

Intercultural Skills: A Reflexive Approach to the Training of Sociocultural Workers¹

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Abstract

The paper aims at (re)introducing the reader to intercultural skills: a concept that has been at the heart of the work of the researchers at IRFAM in their study of the challenges that come with the process of integration for collectives and individuals. Using the figures of the socio-cultural workers and educators who have invaluable experience helping migrant descendants, this essay is a project report on challenges and frictions that emerge in situations marked by asymmetric cultural and social relations. Based on theoretical and empirical sources, the paper also offers a list of intercultural skills that provide those acting as mediators with some conceptual tools that would help them to decipher a specific situation and navigate between the institutional and their personal a priori religious, cultural, or ideological values (metacognition), and those of the individuals with a migrant background - but not only - they work with.

Keywords: Teachers; socio-cultural workers; intercultural skills; training

Introduction

Intercultural competences are psycho-sociological capacities allowing people (and not just those with an immigrant background) to cope, a more or less “effectively”, with complex situations generated by the multiplicity of cultural referents in unequal social, economic, and political contexts (Manço, 2002). The “effectiveness” in such situations would be the capacity to produce collective well-being, harmonious and rewarding communication and relationships with concerned groups and individuals. This “effectiveness” depends on the ability of the actors to take some distance with regards to certain elements of their “own culture”, to integrate “exogenous” elements and to build “intercultural identities” (Krewer, 1994).

The multiplicity of cultural referents in unequal contexts is a complex question for sociocultural workers in the broad sense, who are supposed to support their audiences. Educators and youth leaders, teachers and even caregivers are concerned by the tensions that can arise in this type of context. Therefore, the notion of intercultural skills can offer a theoretical framework for those who are dealing with these frictions that can arise from contacts of cultures in situations marked by asymmetric social relations.

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This article thus aims to (re)introduce the notion of *intercultural skills* as a framework to understand the work of education of sociocultural actors confronted with diversity. This paper begins by describing some of the challenges posed in the field of sociocultural professions. In particular, the case of street educators is developed in the context of cultural diversity. It follows with the proposal for a framework for reading tensions identified in these illustrations. Finally, the paper ends with a call for the development of socio-educational structures and actors, by positioning intercultural skills as an effective framework for action.

Some Challenges Related to Intercultural Contacts in the Sociocultural Field

Education actors in relation to individuals and communities with an immigrant background often face obstacles that concern the contextualization of the presence of migrants, which Pierre Bourdieu (1993) calls “effects of place” (*effets de lieu*). This notion implies that the tension arising from a specific place or space can lead to social discrimination or disqualification. To understand better such complex situations, the educators need a clarification of concepts: who is a *migrant*, who is a *refugee*, who is a *newcomer*...? However, the educators find it difficult to question migrants on their trajectory. They often question themselves: is this their role? Are they legitimate to ask this type of question? Is it not intrusive? What to do with the information collected? What to do with requests that go beyond the considered professional framework? The educator workers must nevertheless question and understand the political, economic and social context which governs the migration of their informants, often in precipitous conditions.

Understanding relevant cultural dimensions, on the one hand; and dealing with the effects of the balance of power in the host country, on the other hand, and two poles that generate a lot of tensions. However, not all findings can be attributed to cultural or religious aspects of individual or collective identities. Rather, “cultural” or “religious” questions reflect dimensions linked to transmission within immigrant families. This function is even more complex because the people are no longer in their original context and must adapt quickly to new realities. Indeed, faced with cultural diversity, the educator is sometimes helpless, even ignorant of the subtle variations. Yet, it is important for the educators to confront to these questions to access the issues and difficulties that arise here and now, because the recognition of the importance and validity of the migrants’ experience make them valuable allies for the analysis of the social context of both the country of origin and the host country. It will promote the gradual establishment of mutual trust, a form of active listening, and many other favourable conditions for diversity (Manço, 2016). Furthermore, in a context where the educator and the participant do not share the same cultural references, it is useful to consider this type of “adaptive” interventions, based on questioning and a progressive and negotiated analysis of the situation. According to Schurmans (2010), one of the main requirements for the caregiver is not to engage in their own desires, but to co-construct with the participants with a migration background the meaning that their feelings and actions take place in the installation context.

