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Intercultural communication and competence: practices at the education level

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Intercultural Communication

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION REFERS TO COMMUNICATION SITUATIONS that occur in the context of a global exchange of messages and information by carriers of different cultures. Such carriers of different cultures can be individuals, ethnic groups, organizations, or even countries. In particular, and based on a more general definition of communication, intercultural communication can be defined as the exchange of messages between people with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, for mutual understanding, based on the negotiation of the meanings that define and constitute the content of the communication.

In practice, intercultural communication takes place in two main areas, with the first being the transfer of printed, oral, and digital culture products from one language code system to another. The second area includes cases of intercultural encounters and exchanges arising from mobility at the international level (e.g., in the fields of international entrepreneurship, educational exchanges, international governance, etc.), within the context of national societies, mainly due to migration flows, international tourism flows or the existence of historical minority groups (e.g., multiculturalism in the public sphere, in the workplace, in the tourism industry, in education, in health services etc.).

Intercultural communication is a dynamic and complex process as it is influenced by a number of factors related (a) to the dynamics and characteristics of international political, economic, and cultural relations (e.g.,

international entrepreneurship and trade, educational exchanges, international governance, etc.) and (b) with the characteristics of the implemented national policies for managing multiculturalism and the issues of social and educational integration of different minority and immigrant groups and (c) with the special features of the people who communicate and interact (perceptions of the “other”, experiences, political beliefs, etc.).

The challenges that can arise in intercultural communication are mainly related to differences between the communicators in terms of how they understand the roles or in terms of how they understand the values and rules according to which they act. According to Auerneheimer (2010), these barriers should not be interpreted only about individual characteristics of the communicators but also about the characteristics of the context in which communication takes place. In the case of intercultural communication, the different cultural backgrounds of the communicators, which are expressed during the communication in the form of different expectations and the degree of knowledge of the extralinguistic dimension, i.e., the appropriate language type for the given communication occasion are the main challenges cited. In the same direction and non-verbal communication presupposes the knowledge of the cultural context of the other. The importance and value of specific daily practices, movements, gestures vary depending on the cultural context in which they take place.

Consequently, Auernheimer (2010, 45-56) suggests that (a) the asymmetries in social power and collective experiences, (b) the pictures of the ‘foreigner’ and the ‘other’ and (c) the various cultural patterns are the main issues to be considered for the interpretation of any challenges in intercultural communication, in addition to the biographical characteristics of the participants.

Based on the theory of Auernheimer (2010), we can argue that the communicative state of an intercultural contact contains chances for intercultural exchange and learning to the extent that uncertainties and insecurities probably caused by the historically constructed and currently reproduced images of the “other”, foreign and by the nature of communication, which, whether intercultural or monocultural, is for the participants, in any case, a demanding process of communication. Therefore, for an intercultural meeting to be characterized as successful, there must be respect among the participants of communication, a reflection on the influence of cultural background on personal interpretive patterns, sensitivity to differences in social power between groups and attitudes that

demonstrate interest, motivation, and flexibility. The above could be named as individual abilities / competences to support intercultural communication.

Intercultural Competence

As mentioned previously it is evident that intercultural competence is a prerequisite for the success of intercultural communication. Empirical data from the fields of tourism, international relations, international entrepreneurship and higher education (i.e. Dimitrova & Chakarova, 2015; Chu, Martin & Park, 2018; Jhaiyanuntana & Nomnian, 2020) confirm the importance and the role of intercultural competence in intercultural contacts, pointing out that knowledge of a foreign language, even if excellent, is not sufficient for a constructive and meaningful intercultural communication. The ability to understand the influences of the context in the way we try to communicate with the culturally "different" is important.

In the relevant literature, the concept of intercultural competence is not defined in a unified and commonly accepted way. In an attempt to illustrate common areas as well as different points, some definitions of intercultural competence are presented below.

According to Bolten (2001: 86-87), intercultural competence is a social ability with which the individual can learn about "other" cultures, to apply this knowledge and skills in unknown situations, to understand cultural differences, and finally, to respect and recognize all other cultures using any given language (Foncha & Sivasubramaniam, 2014: 376). In other words, it is the "means" of bridging the gap between the "himself" and the "foreigner" thus satisfying the need to understand "cultural differences" (Luchtenberg, 1999). Gudykunst (2003) argues in the same direction: intercultural competence is a capacity for conscious communication, which refers both to the need to acquire knowledge for others (e.g., knowledge of foreign languages) and to the need to build communication skills with more important ones of empathy (cognitive, emotional, and interactive), tolerance of ambiguity, communication adaptation and critical acceptance of different perceptions and behaviors. In other words, the full concept of intercultural competence refers both to the need to build skills related to the management of the cognitive content of the communication

and skills related to the creative overcoming of problems in relationships with the "other". These definitions reflect an "instrumental" approach to intercultural competence and understand cultural differences almost exclusively as differences between national cultures.

Straub et al. argue in the opposite direction (2010: 21-24), as they point out that the contents of intercultural competence are broader than the knowledge of "others", while elements of the individual's personality, such as fears, anxieties and desires influence the attitude of a subject towards the intercultural encounter, in other words, determine his readiness to turn an "accidental" intercultural contact into a process of intercultural learning. There is, therefore, a need for intercultural competence not to be limited to knowledge of "others", but also to include self-knowledge of our historically mediated relationships with "them".

