspects evaluated by the IDI in the following order: Perceived Orientation, Developmental Orientation, Orientation Gap, Trailing Orientation and Cultural Disengagement. Each of these aspects enabled us to observe how cultural differences are perceived and experienced. A global view gives us a clue to the level of development of IC in the group of teachers.

As can be noted, the results confirm the expectations detailed earlier. There is ample evidence of ethnocentric conceptions anchored in a discourse manifesting little development of IC and conflicts in relation to the educational management of cultural differences. As a 2016 report states, the effective integration of immigrants in Catalonia is still a pending task (Pinyol-Jiménez 2016).

Perceived Orientation: How does the group of teachers perceive their own level of IC?

The Perceived Orientation score (Figure 2) indicates that the group evaluates their own ability to understand and adapt appropriately to cultural differences as Acceptance. This

reflects an orientation that recognizes and appreciates patterns of cultural difference in their own culture and that of others, in terms of values, perceptions and behaviours.

According to Bennet (2004), this is the first of the three ethnorelative stages, an important turn in the development of IC: 'By discriminating differences among cultures (including one's own), and by constructing a kind of self-reflexive perspective, people with this worldview are able to experience others as different from themselves, but equally human' (6).

From the teachers' point of view, this self-assessment corresponds to an ideal representation, a conviction the group has on their ability to understand and adapt to cultural differences. In this regard, a teacher draws on previous experience and states:

T1²: [...] I can "accept" some things from other cultures, but you often think: I cannot "adapt". I am thinking, for example, of this child who had that Feast of Sacrifice (Eid al-Adha) and says to me: Well, I have to go to the Feast of Sacrifice tomorrow and cannot come to school [...] I can accept it, but I don't think I can adapt.

He/she also summarizes this point to the rest of the teachers when he/she expresses:

T1: I think at school most teachers are doing well because we actually have 24 little people who each have a mother and a father, and one that comes from Romania, another that comes from Morocco [...] Well, we're very much in touch with different cultures [...] I do not mean that we are more "accepting" or that we have "adapted".

These comments by the teachers also reflect certain respect, openness and curiosity towards immigrant students' cultures, an attitude which according to Deardroff (2006) signal the start in the development of intercultural competence at a personal level (individual) as the desired internal outcomes.

Interestingly, not only is the level of Acceptance being embraced, but not achieving the highest level (Adaptation) is being justified on account of the school not having a high rate of immigrant students and, thus not needing to conduct regular

inclusive educational practices that respond to cultural diversity. This is in contrast to what other schools do. This was explicit when he/she says:

T2: [...] obviously we are not in the adaptation phase [...] We are not the type of school that needs to implement daily activities that will enable the school to reach the adaptation level [...] As a group, perhaps we are not in an adaptation phase that perhaps other schools are working towards on daily basis.

T1: [...] I think that's my case and that of all the teachers in our school or most of the teachers at the school [...] we do not feel the need [...]

This confirms the validity of previous studies that warn against the tendency to link intercultural education to the significant presence of immigrant students (Garreta 2004), with predictable consequences on school segregation —understood as the unequal distribution of different social groups among schools within the same territory (Valiente and Rambla 2009). Despite political, administrative and academic intentions to establish intercultural education as a benchmark for all schools and all students as a whole, there is still a generalised view that intercultural education is only relevant for schools and teachers with ethnoculturally diverse studentship.

To accept the relativity of values to cultural context (and thus to achieve the potential to experience the world as organised by different values), individuals need to figure out how to maintain ethical commitment in the face of such relativity (Bennet 2004, 7). The consequence of this view is apparent in a comment that is worth mentioning:

T1: [...] I, my problem is that I have 23 Catalan students who are not aware that we are different [...] my problem is not that there is diversity, quite the opposite [...] they do not understand other cultures [...] I find that I have kids in class who are really racist [...] they have little awareness of other cultural realities, little or virtually no sensitivity [...]