Street Educators in the Context of Cultural Diversity

Street educators are “visible” social workers that are often the object of political issues because they might be confronted with sensitive interactions: violence, incivility, vandalism, issues of addiction, radicalization, etc. Furthermore, “being on the field,” they might be perceived as being in an ambivalent situation: on one hand, they develop a privileged relationship with the



inhabitants of the neighborhoods, with whom they are cultural proximity. On the hand, they might be seen as a spoke-person of an authority (state, council, municipality, school...). Finally, the concrete definition of this work also depends on an educator's own sociocultural horizon and his or her personal history, which can in certain contexts felicitate their job, and in others, be an obstacle to it.

According to Ural Manço (2012), the security of public spaces, "fallen to the mercy of groups of young people" whose presence dissuades other citizens from circulating there, seems to be one of the main purposes of this profession in many municipalities in Belgian cities. Indeed, the *communes* (city councils) often sums up the missions of social workers as "being in the field", "meeting young people", "monitoring them", "fight against the feeling of insecurity".

In such a context, one can ask the following question: For whom or what does the street educator work? The profession of street educators is a contact profession. In their quotidian actions, they are necessarily dependent on their personality, their being.

However, the 25 years team coaching experience at IRFAM (Institut de Recherche Formation et Action sur les Migrations) shows that the opposite also exists: personal values can oppose the principles defended by the institution, managers, colleagues or partners. A way out of this type of blockage can be mediation, consultation, collective supervision, or equivalent methods: the principle is that, during meetings scheduled for this purpose, members of a team express themselves about the work, their visions, difficulties or facilities, discoveries or regrets. The question of values is also at the centre of this reflection.

The last scenario is well illustrated by some examples present research led at IRFAM (see Manco, 2012): several male street educators working in Brussels refuse to work with a female colleague, during the evening shift. This attitude responds to a certain logic (avoiding problems) and contributes to validating the idea that "the public does not want to see women work at night in the street". We can imagine, beyond the organizational difficulties that it can cause, the implicit submission imprinted by this attitude towards cultural values of part of the public, in this case the values related to equality between sexes. For example, one of the educators, who is Muslim, visited a mosque as part of his job, which also indicates visiting other local places of worship. In case of refusal, this could be seen as a problem of lack of neutrality and pluralism in the service rendered. *Neutrality* can be defined as the non-imposition of personal convictions and points of view of the social worker, within the framework of his or her professional activity. To ensure a neutral positioning and facilitate the voice of young people, the social street workers must be able to distinguish their personal values from professional values. Neutrality aims thus for a fair approach to all audiences. Individuals should not, of course, be neutral, but they should acknowledge that the public service should be in a spirit of openness and equal distance to all expressions of diversity. In the exercise of their function, social workers are required to apply this inclusive neutrality.

The collective acceptance of this neutrality within a team and the dialogue that leads to work-sharing can overcome many difficulties, without going through a series of obstacles that risk amplifying the conflict. To illustrate this statement, an example of good practice could be each member of the team can, for example, go to a place of worship or a different association. Of course, this type of task sharing should be discussed, justified, and decided on as a team, which gives the opportunity for everyone to define their preferences, limits, and skills.

Proposal for a Framework for Reading the Identified Tensions

To reduce the complexity of working with people with a migrant background, it would be useful to use a reflection grid which relies on three dimensions. First, an anthropological axis that relates to the material and ideal “relation to things”: in other words, our sociocultural representations, in the broad sense. The second axis is a sociological one: it concerns the understanding of the power relations between individuals and between groups. These first two axes have the function of making intelligible a person, a group or context. Finally, the last axis is a psychological one that is dedicated to the practice: the fact that the socio-educational professionals are supposed to face complex situations (understanding, analysing and deploying behaviours and social interactions).