Therefore, for the definition of intercultural competence as well as the determination of contents specific dimensions, we must consider the broader social conditions of intercultural encounters. It is pointed out that the "different" always meet within a formed framework of social conditions (e.g., dominant ideologies about immigration and immigrants, about diversity and equality), articulate speech, and interpret facts and situations through specific social positions (these are characterized by possibilities and limitations) and corresponding identities (majority or minority members). According to this approach, "cultural differences" cannot express differences of cultures that (pre) exist outside the action of the subjects or outside institutional practices. If we understand culture as a social act, then we must accept that cultural differences also express differences in access to social goods and social positions. Only if we consider the real social conditions of "meeting" of the groups can we avoid the risk of strengthening existing dividing lines and discrimination (Auernheimer, 2010; Govaris, 2006; Leiprecht, 2006).

Given the above, the contents of the dimensions of intercultural competence can be specified with the cognitive, emotional and behavioral dimension (Leiprecht, 2006: 41). The cognitive dimension includes (a) the knowledge about the internal diversity of cultural groups, (b) the knowledge of "ethnicity" and "nation" construction processes, (c) the knowledge of the social significance and functions of stereotypes and prejudices and (d) the knowledge of the possible influences/ effects of language hierarchy. The emotional dimension incorporates (a) empathy for the experiences of stigmatization and exclusion of members of different cultural groups, (b) self-reflection about self-evident patterns of in-

terpretation and (c) self-reflection and critical attitude towards "self-evident" assumptions about our social position, our social and cultural identity. The behavioral dimension comprises of (a) the ability to act in a context of asymmetric relations of social power and economic inequalities, (b) the ability to act in the context of an intercultural encounter from the perspective of a culture of equal coexistence and (c) the ability to act based on respect for human rights and social justice.

Intercultural Training

The question of "how" to build intercultural competence is answered by intercultural training programs. The beginnings of intercultural training programs, mainly in the form of non-formal forms of education, dating back to the 1950s and 1960s in the USA. The first intercultural training programs, according to Mazziota et al. (2016), were designed and implemented by companies that operated internationally and aimed to prepare executives and partners for their effective involvement abroad. Sub-cultural training activities were then extended to other social sectors. The concept plays an important role in the fields of economics, and international business, international relations, international educational exchanges, as Mahadevan and Mayer (2012) typically point out: "intercultural training has become a standard tool of the corporate human resource development » (i.e., in education).

The concept of intercultural training (intercultural training/interkulturelles training) is defined in various ways. In a related paper, Rathje (2010: 216-217) presents some broad definitions of the concept from the English and German-speaking space. She notes that in the English-speaking world the concept includes, according to Albert (1994) actions that aim "to facilitate effective interactions between culturally different persons". Intercultural practice is generally defined as a process of intercultural learning both at the level of staff development (e.g., of a business) as well as in the level of development of the personality of the individual. In the German-speaking world, as well, the relevant definitions are general and broad, as they define as the content of intercultural training programs "actions that aim to make a person capable to adapt constructively, and effectively to a cultural encounter condition". The concept of intercultural practice, according to the definition of IKUD, re-

fers to actions of staff development (e.g., institutions, agencies, companies) and personality, which aim at building appropriate knowledge as well as the formation of appropriate perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors that play an important role in interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds (see IKUD-Seminare).

Intercultural programs and methods

Gudykunst and Hammer (1983, found in Mazziota et al, 2016: 13, see also Ang-Stein 2015), have categorized intercultural training programs, which are implemented through a series of special methods, based on two criteria, the method (didactic or experiential) and the content (general or specific).

A. The programs with didactic-cognitive orientation aim almost exclusively at the dissemination of information about cultures and are differentiated into two sub-directions:

- Didactic culture general training: The main goal here is for the trainees to develop an awareness of the influence that culture has on the perceptions and actions of people (i.e., both on their own perceptions and actions) and those of people from different cultures. Through this process, the development of general intercultural awareness is sought.
- Didactic culture-specific training: In this case, training is required to prepare for a specific culture. This can be done through the following methods.

The main methods used in the implementation of the above guidelines are the following (see Ang-Stein, 2016: 79):

- Lectures/seminars on cultural anthropology, intercultural psychology, the theory of intercultural communication.
- Presentations (University Model): oral presentations by expert scientists aimed at transmitting historical, geographical, and political information, information on cultural differences (e.g., norms, values, beliefs), and economic living conditions.
- Case study: The focus is on complex insights into living conditions, to identify a problem for which participants must find appropriate and detailed interpretations and finally propose possible solutions.
- Culture assimilator: This is a special book describing events that usually characterize the meetings of members of one cultural group with

members of another cultural group. Concerning these events, the participants (Assimilators) are offered different and culturally defined possibilities of interpretation and behavior. The goal is for the Assimilator at the end of the process to be able to interpret these events in the same way that members of the other cultural group interpret them. This proves that the Assimilator can place himself in the position of a member of the other culture.