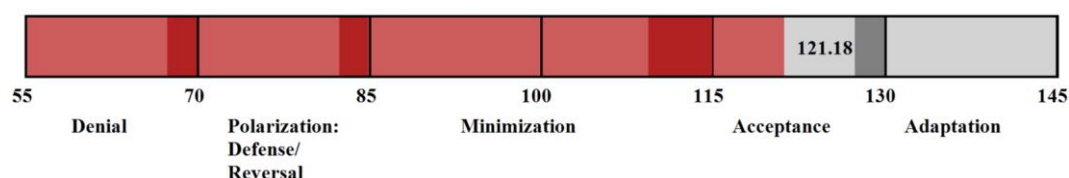


Figure 2. Perceived orientation: acceptance

These students' attitude of ignoring cultural difference goes against school's socializing function and, in turn, puts into question the teachers' leading role as directly responsible for making the intercultural approach an educational reality.

The importance of teachers' attitudes to make intercultural understanding a reality has been at the forefront of education since the publication of "Transversal Axis on Intercultural Education" by the Department of Education in Catalonia (1996), which at the time was one of the official responses to the influx of immigrant students. As the professionals directly responsible for the plan's implementation, teachers are expected to make a firm personal and professional commitment to valuing cultural diversity and discarding any ethnocentric attitudes (Han and Thomas 2010), in favour of inclusive education.

Inclusive education means that all students are welcomed and are supported in their learning. Consequently, an inclusive classroom is one that values the contributions made by all students, their families, and communities. It recognises that every learner is unique and it builds on their languages, cultures, and interests and identifies and removes any barriers to achievement (Gay, 2002; Malik, 2003).

Developmental Orientation: What is the actual level of development of intercultural competence in the group of teachers?

The Developmental Orientation score (Figure 3) indicates that the group's main orientation towards cultural differences lies within Minimization, thus reflecting a

tendency to highlight similarities across cultures that may hide important cultural differences in values, perceptions and behaviour (Bennet, 1986).

According to the result of the IDI evaluation, that is the group's real tendency when facing situations in practice where cultural difference arises. Some of the following statements highlight this tendency:

T3: [...] although all children are Spanish [...] we do not think of them as individuals but as equal [...] you're like the others, I do not devote more attention to you than to so-and-so because you're a normal kid, like the others. That's what we do, what we tend to do [...] here everyone gets equal attention [...] because if they are 28 I cannot give special attention to one against 27, then the message you give to kids is that everyone is equal [...]

T4: We are all equal? Well, there is a maxim that I applied [...] and I always said: we are all different, but we are all equally important.

These results corroborate the lack of cultural sensitivity among teachers (Garreta 2006; Leyva 2009) and this translates into a real difficulty to perceive, appreciate and understand cultural differences, which are essential skills for the effective development of IC (Bennett 1986; Deardorff 2006). Moreover, these results show a Denial worldview, as teachers appear disinterested in cultural difference even when it is brought to their attention (Bennet, 2004). They put emphasis on similarity, standard and equality for the sake of cohesion, which alienates some schools from the inclusive education model, as had previously been noted by Aguado et al (2003).

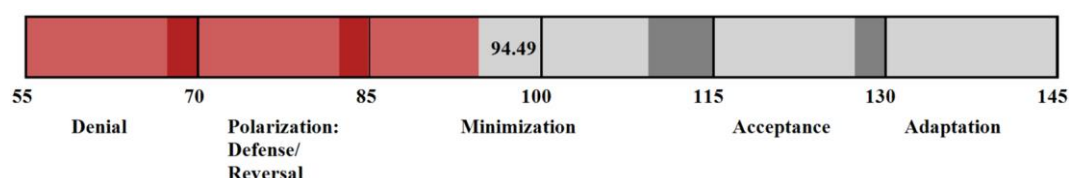


Figure 3. Developmental orientation: minimisation.

As argued Bennet (2004), people at the Minimisation stage expect similarities, and they may become insistent on correcting others' behaviour to match their expectations. The following dialogue not only continues to evidence the tendency to highlight similarities, but also uses, once again, the volume of immigrant students to justify the need for attention to cultural difference:

T5: It's just that we do not have such a diverse student body as to make us think about these issues of difference, in general they are a fairly homogeneous group and we don't have issues on a daily basis [...]