The anthropological axis demonstrates that some diversity markers are immediately sensitive such as phenotypes, linguistic abilities or accents, visible signs (e.g. clothing and accessories), affiliations and beliefs, etc. Sometimes these visible signs could be misleading. It is therefore important to ask questions to the actors: are these differences effective? Are they claimed as important cultural markers? Why? To what extent? Since when? Are they obstacles to the relationship? This it is probably no coincidence that ostracizing reactions take on these perceivable dimensions as targets. The discussion then should lead to discuss the fact that there is another meaning it attributes to “things” that is often categorized as “hidden”, to which access is only possible through a relationship with the others: listening, dialogue, and debate. The hidden dimensions of being are like some “relationship to” (Manço, 2016).

The relation to the unknown, for example, is one of them. The unknown is often seen as distressing; an anxiety that pushes us to react, to set up defence mechanisms. In industrialized countries, but more precisely, among people who have benefited from education, “science” or “materialistic reason” can be a form of response to the unknown, although imperfect, it is still often considered satisfactory. Other groups can use “intangible rationality”, such as deities. There is no question here about classifying individuals in a binary way. In fact, we are all somewhere on this material to immaterial continuum, and our position can vary according to the times of our life, our experiences, our encounters that it may also depend on the domain considered. Finding the interlocutors’ position on their system of beliefs, combining with it and not trying to impose our own point of view, is a central element in helping or facilitating relationship with them, so as not to reinforce the denial or disqualification of the other.

The perception of time is another important cultural dimension (Hall, 1984). Beyond the impact (not always anecdotal) of respecting schedules, conceptions of time can be cyclical, looking to the past or the future, sometimes in connection with “past lives” or “parallel” ones. We are not necessarily talking about metaphysical entities. In fact, for some individuals who have recently arrived in a host country, the transition marks a before and an after. They live with two times in parallel: the one here and the one there. It is through a dialogue that one can realise these hidden relationships that shed light on a behavior that could be perceived as strange or surprising.

The second axis also questions relationships with the other. The social relationship is obviously also a changing representation through time, contexts and uses. It implies trying to answer the question: to what type of collective entity, the actor belongs to? To a nation, to religion, to the community, to the family...? These responses belong to the individualism/collectivism continuum (Hofstede, 2001). The collectivist perspective,



although more present in the rest of the world, still plays a major role in Western societies. Who should a daughter be marrying? Should it be a choice of the heart, or a man chosen by her family? It is important to highlight that this dimension, is not totally linked to religion or ethnicity: people of very different religions may share the same orientation, whereas within the same cultural community, various orientations can coexist, in unequal proportions. Depending on the context (minorities/majority oppositions, for example) and the position occupied in this antagonism, a group (or a person) may prefer to prioritize such or such dimension of his identity; this is how Barth (1998) explains the profound emptiness of generalizing and totalizing identity constructions.

Finally, the psychological axis is directed towards action. It concerns all facets of communication (oral or written, verbal or pictorial, direct or indirect, formal or informal, in pairs, collectively, real or virtual), since communication is the main tool used by socio-educational workers. It is important to reflect on the status of each communication channel, especially within distinct and culturally distant groups. The psychological axis implies understanding that all the dimensions developed so far allow everyone to compose and manage a personal identity profile, which is interwoven to collective identities, which are consciously or unconsciously claimed according to the contexts and the objectives of the moment.

Following this idea, part of the job of the street educators can be seen as facilitators: in a multicultural environment, they can help individuals, or group of individuals, to become aware of their identity profile, and how to manage it according to a specific context, and thus strengthen their intercultural skills (Manço, 2002). This implies an awareness of their way of being in the world can be questioned, reviewed, transformed, if necessary, and negotiated with its environment. Finally, this axis suggests that social workers understand the individual, collective and institutional sociocultural environments, in search of resources and traps, to help participants and colleagues to navigate there. Far from encyclopedic knowledge, adopting an intercultural discipline is therefore given the chance to acquire the keys to a positive encounter between users and services.