- Excursions: For example, information and materials are given to participants, such as city maps or public transport timetables. They are tasked with gathering information on a topic and then discussing and evaluating the results.
- Film screening: Used to illuminate aspects of life in foreign cultures. Through this process there are opportunities to discuss a series of topics that the narrative of each film highlights.

B. Programs that aim to gain experiences of interaction with different cultures. These programs are divided into two subgroups:

- General education with experiential culture: The goal of this group of programs is to raise awareness and prepare participants for intercultural communication, helping them to understand how their culture affects their perceptions, thinking and values.
- Experiential-culture specific trainings: This group of programs aims to inform the participants about a specific culture (e.g., historical background, cultural differences) to get acquainted and to be able to make the best language choice in an intercultural communication context.

The following methods are used in the context of these directions:

- Role-playing games: The most common form of role-playing in the field of intercultural competence development is the Cultural-Awareness-Training technique: This method aims to realize the influence of our culture on our perceptions, patterns of thinking, values and the strengthening of our consciousness for their relative character. Simulative role play is another technique (Rathje, 2010), which focuses on the re-enactment of a real situation. This situation may involve professional communication with one or more international partners or a conflict in the communication context between partners from different cultural backgrounds. In both cases the goal is to broaden the intercultural competence of the participants (Rathje, 2010: 220). This can be achieved through intermediate goals, such as “recognizing” and

changing patterns of behavior, developing empathy through role sharing, and empathizing with the experiences of others.

- Simulation (Rathje, 2010: 221): In this method, participants play in typical groups of actors in alternating scenes and situations. A key feature of their interaction is the element of tension and stress. In this context, the members undertake the task to try in many rounds of the game various possible solutions.
- Contrast Culture approach: According to this approach, the conscious perception of patterns of a foreign culture presupposes a specific contrast culture. The aim of this method is for the participants to build a stable system of cultural orientation, which will allow them to cope properly and effectively with the challenges of a different environment.
- Workshops: Are cultural awareness workshops that have a didactic character and aim to improve the ability of participants to communicate effectively with different cultural groups through their involvement. Specifically, they include topics such as historical issues aimed at highlighting injustices and wrong immigration experiences (Shepherd, 2019: 2), belief systems (cultural differences), but also issues of interaction approach, practices, that is, to achieve functional communication.

An important issue to overcome in intercultural training is that the conceptualization of culture is often static therefore stereotypes are reproduced. According to Mazziotta et al (2016), the evaluation of intercultural training is necessary as some methods that are applied may lead to undesirable, i.e., contrary to the desired results. These results mainly include the strengthening of stereotypes, prejudices, and stigmatization behaviors, as well as the creation of feelings of insecurity in contact with members of different cultural groups.

Several researchers focus on the fact of unwanted reproduction of prejudices and stereotypes in the context of applying methods of practicing intercultural competence. They question the adoption of a static concept of culture: both the culture of the people taking part in the training and the cultures of the "others" for whom they wish to build knowledge are presented as solid and homogeneous, thus promoting the misconception that the actions and choices of members of different cultural groups are determined by common cultural values and principles. According to this, what should be built as knowledge in intercultural training is the knowledge of "cultural differences" with one or another culture as well as

the "how" these intercultural differences affect the perceptions and practices of their members. This standardization of cultures based on their cultural differences from "our" culture inevitably leads to the reproduction of stereotypes as it does not consider the broader social processes that influence the perceptions and actions of members of a group or the fact that cultures are characterized by internal differences and pluralism. Based on this critical approach, Auerneheimer (2010) evaluates the method of practicing intercultural competence Cultural Assimilator as deficient. From the point of view of this method, any communication problems in the context of an intercultural encounter are interpreted exclusively as problems arising from statically understood cultural differences that characterize the reference cultures of the participants. In this way, however, the cultures are not presented essentially, but the fact that the social conditions in which individuals live have a significant influence on the perceptions and actions of individuals is also obscured. Consequently, the understanding of the "other" presupposes not only knowledge of one's culture but also knowledge of the social conditions in which one thinks and acts.

Based on the above, a question arises regarding the concept of culture that should be considered in the context of intercultural communication training to reduce the risks of reproducing stereotypes and prejudices. This means that a concept and understanding must be sought that will not ignore its potential character, its relationship to social structures and relationships as well as the dynamic character between individual and culture. It must be borne in mind that individuals belong to more groups, which leads us to the conclusion that they belong to and interact with more than one cultural context. At this point, it is important to emphasize this dynamic relationship between the individual and the cultural context: individuals are influenced and influence culture at the same time. And this element urges us to deal critically and thoughtfully with any stereotypical expectations regarding the way of thinking and acting of people belonging to different cultures. Theories and proposals for intercultural communication based on the approach of cultural diversity move in this direction, an approach that defines cultural differences more broadly, leaving behind the dichotomous and essentialist perception of differences as differences between national cultures. From the perspective of the diversity approach (see Auernheimer 2010, 39) the focus is on differences that have to do with work style, learning style, role models, values as well as differences between gender, age, social class, etc. The critique

goes so far as to reject the very notion of culture, favoring the approach of cultural identity.