T3: No, they do not feel different, no, they feel valued. The kids do not even think about it.

T2: They feel valued, safe. What happens at home? Well, I do not know [...]

T3: [...] here they are truly valued, as individuals.

T4: [...] I do not believe that any child can feel unvalued by the way they are treated at school, whatever their culture.

T5: Do families feel integrated at school? We do not know, but children are children [...] the differences you find in class here are not due to a child's different culture or religion, but because of his/her different personality, of his/her contact with their capabilities.

T1: Because of his/her individuality as a person, not their culture.

Moreover, when discussing their educational practices in the classroom, teachers also evidenced this tendency towards homogenisation:

T6: [...] the priority is coexistence and not between cultures but between people, respect between people [...]

T3: That we respect them, that we love them, and that we are people and all that.

In fact, when asked explicitly whether they worked with these children's culture in the classroom, despite them being a minority, negative answers prevailed. It is important to point out that this discourse not only evidences the tendency to minimize

cultural differences and a superficial way to deal with them, but it also shows a clearly assimilationist stance on education.

Moderator: But let me ask you something, even if you only have a small minority, do you still work with that child's culture in the classroom?

T3: No

T2: No

T6: But you work with ethics, everything about values, respect.

T3: No, we work with values, but we don't work with culture.

T6: Their culture, as such, we don't work with it.

T5: There are multicultural things.

T6: Of course, they are rather different things, they are not the norm.

T2: No, I do some implicit things at certain times in the day mention 4 or 5 examples, but talking expressively about their culture? What for? We already work with ours, with cultural things, traditions [...]

T6: [...] At least when we are teaching, our culture, from here, it's obviously what you do without realizing, we convey our culture. Of course, our celebrations [...]

T3: We do Christmas, we do carol singing [...] we do the Tió³, which is typical of this region, that is, we work with ours.

T6: Yes, but ok, when you work with the theme of traditions, you work with Tió, but you also work with others and then you take the opportunity to ask the children: and what do you do, what traditions, what festivities do you celebrate? Tell me about the Tió and now about the Festival of Sacrifice. Of course you do that, devote just a few minutes to it.

T3: [...] but you don't go any deeper than that, it's just what you can see, the culture you can see.

T4: [...] just anecdotes, that's what we do.

T6: Exactly, like as if it was a party.

Such educational practices are not surprising at this level of development of the IC (Minimisation), so ethnocentric in nature, as they reflect the assimilationist, integrative and folkloric sense that is attributed to the cultural diversity and its educational management, as established by Garreta (2004) and Leiva (2009) in their studies. The great challenge for inclusive education is to unlearn the rejection of diversity and instead learn to appreciate it so as to build new educational alternatives from the perspective of intercultural attitudes and behaviours (Armstrong et al. 2011).

Orientation Gap: What is the difference between the group's idealized level of development of the IC and their actual level?

There is a significant difference of 26.69 points between the group's Perceived Orientation and its actual Developmental Orientation, the former higher than the latter. This means that the group greatly overestimated their level of IC. In fact, they were alarmed at the results and tried to find some sort of justification, even if a sarcastic one:

T5: So, that bad, eh?

T1: [...] is this the first time you do this test here? [...] perhaps if you were to do it at the car company, they wouldn't have those cultural differences [...] I mean, the people in those companies are really "open-minded", I would love to compare the results and talk about it [...]

Their incredulity is not coincidental if we take into account that intercultural competence, as stated by Bennett (1993) and Byram (1997), does not follow a natural course of development but rather requires intentional formative actions. This confirms the deficit of cultural sensitivity, which is probably linked to the group's insufficient intercultural training and life experiences, issues that have been already highlighted by previous studies (Alegre 2005; Garreta 2006).