Intercultural Skills as a Framework for Action

Intercultural skills are, at a collective level, competences which make possible, in different situations, potentially a positive and consensual management of the frictions that might arise from cultural diversity. They assume, at the very least, empathy, listening, crossing points of view, as well as the possibility of varying or alternating, in a culturally heterogeneous group, the codes and modes of communication. Interculturality is precisely a practice and discourse that is co-constructed with various parties.

At the individual level, (both for the social worker and the actors) intercultural skills stand for to the ability to integrate plural identities into the concept of “self”; it is a process of individuation that allows the active articulation of cultural traits present with elements from other cultures or subcultures. In addition, global capacities and attitudes, such as openness to the world and to society (awareness and sensitivity to difference), general and historical culture, knowledge (“capacity of learning”), the recognition, understanding and valuation of the other in their potentialities, differences (in particular his language and his modes of communication) and similarities (distancing, relativity), political and philosophical pluralism, etc. (Manço, 2002).

Here are listed several performative elements, based on the work of Margalit Cohen-Emerique (2016), that are constitutive of intercultural skills. Those include:

- The ability to decenter from one's culture of origin (metacognition), to develop a posture welcoming the difference;
- The ability to acquire knowledge through relation to other cultures, in order to soften the approach to the other;
- The ability to negotiate when conflict of values arises, which places the interlocutors, each in their own way, in double constraints and conflicts of loyalty.

Indeed, the acceptance or rejection of exogenous cultural elements (acculturation) depends on the establishment of communication between carriers of different cultures and, in particular, of a specific form of communication that is negotiation/confrontation (Maço, 2006). Nonviolent overtaking or prevention of conflicts and the restoration of cohesion are linked to the construction of a process of fair transactions between interacting people or groups. In such a successive combination of conflicts and consensus, *acculturation* becomes the synthesis of meanings that social stakeholders derive from their negotiations between positions sometimes not very reconcilable (Maço, 2002). At the inter-individual level, *negotiation* is precisely a condition of equilibration and development of the personality in a context of conflict and cultural change.

It thus seems difficult to envision the intercultural processes outside of the context of negotiation, and therefore confrontation. However, we think that intercultural skills is a useful dialogical tool that allows actors, professional or not, to outline an act of openness, in situations marked by cultural contacts. For both individual and collectives, using the notion such as *intercultural skills* is useful in a very performative way: it sheds the light on the participation and adaptation to multicultural contexts.

For social workers, interculturality in a professional situation is an attempt to respond in an interdisciplinary manner to the concerns of social actors concerned with a managing at best cultural diversity and in order to contribute to the construction of a social articulation between bearers of different cultures, with, ideally, advantages for everyone (Maço, 2002). Thus, we identify several skills that saturate the intercultural skills of socio-educational workers. The first concern the actions of professionals with their audiences, the second their relationships with their colleagues and, finally, the third involves their institutions.

To conclude, for socio-educational workers faced with the cultural diversity, we recommend to:

Develop critical knowledge of oneself, of one's own groups, in particular in their socio-historical dimensions;

- Develop language skills and general knowledge in relation to the public;
- Be at the service of the community and the public and not of an "ideology"; favoring responsible and participatory intervention, build "symmetrical" and credible relationships at a micro level.
- Focus on positive analyses and recognition of the potential agency of the actors; think in terms of potentialities rather than on the diagnosis of cultural or symbolic



“deficiencies” (Bourdieu, 1977). Generate practices in continuity with the lifestyles and values of the public, avoid disruptions, plan for resistance, informing and rallying the public to decision-making and practical procedures, leave a place for beneficiaries in the development and implementation of projects, energize, motivate, and strengthen the confidence of the public, integrate into the educational approaches of content related to people’s daily lives, make possible a real participation.

