

Multicultural Education in Finland - Renewed Intercultural Competences to the Rescue?

Fred Dervin
University of Helsinki, Finland

Martina Paatela-Nieminen
University of Helsinki, Finland

M.-Kaisa Kuoppala
University of Helsinki, Finland

Anna-Leena Riitaoja
University of Helsinki, Finland

ABSTRACT: This paper reviews discourses on multicultural education and the concept of intercultural competences in the European and Nordic country of Finland. We are interested in their present uses and perceptions by decision-makers, researchers, but also student teachers. Some prognosis for the future is made based on a short case study from art teacher education in this context. The article also represents an attempt to evaluate how intercultural competences are being reconceptualised in global scholarship today. This serves as a template for examining the Finnish context.

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We **Fred Dervin, Martina Paatela-Nieminen, M.-Kaisa Kuoppala and Anna-Leena Riitaoja** confirm that the submission is all my (our) own work and does not include any work completed by anyone other than the author(s). Works of others used in this submission are cited with correct source information and/or properly acknowledged. I (we) also confirm that this submission is submitted only to the International Journal of Multicultural Education (IJME) and will not be submitted to elsewhere while being considered by IJME. If I (we) decide to submit it elsewhere before its publication, I (we) agree to withdraw the submission officially by writing to the editor (ijme@eastern.edu).

Names of Authors: Fred Dervin, Martina Paatela-Nieminen, M.-Kaisa Kuoppala and Anna-Leena Riitaoja

Date: 20.3.2012

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Introduction

Finnish education is now known worldwide for its excellent results in most international rankings (Sahlberg, 2011). Having attracted worldwide attention, Finnish education has triggered “pedagogical tourism” in the country, where researchers from all over the world come to witness this “miracle”. Yet very few specialists who visit Finland examine the state of multicultural¹ education, even though Finland is increasingly a country of immigration (Talib et al., 2009).

The field itself has a short history in e.g. Finnish educational sciences or teacher education compared to other countries. Furthermore there is no agreed-upon approach to multicultural education in either the Finnish academia or in schools. One concept that seems to have gained popularity in both research and training/education is that of *intercultural competence*. The concept will be pivotal in this article to explore the present and future of multicultural education in this context. Practically always used in the singular, we prefer its plural form (*competences*) in this article to develop a renewed understanding of the concept.

Our aim is to review discourses on the concepts in Finland: its present uses and perceptions. We are interested in decision makers’ (section 1), researchers’ (section 2), but also student teachers’ discourses on the concept (section 3). We also make some prognosis for its future based on a short case study from art teacher education (section 4). The second section of the article

also represents an attempt to evaluate how intercultural competences are being reconceptualised in global scholarship today and serves as a template for examining the Finnish context.

1. Policies on Multicultural Education in Finland

In Finnish education policies on the 'multicultural' relate exclusively to immigration and international cooperation. The idea that diversity is a relatively recent phenomenon in the Finnish context is widespread (e.g. Holm & Londen, 2010) and ignores the 'ethnic', linguistic and religious minorities of the country but also the diversities contained in social class, gender, worldviews and areas of living, both among the 'majority' and 'minorities' (ibid.). The ideas of a homogenous Finnish society and Finnishness are mainly illusions constructed through nation-building, and schooling has had a central role in this construction (Gordon et al., 2000, pp. 9-22).

Räsänen (2005) has noted that in the national core curriculum for basic education (Finnish National Board of Education henceforth FNBE, 2004) there are different aims for the ('ethnic') majority and ('ethnic') minorities. The aims are also constructed as if the majority and minority groups were taught separately. Multicultural education for minorities should provide them with knowledge about their "own culture" and about "Finnish culture". It should also allow "immigrant" youth to develop skills and attitudes to construct and maintain a "bicultural identity" (Finnish + another national identity) in order to integrate into and to become competent/active members of Finnish society. The majority, instead, is expected to be aware of and to accept "multiculturality" in Finland. However, apart from the specific section on minority education in the national curriculum, the multiple diversities within the student populations are not considered. (FNBE, 2004; Holm & Londen, 2010). Discursive reading of the policy text (i.e. FNBE, 2004) reveals that students are constructed as being mainly white 'native' Finns (Riitaoja, forth.).