Trailing Orientation: a discontinuation in the development of IC in the group of teachers

The IDI results indicate the level of resolution the group has achieved with regards to possible Trailing Orientations. In this regard, the Trailing Orientation that has yet to be resolved by the group of teachers is Polarization, in its Reversal version (Figure 4). That is to say, there are certain moments, topics and situations in which the group considers cultural differences in terms of “us and them”, with an overly critical stance on their own cultural values and practices and an acritical stance towards other values and cultural practices (Bennet, 2004).

When it arises, this orientation tends to shift the group away from the Developmental Orientation, as it is an emergent previous tendency that may be used to assign meaning to cultural differences, instead of the orientation which predominantly characterizes the group. Through speech analysis certain elements of Polarization can be observed, as we shall see later on; however, although Reversal comes up in the results, there are no indications of it in the discussion.

In the discussion about conflicts between cultures, the following statement was made, where Polarization (“us and them” worldview) was explicit, thus confirming the results of the level of development of the intercultural competence.

M3: For them, integration means having to sacrifice. For them, getting to be part of the group means a sacrifice. For us, accepting them is a huge sacrifice.

To explain these results, it is worth referring to the contact theory posited by Alegre (2005), given that the discontinuities between the levels of intercultural sensitivity (Developmental Orientation and Trailing Orientation) respond to the potentially increasing degree of relational experiences with students and families of diverse cultural origins the teachers are dealing with.

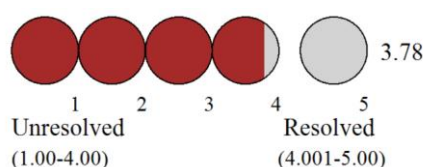


Figure 4. Trailing orientation: polarization (reversal)

This, therefore, fosters beliefs and promotes more or less erroneous, reductionist and discriminatory practices, which is understandable if we consider the formative deficiencies previously mentioned. As previously noted (Garreta 2006), the increase in cultural diversity in the classroom represents adding to the load that the teaching staff already have to bear.

Cultural Disconnection: teachers' distance from their culture of origin

The high score for this indicator (Figure 5) shows that the group did not experience any kind of disengagement from their primary cultural group, which translates into a strong sense of attachment to their own culture, in this case Catalan culture.

On the one hand, this indicates that it is a highly valued, strong culture, which provides security, and this promotes the potential development of intercultural competence over the basis of their cultural self-awareness (Deardorff 2006). But on the other hand, this attachment to their own culture may also be a risk factor, as it may foster a tendency to ostracisation, ethnocentrism and assimilation. As has been observed with previous results, the group's Developmental Orientation (Minimization) and Trailing Orientation (Polarisation) are complemented by discursive and attitudinal nuances that reflect an assimilationist tendency in some teachers:

T3: I am the foreign language teacher [...] I already have to teach English culture and then to top it all, I have to teach them another one? [...] but you also have to work with our own culture, Catalan culture, because we may not realize it, but we do work with it, you are not aware and you then [...]

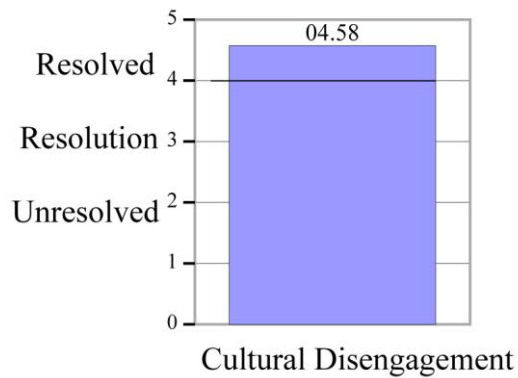


Figure 5. Cultural disengagement: Resolved

These views were also apparent in a situation we consider worth relating as further evidence. It is about the case of a Moroccan young girl who came to school wearing the Islamic veil (hijab) for the first time:

T6: For the first time ever, this young girl came to class today wearing one of those veils, “the veil”, and of course, I don’t know [...] I don’t know if they are allowed [...] I went to the Head Master and asked what I should do [...] and we were both left wondering, we both thought about it and didn’t really know. Because, of course, adapting ¿is it them to us or us to them? [...] I went to the Head Master, because of course, I am a nobody, I don’t know, and before I decided on any action, I took the girl with me [...] we looked at guidelines and stuff like that [...] the girl was crying [...]