Considering the criticism of intercultural training methods that, instead of weakening, reinforce ethnic stereotypes and prejudices and wanting to avoid the pitfalls of using a static concept of culture, Oslands & Birds (2000) developed the "Cultural Sensemaking" method in response. According to her, during the implementation process of training, the trainer should:

- Help participants understand the complexity of their culture
- Give them cultural dimensions and values, as well as sophisticated stereotypes as key tools
- To develop the skills of participants in cultural observation and behavior
- Ask them to do an in-depth study of a culture
- Focus on learning appropriate behavior in other cultures and developing cultural hypotheses and explanations for paradoxical behavior (Oslands & Birds, 2000: 74).

In the same direction Stephan and Stephan (2013) argue that the effective design of intercultural programs should include the following. First, programmers need to be well acquainted with the cultures and groups involved, the elements of these cultures, their histories, and the history of the relationships between these cultures. Another key to ensuring success is setting specific program-related goals. For example, setting goals such as promoting immigrant-resident relationships, resolving conflicts, increasing empathy, reducing inter-group stress, reducing stereotypes and prejudices, and improving nonverbal communication skills contribute to the effectiveness of an intercultural program. On the contrary, research data show that the formulation of general goals of broader concepts, such as the improvement of intercultural relations or the development of skills, etc. do not have the expected results, due to the difficulty of their general formulation. In the same direction, theories of culture and cultural change can contribute to the successful design of a program, if related to its goals, while the focus on psychological and communication processes can lead to the results we want from intercultural education and training programs. In particular, the activation of cognitive processes such as analytical thinking, self-regulation, categorization of group boundaries or procedures to address prejudice, but also emotional processes such as empathy, positive intercultural emotions, and reduction of stress between

groups, skills Listening, transparency in the views of others, displaying culturally appropriate non-verbal behaviors, are steps that help to achieve the individual goals. Therefore, another factor to consider is the appropriate techniques and exercises that will frame the goals and processes chosen by the designers. At this point, it should be emphasized that their selection should include factors such as the context, conditions, and characteristics of the participants for the technique to perform as well as possible. Finally, the evaluation of the program with a focus on its feedback function (evaluation of result and procedures) is one of the most important steps in designing a successful intercultural education and training program.

Hass (2020, pp. 280-285), synthesizes the proposals that have emerged from the critique of the methods of intercultural training, in the form of the following instructions for the design and implementation of an intercultural training:

- Adoption of an open and dynamic concept of culture
- Specialization of the frameworks of intercultural meeting and communication to which the training refers (the more specialized the meeting and communication frameworks are, the less there is a need to simplify the complexity of the meeting conditions)
- Reflection on how culture affects people's perceptions and actions
- Highlighting the diversity of the relationships between the individual and the culture of the affiliation group, i.e., the possible different ways of connecting the members of a group, at the level of their daily life, with the common culture
- Open confrontation with generalizations and evaluations (collective reflection in the group of trainees on patterns of perception of the "foreigner" and in the evaluations of the charges)
- Adoption of the constructivist concept of learning (the instructor does not teach "objective" knowledge to "strangers", which would certainly lead to the reproduction of stereotypes, but creates a learning environment in which learners process their cultural patterns of perception and interpretation of the world as social constructions)
- Priority over experience over theoretical knowledge of culture (personal narratives may be less charged with stereotypes provided narrators are aware of the subjectivity and particular perspective that characterize their personal experiences)
- From the dimension of culture to the dimension of perception (the focus is not on the "other" culture but on the way, we perceive the diver-

sity of the "other" culture)

- Culture and cultural differences (topic of "how" learners understand the meaning of culture and cultural differences)
- Building intercultural capacity through the strengthening of reflection and negotiation skills.

Later, Bolten (2016, 81-86) proposed a specific orientation framework for setting intercultural trainings goals, such as multivalency, relationality, perspective reflexivity and sustainability to avoid the limitations, we have highlighted above..

Intercultural communication at education level

The educational system is a basic socializing institution, and for this reason, it is called to play an important role in the democratic management of cultural pluralism. In particular, the school is one of the main recipients of the request to cultivate intercultural communication skills in all students. As intercultural communication ability is a pre-eminent ability to be critical of processes that hinder the demands of a constructive intercultural encounter, such as e.g., ethnic stereotypes and prejudices, the question arises of "how" to cultivate this ability in the context of school teaching and learning. As we have already mentioned, the most important obstacles to the successful outcome of an intercultural encounter are the existing asymmetries in terms of the social power of the groups (asymmetries in terms of the power associated with the positions from which the persons of an intercultural encounter interact, e.g., social status, economic inequalities, inequalities before the law) as well as the negatively charged images of the other (Auernheimer, 2010). A pedagogical and educational possibility to face and overcome these limitations in the direction of building intercultural competence is theoretically offered by Lipman's (2003) proposal for the transformation of the classroom into an exploratory community. We will refer to key points of this proposal to highlight its value and importance for intercultural learning and for building intercultural competence, as presented earlier from a critical point of view.

Lipman (2003) suggests transforming the classroom into an exploratory community in which students using dialogue will have opportunities to

think logically together (such as generating and exchanging ideas, developing and testing hypotheses, clarifying concepts and processes) while learning to enjoy their mental interdependence. The possibilities of a subjectively framed reflection of individual positions and arguments are cited by Lipman (*ibid.*) as one of the most important advantages of operating a classroom in the form of an exploratory community where students can search for processes to build self-knowledge with others. The classroom as a community of inquiry has the characteristics of a democratic dialogue community, in which everyone participates equally, developing dialogue-like solidarity with each other, as they jointly seek arguments to critically substantiate criteria, arguments, rules and to reach a temporary consensus around a specific issue (Weber, 2013).