It has been argued (Rizvi, 2009) that multiculturalism "has remained trapped within a set of nation-centric assumptions" as it "continues to address issues of cultural diversity within a national framework" (Rizvi, 2009, p. 283). Although globalisation has challenged national boundaries and spaces, as well as privileged epistemologies of the modern space, the way multicultural education is conceptualized appears to have mainly remained untouched by these processes in Finland.

2. Intercultural Competences: A Much Sought After Tool in Education and Beyond

Be it in teacher education, higher (vocational) education, professional development or even compulsory education, the concept of intercultural competences seems to have gained strength in Finland as a tool allowing to implement multicultural education. The concept has a long history in global scholarship and it has been described as an extremely polysemic and

problematic element (Dervin, 2010). Today, in the field of education, but also in communication, business, and health studies, it seems that intercultural competences are sought after by many researchers and practitioners – even if they are not always sure what it entails.

In language education, one of the main advocates of the concept is British researcher Michael Byram (1997), who has contributed to conceptualising and renewing the competences. For Byram (2000, p. 9), intercultural competences symbolise the capacity “to see relationships between different cultures - both internal and external to a society - and to mediate, that is interpret each in terms of the other, either for themselves or for other people”. He adds (ibid.) that intercultural competences also consist in being able to understand critically or analytically that one’s “own and other cultures’ perspective is culturally determined rather than natural”. Many of these somewhat problematic elements were identified in the short presentation of the Finnish educational policies in the previous section. Byram’s definition has been influential in language education and beyond. Dervin (2010) has demonstrated that his take on the concept is very similar to other researchers’ in other fields (e.g. Deardorff, 2009; Bennett, 2004²). In what follows we review some aspects of these definitions that remain problematic. This will allow us to discuss critically an understanding of intercultural competences which seems to be widespread in Finnish scholarship and education.

2.1. Problems with Intercultural Competences

“I am going abroad and I need intercultural competence...”

This quote is from a student teacher at a Finnish Department of Education. When asked to develop her insistence on “acquiring” intercultural competence before a stay abroad, she responded that she wanted to learn how to “respect other cultures”. She added: “my professors have told me that this is the main goal of interculturality”.

One of the first challenging issues with intercultural competences is the use, overuse and abuse of the “old and tired” concept of culture (Breidenbach & Nyíri, 2009, p. 10). In Finnish policy documents or in Byram’s definition mentioned earlier (“to see relationships between different cultures”), the concept is omnipresent. Quite often, the *-cultural* of the ‘intercultural’ takes over and deletes the *inter-*, i.e. the relations between people (intersubjectivities), spaces and times. For Adrian Holliday (2010, p. 39), the *list-like* and descriptive approach to cultures (“do this - don’t do that”) is extremely ideological and too static to allow interlocutors to appreciate the *diverse diversities* of the ‘Other’ and the Self (Dervin, 2012). To illustrate let us quote Breidenbach and Nyíri (2009, p. 50) who denounce the abuse of Confucianism in Europe and elsewhere to talk about Chinese students. Ironically they write: “using “Confucianism” to explain the values of 1.4 billion Chinese is surely as absurd as trying to derive the behavior of contemporary Europeans from the Bible or from Plato’s Republic”. Such elements are often presented as “normal” by many educators or researchers (Debono, 2011). Finally such an approach gives the impression that

intercultural competences can be “acquired” for good rather than developed contextually and “lifelong”.

The unproblematised essentialist notion of culture is also present in many Finnish studies that aim to evaluate or improve intercultural competences. In many such studies, the focus has been on different, ‘coloured’ ‘others’ while the position of the ‘majority’ has remained an unrecognised and non-problematised norm. In these studies the construction of multiculturalism is seen separated from the construction of Finnishness although these two categories cannot but contribute to defining each other.

This leads us to another misconception about intercultural competences, which Dervin (2012) has labelled a “differentialist bias”. Cultural difference is often exclusively the basis of models of intercultural competences in Finland. For Anne Phillips (2010, p. 20), cultural difference often leads to cultural hierarchy: “There are said to be ‘better’ and ‘worse’, ‘more advanced’ and ‘more backward’ cultures”. What this approach ignores is the fact that “each of us live in a web of cultural references and meanings” (Phillips, id., p. 61), which makes it difficult to define a difference as e.g. national or cultural. The future of multicultural education and intercultural competences might rest on taking into account similarities across imaginaries (“national cultures”) rather than solely differences.