T1: Those parents didn’t come here to tell us [...] They just put it there right in front of you and here you go, deal with it! It’s an imposition!

T6: But we always have guidelines, otherwise everyone would do whatever they wish. You don’t allow baseball caps.

T3: Baseball caps, we ask them to take their caps off. Firstly, because gentlemen should take them off in public places. In the West, they take them off [...] in Europe, gentlemen take their hats off before the ladies and in public places that is the norm we have in our culture. So you don’t go out with a hat or a hood because you would be

hiding your identity and in our culture that is not good manners. That is the same principle.

T6: [...] of course, if there is a ribbon with a bow on the side, you don't ask them to take them off.

T5: You can wear a ribbon but not a veil, where is the limit?

T6: [...] I understand that there has to be a common stance for everyone [...] we have been talking about, she took the veil off and we told her that when she left school that was fine, no problem, but that at school she could not wear a veil [...] public school here, it's about trying to 'adapt' to society here, to reality here, which is what we told the girl, and once they go out of school, they can wear whatever they like [...] but at school I cannot see it, and the issue is deciding 'no to veils'. Why? Because it is a public school with guidelines [...]

Such statements reflect an ethnocentric conception that does not consider cultural differences, but the adoption of cultural models of the majority group. This confirms the persistence of an educational model which is far removed from the interculturalism that certain policies and speeches are trying to promote (Gay 2002; Garreta 2004). As Armstrong et al. (2011) note that inclusion becomes a process of 'managing' many different individuals and groups who are perceived as 'problems' (32). Instead, an apparent model of inclusion is being perpetuated, which seeks integration into the dominant culture; in other words, the imposition of the majority cultural model on the culturally diverse minority. This way of acting will eventually turn into a boomerang effect, as the school is bound to live with diversity due to the context in which it is located. Ultimately, as Aguado et al. (2003) argue, meeting this reality incidentally seems inevitable, and it is usually experienced through conflicts rather than seen as an opportunity for learning and mutual enrichment.

Conclusions

Firstly, our results indicate that the group of teachers, who participated in the study, considerably overestimated their level of IC. Far from the ideal level of Acceptance they consider to be at, their real level of development of this competence falls within Minimisation, with the emergence of a latent Polarisation. In other words, instead of recognising and valuing patterns of cultural difference in their own culture and those of the others—in terms of values, perceptions and behaviour—the group mainly tends to highlight similarities in all cultures, which can mask significant cultural differences.

Moreover, at certain times, with certain issues or situations, they consider cultural differences in terms of "us and them" with an overly critical view of their own values and cultural practices (Catalan culture), and an uncritical view of the values and cultural practices of others (in this case, children and their families coming mainly from North Africa and the Maghreb). Similarly, an ethnocentric discourse is observed which reflects the persistence of an assimilationist conception of education which has yet to be banished, despite inclusive policies for managing cultural diversity being promoted at the administrative level. We are talking about the prevalence of educational practices that prioritise and promote the adaptation to the majority culture and official language (Catalan in this case). This is due, perhaps, to insufficient teacher training on intercultural matters and the challenge posed by changing attitudes entrenched in deep patterns of cognition (Garreta 2004, 2006).

Furthermore, there is a recurrent tendency, which is also reductionist and compensatory in nature, to see intercultural education linked only to the presence of culturally diverse students; when in fact the actions in this regard should be directed to all students as a whole, consistent with the socialisation and inclusive functions inherent to schools.

This tendency puts in evidence not only the negative consequences of an educational model that denies diversity and minimises cultural differences, but also the deficient training in intercultural matters evident in teachers, and consequently in students, as well as the subsequent low level of development of the IC. It is therefore very important to identify the real factors affecting the development of the IC, and especially to find out what role intercultural sensitivity and the experience of diversity play in this matter.