It is of particular interest to us that in Lipman's (2003) proposal for the functioning of the classroom as a learning community, a central conception of the student plays a central role, according to which s/he functions not only as a recipient and carrier of cultural values but also as a potential producer of culture (this is the dynamic relationship between an individual and a culture mentioned above). From this point of view, school learning is not a tool-like reproductive process of culture, a process that fixes the child in the role of the passive recipient of cultural rules. Learning is understood as a pedagogical concern for the empowerment of the child's cultural potential: Participating in a community of exploration means participating in culture by giving meaning to (common) cultural symbols so that they express both my "own" experiences and my "own" interests, mainly in the sense of enriching the communicative search for forms of social coexistence, which bind us around common issues, while ensuring, at the same time, to all, possibilities of a particular individual development (Govaris, 2013). It turns out that the operation of such a community is contrary to the practices of the dominant version of intercultural learning, which wants students to communicate almost exclusively as representatives of cultural groups, thus trapping them in restrictive ethnic identities.

The exploratory community creates conditions for the acquisition of experiences of collective reflection, mutual recognition, and solidarity, enhancing (a) evaluation skills, (b) creativity skills and (c) the loving dimension of thought. Two other characteristics are valuable for our discussion: (a) because the investigative community relies heavily on self-organization, a sense of solidarity between the participants plays a central role (Weber, 2013) and (b) the investigative community is supported and

dependent on the mutual understanding of the participants as equal, which it promotes. Consequently, any differences between them have the value of different knowledge resources, which can be used for the good of the community (Glaser, 2007).

From an intercultural point of view, the development of critical thinking, as defined by Lipman, is of particular importance as it can support the learning objective of reflecting the cultural and social conditions of "our perception" and "our action", i.e., the confrontation with all the self-evident representations of the world and the internalized values that underpin social identity. From this point of view, the ability to critically analyze reality creates conditions for the release of interacting subjects from the limitations of their culturally defined roles, as well as opportunities for their creative redefinition or the development of new ones. Furthermore, in the context of the exploratory community, it is possible to overcome a restrictive recognition of the "other" which focuses exclusively on the origin (past) and not on the biographical becoming of the difference (present and future) of the "other" (see Govaris & Kaldi, 2017).

Thoughtful thinking is defined as thinking with a double meaning where one thinks the object of her/his thoughts as personal and on the other hand s/he is concerned her/his way of thinking. For the latter, the importance of the investigative community is emphasized, in terms of seeking to strengthen interpersonal relationships. The premise is that attitudes of acceptance of pluralism and empathy as well as equal participation are strengthened within the community. Experiences and attitudes are strengthened in each case, which can support coexistence in a democratic and pluralistic society.

The above has been confirmed in relevant research. It has been found that participation in a community of inquiry contributes to the transformation of the egocentric way of thinking towards the adoption of an intersubjective view of the evaluation of things (Weber, 2013: 124). It seems, then, that such a framework of interactive learning enhances awareness and sensitivity to different interpretations of the world and contributes to building an ethos of recognizing diversity (Nießeler, 2007). At this point, it is understood that the exploratory community is at the core of intercultural learning as it experiences experientially motivates participants in a process of critical distancing from self-evident perspectives, in a process of alternating perspectives. It is worth remembering that the didactic principle of "change of perspective" is also a basic prin-

ciple of intercultural teaching. The intercultural significance of the exploratory community lies mainly in its potential, as an environment and as a practice of interactive search, to acquire experiences of reflection through the search for alternative perspectives. The pursuit of learning experiences of visual change is a predominantly intercultural learning pursuit as Duncker (2005) points out, it is characterized by the transcendence of the egocentrically limited view of things and, therefore, its transcendence leads to the opening of new perspectives. In the environment of the exploratory community, it becomes possible for students to observe their arguments and their self-evident perceptions from a relative distance. "A distanced contemplation of the world requires above all the overcoming of the simplistic and egocentrically limited gaze through a constant change of perspectives but mainly the observation of the world with" other eyes " that is, those of empathy" (ibid.).

The following principles of intercultural teaching and learning can play a supporting role in the practical implementation of the proposal to transform the classroom into a kind of intercultural exploration community. These principles constitute a proposal for the specialization of the general principles of organization of intercultural training from the critical point of view developed in the previous sections (Govaris, 2019):

- The principle of indirect reference to cultural differences. According to this principle (see Diehm & Radtke, 1999), a fundamental condition for reference to cultural differences in the formation of a learning environment at the center of which are issues that are within the horizon of the learning interests and experiences of all students. The formation of a student-centered learning environment contains a strong motivation potential for the participation and interaction of all students, as specific individuals who are invited to submit their views, perspectives, interpretations, and knowledge. In such an environment of dense communication and creative interaction, the universal (e.g., in the form of a common reflection, a common challenge) can coexist, in a relationship of positive intensity, with the different.
- The principle of recognizing experienced cultural differences. According to this principle, schoolgirls need to present and talk about cultural differences, which are personal experiences and therefore elements of their identity. These differences alone are pedagogically appropriate to talk to us, as they know them well and can explain them to us, in the context of a learning environment as outlined above. This principle is based on the theoretical position (Honneth,

2013) on the role played by the experiences of recognition, in the form of the social appreciation of our "particular knowledge", for the construction of an integral individual identity. In the example of the text, the parents' interest in telling the myth that the immigrant parent knows, functions as an essential source of gaining an experience of social appreciation.