- Be in favor of an “open” state of mind, concerning the most “different” aspects of audiences (conceptions of time, space, of the status of the person, of the relations between the sexes, of the status of children, etc.); overcoming fears and anxieties in the face of difference and changes (fear of invasion, fear of alienation, fear of losing one’s identity, tensions, authoritarian reaction and exclusion, stereotypes, distorting representations, prejudices, denials, etc.);
- Develop “places” (space-time) of contact, friction, mediation and negotiation, information and permanent dialogue with the public;
- Remove obstacles to calm communication, make visible and transparent interventions, objectives; allow the public to express themselves (including in its conflicting aspects); manage and positively impact conflicts;
- Allow the public to move towards balances;
- Manage the contradictions between respecting and valuing differences and the cultural assimilation or “normalization” task implicitly vested in socio-educational institutions;

The intercultural dynamics and the psychosocial integration of people in an unequal multiculturalism context are more easily possible in such welcoming and educational settings whose project is to enable the active articulation of specific characteristics of the minority to the elements of the host culture, to strive for a balance between respect people, minorities and the majority (Manço, 2002). The second type of professional capacity that we consider important concerns relations of professionals with their colleagues, their direct or indirect hierarchy, as well as with other actors and institutions of the locality and/or field of activity. These capacities are part of a “systemic professional interculturality”:

- get informed, develop information channels about practices and resources related to the activities undertaken, participate in or initiate information, awareness and continuing education;
- develop practical and political positions, link actions on the ground and more “macro” levels implied by the grassroots realities, as, for example, showed the local issues of the implementation of a body of street educators mentioned above;
- generate partnerships and practices in continuity with the actions of others interveners, avoid ruptures and competition; make known your know-how, negotiate your qualifications and contributions;
- evaluate and really pilot the procedures with colleagues and decision makers.

Thirdly, it is important to mention the “collective intercultural skills” (Maço, 2002). This is the capacity of a social or educational institution to organize and regulate interactions within a heterogeneous sociocultural community to bring out common projects nourished by the differentiated contributions of each and everyone. It will be:

- an institution that generates membership, develops collective memory, produce knowledge and experience, a place and a capacity for self-regulation;
- an approach that unifies, a recurring practice of adjusting professional cultures and postures, a qualifying, encouraging and enriching place, a pooling of resources, knowledge, means and decisions;
- a cultural permeability and adaptability which contribute to the speed and quality of reciprocal acculturation of audiences and professionals;
- an ability to allow the full development of intercultural skills of people involved.

For Haddad et al. (2009), the establishment of intercultural capacity at the institutional level, the ability to generate spaces for dialogue within structures and around their activities, is to intervene in conflicts, tensions or polarizations linked to cultural diversity in order to transform them. Also, the institutions faced with this type of tension must:

- Break taboos, bring out latent conflicts in order to better elaborate them;
- Alternate inter-group and intra-group dialogues;
- Manage interference between local and global;
- Identify unifying interests;
- Focus on “bridge makers” who can be within their staff, their partners and their audiences.

The reader might have noted the parallelism and complementarity between the various levels of professional intercultural skills: those of actors, as well as those institutions. Indeed, the establishment of a dialogue mechanism is correlated with the social and political context. If this is favourable to dialogue, the facilitators and field workers have political support and are in a position of influence, they have the support of those around them. This is the reason why consistency between various institutional levels is essential for the intercultural development of structures and professionals.

In sum, this article has (re)introduced the notion of intercultural competences as a theoretical reading grid and a practical tool within the framework of the training of workers confronted with sociocultural diversity. The process leads to practical recommendations for the intercultural development of socio-educational structures and their staff. They can serve as a basis for negotiation and programming, even assessment of continuous training, supervision, and methodological support in the socio-educational sectors, in the broad sense, commonly confronted with questions relating to cultural diversity.



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