It appears that, in the case we are presenting, the teachers in our study became interested in cultural diversity after considering their potentially controversial and problematic educational context. This reaction could be interpreted as the awakening of key sensitivity for the development of IC. In fact, discussing it triggered some cognitive and affective mechanisms that could potentially lead to action. The following commentary reflects this:

T5: [...] At first, I was struggling a bit, I didn't really understand this course and I struggled quite a lot on the first two days and now I am very glad I took part, I really enjoyed it, and well, you've opened something in me and I am very grateful, I am very happy I came, with the group and I've enjoyed [...] there are so many ideas, so many.

Reflecting on and scrutinising daily practice contribute to discover assumptions that may guide our actions in specific situations or experiences, to proactively address similar situations and increase our cultural self-awareness of differences (Deardorff 2006). In this sense, some variables were identified in teachers' educational actions linking intercultural sensitivity with more or less exposure to cultural diversity at school. In particular, we refer to the school's flexibility and strategic openness towards families and community, as well as a leadership that promotes innovation and teacher collaboration and cooperation.

The educational experience with cultural diversity, in the context of interactions with foreign origin students and families, appeared to be a factor affecting teachers' intercultural sensitivity and, apparently, their educational practices' orientation through more or less inclusive and intercultural paths. However, it is difficult for teachers to accept the development of IC as a requirement if an ethnocentric conception prevails.

Lyons (1990) stresses that co-constructing meaning and new knowledge is the function of the joint interactions of the participants' understandings. Consequently, teacher training aimed at developing intercultural competence develops as a social process in which meanings are made through dialogue between the participants' ways of knowing. This is, ultimately, the main contribution the present study makes.

Limitations and prospects

To begin with, there are limitations inherent to the small-scale methodological approach, as the results refer to a single school. In this regard, it would be worth replicating this research in schools with similar characteristics to the one presented. Similarly, it would be interesting to contrast our findings with those from other settings with greater experience in managing cultural differences from an ethno-relativist perspective. At the instrumental level, while the IDI offers guarantees of reliability and validity in assessing the development of IC, the interpretation of the results offered is prone to some bias due to the transfer of their statements and concepts if we do not consider the particularities of the context where administered (Perry and Southwell 2011).

In general terms, the results of this study shed some light on issues associated with the development of IC in teachers, which allows a better understanding of their educational practices in a culturally diverse and complex context, as is the case of

Catalonia. However, the findings are not definitive; on the contrary, they open new questions that highlight the need to continue research in this area.

We need to improve our understanding of the myriad ways that IC can be developed. What works best, for whom and under what conditions, and why? Any educational improvement relies to a certain extent on the teachers' professional development and cultural sensitivity, even if it is only through raising awareness of their own stances. Thus, our intention with this paper was not to echo moralistic discourses, but to make a reflective contribution to the debate around the intercultural issue in education and the agents in charge of bringing it into action.

As society evolves, so does what is expected, required and demanded from schools and teachers. A school is no longer an institution only devoted to learning — an ever less important function —; it is also an important space for socialisation, for the development of key competencies in adapting to an ever-changing cultural context. After all, a school is the only social institution that the whole population experiences for a long and continued period of their lives. Therefore, there is a great need for effective and culturally sensitive teachers.

Beyond admitted limitations of this study, our practice based reflective proposal highlights obstacles and potentialities for managing cultural diversity in the classroom. Our approach generates a favorable predisposition to changing attitudes around intercultural relations, increasing self-awareness of cultural differences and its educational management. At the same time, this study can become a starting point for intervention and individual or group advising, aimed at the development of IC in teachers.

Notes

1. For more information, see Intercultural Competence Using the IDI at <https://idiinventory.com/products/the-intercultural-development-inventory-idi/>
2. T:Teacher.
3. Mythological character relating to a Christmas tradition in Catalonia and Aragon.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Ibis Marlene Alvarez Valdivia, PhD, is a Senior Lecturer at the Department for Developmental and Educational Psychology, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. Her research interests focused on cultural aspects of learning and psychological development.

Iosbel González Montoto, Diplôme Européen d'Etudes Avancées en Psychologie Sociale (Université de Genève). Currently, he is a doctoral student at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. His research interests focused on preparing teachers for inclusive classrooms.

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