- The didactic principle of "multiple optics" (multifaceted view). This principle is closely linked to the two previous principles as it accepts and emphasizes the importance of each particular and personally meaning-charged perspective for building a universal type of knowledge in the context of intercultural encounters at school.

Given the above, we believe that the transformation of the classroom into an exploratory community can help build the key elements that make up intercultural competence based on a dynamic understanding of culture, cultural differences, the relationship between individual and culture, and does not overlook the reality of asymmetric social relations in a multicultural society. These data can be described in more detail as follows (Auerheimer, 2010; Govaris, 2004; Govaris, 2005; Leiprecht, 2006):

1. *Empathy*: The respective categories of discrimination, identification, and separation of "foreigners" are not arbitrary, are not occasionally invented by the subjects themselves, but are the result of specific historical developments and social processes. Consequently, empathy can be defined as the ability to critically confront the social processes that lead to the stigmatization of immigrants and as the ability to recognize "others" not as strangers but as specific persons (Govaris, 2004). The "other" must be understood as a person acting in a specific context of possibilities and limitations that characterize his social living conditions. To the extent that the social conditions of action of the "other" are recognized as conditions related to "my" way of life, communication goes beyond the narrow confines of personal contact and is an attempt to reflect on the wider social relationships that affect the communication encounter and interaction (ibid.).

2. *Knowledge*: Knowledge about heterogeneity within cultural groups, knowledge about the processes of the social construction of categories, such as "ethnicity", "race", knowledge about the social functionality of stereotypes and prejudices. This knowledge can contribute to the deconstruction of the stereotypical image of absolute homogeneity of our group

and consequently to the weakening of perceptions that wants the social space to be composed of completely distinct and solid groups. They can further support efforts to critically approach and analyze the role of collective identities as regulatory and value systems in meeting and communicating with "others".

3. *Values*: Values such as those of human rights, social justice, and respect for the basic rules of democracy, the acceptance of the "different". Awareness of these values and their use as tools for diagnosing the social pathologies that characterize the relationship between the majority and minority groups can help students understand the importance of basic forms of recognition, such as e.g., legal relations and solidarity relations, to maintain the internal cohesion of the subjects (Govaris, 2004; Honneth, 1992).

4. *Communicative ability*: Communicative ability allows individuals to communicate interpretively, that is, to discuss and communicate about problems arising from interpretations of cultural symbols and to analyze the general cultural and social conditions for conducting dialogues. In intercultural encounters, communication skills allow subjects to reflect on the conditions of communication, as they have been shaped through their socialization conditions, thus realizing both their own position and the position of others and to attempt on this basis the solving any comprehension problems (Eppenstein & Kiesel, 2008). We would argue that interpretive ability presupposes and expresses the ability to empathize. In this sense, at the level of intercultural encounter, the interpretive capacity is the basis for the creation of relations of recognition in the form of solidarity, as it creates the conditions for the social appreciation of the "other" and consequently the basis for common identities.

Practices in education for intercultural competence and communication

Education is another field where intercultural communication is encountered and developed. Mobility in the context of transnational exchange programs at the level of both pupils and students is an important pedagogical tool for the development of skills necessary for the modern multicultural society. In other words, mobility and staying in another country is not just practicing a foreign language and learning about other

cultures, but the ability for individuals to experience intercultural experiences, appreciating cultural differences, and approaching their own culture in the context of others. In this context, they can create interpersonal relationships, gain intercultural knowledge and sensitivity, and awareness on issues. However, the benefits of a mobility period depend to a large extent on the quality of the practices (Council of Europe Publishing, 2012).

Higher education institutions are undoubtedly spaces that are characterized by diversity with communication being a critical tool for academic benefits, but also the development of intercultural competence of students. In fact, transnational exchange programs are an effective practice that promotes the development of intercultural competence and therefore communication. However, they do not in themselves imply the development of intercultural competence. In particular, these exchange and collaboration programs provide the opportunity for intercultural experiences, both at the academic level by exploring perceptions and practices related to learning and in particular in the way it is exercised, such as tasks and forms of work, subject relationships (teacher-students) and ways of communicating with each other. At the same time, however, there is the possibility for intercultural experiences at the individual level to develop intercultural competence by interacting with people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, as a means of capturing the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for successful communication in such multilingual and multicultural conditions. Staying in the host country and living communication with its citizens, as well as involvement in social and sporting events in the wider context of the university are characterized by multilingualism and contribute to the development of intercultural competence of individuals through identity negotiation (Foncha & Sivasubramiam, 2014). Even group work in the context of university courses is a good practice, as it gives the feeling of belonging to the subjects of communication, which in turn motivates them to share and exchange cultural perspectives together (Lee, 2011). Experiential activities that require the deposit of personal resources and experiences also contribute to the same direction. At the same time, communication with host university structures, but also with informal networks of volunteers is one of the most popular and effective practices in the context of student mobility. In particular, these networks are formed by students who have participated in exchange programs aimed at assisting new students. Indicatively, some of their practices are the organization of social and sports events, but also

excursions and guided tours (historical, cultural), to get to know and socialize students who move both with each other and with other students. Thematic events and workshops on various topics of global interest are also organized, to present a variety of perspectives and to launch a fruitful intercultural dialogue. Finally, the mediating role (buddy) that informally and voluntarily assumes each former participant in an exchange program upon his return to his country, is a practice that creates conditions for intercultural communication. In essence, the goal is to integrate the newcomer into the host city, helping in various areas, such as communication, searching for university structures, or information about the social life of the place.

Intercultural practice can also be characterized by pre-departure preparation programs for students hosting three universities and focusing on their language support to English, the common language and working language of most international institutions. This is logical, as in multilingual and multicultural spaces such as universities it is obvious that "no educational process is free from the influence of language, and so the role of language is central to any educational process", as well as in the preparation programs of students (Sivasubramaniam, 2004: 187). However, the emphasis on integrating the intercultural dimension into education for student mobility in a way that avoids essential and stereotypical perspectives, better prepares students for intercultural universities. This implies transcending national cultural characterizations, groupings, and identities in preparatory courses and focusing on the fluid, multiple, and complex nature of cultural groups and identities in such intercultural environments.

Mainly language preparation programs are also included in the mobility of students / three with a focus on the most common non-verbal communication elements (Council of Europe Publishing, 2012: 87). Specifically, students can become familiar with the language of the host country with the aim of effective learning, cultural communication, and a better understanding of the culture of the host country. In the same direction within the school where the mobile students are hosted / three practices that include their creative integration reduce the communication and cultural gap and create the conditions for intercultural encounter and communication. For example, joint actions and teamwork during the learning process contribute to team spirit and create feelings of security and acceptance in students, while allowing them to share their experiences and identity. However, intercultural learning and communication are not lim-

ited to the school learning environment and activities during an exchange. Living with a host family offers great opportunities for intercultural experiences. For example, differences in housing, food, lifestyle, leisure activities, family rules, and even misunderstandings and tensions can be part of the experience and should be used as a valuable resource for learning during the intercultural encounter. Another practice that enhances the conditions of intercultural communication is the safety manuals given to students before their departure (Council of Europe Publishing, 2012: 72), to prepare them properly for their stay. Specifically, these manuals cover basic information such as what to do when someone is lost, traffic and hiking rules, emergency numbers that can be used in the event of an accident, illness, theft for students to understand how to organize and operate basic structures of the country to be visited.

Finally, in the context of student/three mobility, there is also the mentoring practice. In essence, this is a role played by either a schoolteacher or an out-of-school teacher who is, however, responsible for addressing the emotional needs of visiting students. In other words, the mentor's task is to help the participant to integrate into the reception environment and to act supportively in case of difficulties, and to provide advice when needed.

Another case of intercultural communication that takes place in the field of education is the international school collaborations. This term refers to intercultural exchanges and other activities implemented in the educational context for students to get in touch and get to know partner countries and increase their understanding of their cultures, languages, stories, and especially their lives. there through collaboration programs. Primarily, schools can make a significant contribution to building feelings of solidarity through intercultural partnerships and exchanges. School collaborations should therefore be encouraged, as they contribute to improving the quality of the school, enhancing the teaching, and learning of foreign languages, and contributing to the social cohesion of European societies.

At this point, the most common practices of cooperation and consequently intercultural communication within the international school networks will be presented. Peer-to-peer e-mail communication is the first and easiest practice due to technology. With this practice, students have the opportunity to get in touch with peers from different parts of the world, to talk, thus eliminating possible suspensions in a foreign language. At the same time, it allows self-presentation, while the curiosity

and reflection that arises from the conversations about the way of life, the country, and the culture of the interlocutors contribute to the realization of images of other cultures, but also of their own. Joint work, as well as the free use of whatever language students wish beyond the commonly decided working language, are key features of school collaboration activities. Another practice is the "partnership diary", which includes all the educational activities, as well as personal thoughts and feelings of those involved. In the same vein, mutually developed questionnaires, as well as the "collaboration newsletter" or a "collaboration video" are often practices used by teachers and students to capture the evolution of the partnership. In many cases, these intercultural activities are enriched by exchange visits, with lifelong communication contributing significantly to the development of intercultural competence. In this context, the practice of involving students in the preparation of the educational program before the guest students arrive by planning joint actions, workshops and events activates them and helps them to identify linguistic and cultural elements of the guests. Finally, in this case of school networks, the students are the ones who take on the role of mediator either as representatives of the host families or as guides to the school or the city.

The example from the field of STEM

The term "STEM" is derived from the acronym (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) used in recent years in the educational community to express an interdisciplinary approach to Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics. In this field science is studied not as a separate subject of the curriculum, but as knowledge and skills related to mathematics and humanities (Yakman, 2008). The goal is through experiential learning for students to get in touch with the process of solving a problem, to release their imagination and creativity, while cultivating their skills and critical ability (Hunter-Doniger & Sydow, 2016). Research shows that science courses that incorporate culture (art, music, social perspectives) enrich students' learning experiences and improve the emotional aspects of learning (Bak & Kim, 2014; Kim & Chae, 2016; Chu et al., 2018: 1252).

In this field, intercultural communication and understanding is a factor that helps to arouse interest in the subject of target science, providing students with the opportunity to see the impact of scientific phenomena in an authentic context that is in a culture different from their own. STEM

programs have a special potential for promoting intercultural competence and some universities have set ambitious goals to provide international engineering students with experience (Parkinson, 2007). In particular, through communication and interaction with students from different cultures, they have the opportunity to identify common elements, such as that the same scientific idea (e.g. seasons, light propagation, ecosystem, etc.) that they observe in their environment, works in the same way in a different geographical and cultural environment. On the other hand, they may find that the same phenomenon or concept (e.g., because winter is not the same in both countries) occurs at different times of the year for groups of students/three other places. Therefore, this intercultural encounter, even remotely or even asynchronously through listening to cultural activities (e.g., times in other countries) is an authentic student experience that can increase motivation and interest in science (Chu et al., 2018). Another potential benefit of intercultural interaction is that the experience of meeting students from different cultures increases awareness of the characteristics of the other culture, creates shared knowledge and questions scientific topics from various viewpoints as groups of learning communities in STEM are formed by students from different cultural backgrounds.

More practically, an example from the STEM field with intercultural elements is this: students from different cultures begin to study a scientific concept by experiencing or observing a natural phenomenon in a sociocultural context. Then, through communication with the help of technology, they discover elements common or different, ponder and lead to a discussion of possible answers, having their previous knowledge as an adjunct, while the stage of experimenting to produce a substantiated answer follows. The integration of culture into the teaching and learning of science enables students to identify the role and relevance of science to well-known cultural events in their lives, something they cannot acquire through traditional teaching. More practically, through the intercultural activities that take place in this field, the capacity for "recognition of culture and development of respect" for other cultures is developed (Chu et al., 2018: 1260).

Concluding remarks

In the present article we attempted to develop an argument about the importance of intercultural competence as a prerequisite for effective intercultural communication which in turn highlights the main principles for having appropriate intercultural training programs.

Intercultural communication encompasses opportunities for intercultural exchange and learning to the extent that uncertainties and insecurities based on (a) the historically constructed and currently reproduced images of the "other", foreign and (b) on the nature of communication, which, whether intercultural or monocultural, is for the participants, in any case, a demanding process of communication, can be overcome. Intercultural communication is significant for an effective intercultural meeting and in particular there are certain abilities / competences that individuals need to have for a successful co-operative outcome during these intercultural meetings. Such competences can be (a) the respect among the participants of communication, (b) a reflection on the influence of cultural background on personal interpretive patterns, (c) sensitivity to differences in social power between groups and (d) attitudes that demonstrate interest, motivation, and flexibility. The above are the individual abilities / competences to support intercultural communication.

The three dimensions of intercultural competence (cognitive, emotional and behavioral) illustrate that "cultural differences" cannot express differences of cultures that (pre) exist outside the action of the subjects or outside institutional practices. These dimensions help us understand culture as a social act, in which we can accept that cultural differences also express differences in access to social goods and social positions. In order to avoid the risk of strengthening any existing dividing lines and discrimination we need to consider the social conditions of groups' meetings and see ourselves as part of this social act. Then, intercultural meetings can become producers of new cultural knowledge and patterns which transcend individual cultures and backgrounds. Developing exploratory communities within the frame of intercultural training programs can meet the objectives of such intercultural meetings in which critical thinking takes place amongst all members.

A variety of intercultural programs and methods was presented in this article in order to promote intercultural competence and communication amongst groups targeted in education. More specifically, problem-based learning and STEM programs are regarded as the most appropriate ap-

proaches to enhance intercultural competence in higher education, taking into consideration the possibilities across universities globally for student exchange programs. Communication and interaction with students from different cultures provides opportunities for exchanging ideas about scientific topics from different viewpoints and cultures, ending in creating shared knowledge and scientific outcomes. Thus, the gains are twofold, on one hand creating social actions by getting to know individuals and cultures and on the other hand producing scientific knowledge that can be universal.

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Abstract

The present article focuses on the main theoretical aspects of the intercultural communication and intercultural competence in order to propose appropriate practices to be promoted at the education level. Based on the theoretical framework of Auerneheimer about intercultural communication and the challenges than can create barriers to intercultural communication we argue about the prerequisite of intercultural competence in order to propose certain practices in different levels of education. The efforts to build intercultural competence can be met by intercultural training programs which should follow the principle of the understanding of the "other" that presupposes not only knowledge of one's culture but also knowledge of the social conditions in which one thinks and acts. Thus, the transformation of the classroom into an exploratory community can help build the key elements that make up intercultural competence based on a dynamic understanding of culture, cultural differences, the relationship between individual and culture, and does not overlook the reality of asymmetric social relations in a multicultural society.

Keywords: Intercultural communication, intercultural competence, intercultural training, higher Education

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