2.2. Renewing the Competences: From Knowledge-Based to ‘Critical’ Competences?

In research but also up to a point in practice, many critical voices are being heard in relation to a solely knowledge-based approach to intercultural competences where cultures are presented as being the “explanations for all” (Phillips, 2010). For Breidenbach & Nyíri (2009, p. 340) it is now important to concentrate on “the critical ability to question the implicit and explicit assumptions behind cultural claims and the power dynamics that they may be concealing”. In other words, what they suggest – and that other scholars are supporting, cf. Abdallah-Pretceille, 2003; Holliday, 2010; Piller, 2011; Dervin, 2012 – is that intercultural competences should allow criticality towards the concept of culture and the related power imbalance that it can produce. These scholars all share a socio-constructionist and intersubjective approach to both multicultural education and intercultural competences. The ideas of historicity, reflexivity and critical relativity are also central (Rizvi, 2008).

Popkewitz & Lindblad (2000) have conceptualised research on diversities and education through “equity problematic” and “knowledge problematic” studies, which can allow us to define what we mean by ‘critical’. The former is already widespread in the Finnish context and “incorporates the principle of equal opportunity to learning regardless of children’s race, gender or ethnic background”, based on the equity problematic approach (Lappalainen, 2009, p. 75). This is in line with e.g. James Banks from the American field of multicultural education (2008).

The socio-constructivist and intersubjective approach described above is very similar or complementary to the other approach described by Popkewitz &

Lindblad (ibid.) entitled “knowledge problematic studies”, whose focus is on systems of reason (e.g. representations) that are embodied in educational contexts (Lappalainen, 2009). Although there is criticism towards the liberal order and an essentialist conception of culture in Finland, especially among equity oriented multicultural education, problematising of knowledge and knowing, i.e. epistemologies (about epistemologies see e.g. Andreotti, 2011), has not been common in Finnish multicultural education. Equity and inclusion-oriented multicultural education seems to lack the question of knowledge and representation in reproduction of differences and exclusion. This is why we combine socio-constructivist, intersubjective and “knowledge problematic” tools in our work.

3. Perceptions of Intercultural Competences in a Teacher Education Programme in Finland

Having concentrated on official and scientific discourses in the previous sections, we are now examining the voices of students. This section explores student teachers’ views on the ‘multicultural’ and intercultural competences in an “international” teacher education programme at the University of Helsinki. The programme, entitled Subject Teacher Education Programme (STEP), is an English-medium programme geared for both Finnish and foreign students aiming to become teachers in Finnish secondary education. The programme was implemented to allow the inclusion of non-Finnish speaking students in the system. A few years ago a short one-credit introductory course on multiculturalism was included in subject teacher education, and a new larger course on diversities including multiculturalism and special education will become part of the subject teacher education curriculum in autumn 2012.

In 2011 it was of interest to ask STEP student teachers how they defined intercultural competences or what multiculturalism meant for them. The students were interviewed before they had taken a course on Multicultural Education – which was given by one of the authors of this article and presented the aforementioned ‘critical’ stance – and here we discuss the viewpoints of some of the Finnish students in the group. The students studied in a multicultural environment and every student acknowledged it as a benefit to learn more varied viewpoints of people who came from different corners of the world and who had, for example, done their basic schooling in different educational systems. Many of the students said, however, that they had not really considered the concept multiculturalism before or what it actually meant for them, how it should manifest itself or be taken into account in the programme. One of the main reasons why they had wanted to apply to the programme was specifically that they would get to interact with people from different countries. In the following quotes, the students react to the word ‘intercultural’:

Student 1³: you can if you go to some other country or surrounding . you can cooperate with other people in a sort of natural way . there are no extra barriers compared to your own country

Student 2: i not even sure i'm not even sure what that word means [...] well interculturality it brings to my mind some kind of interaction between cultures . so you . if if you have a multicultural . i don't know . group for example then you have different from . you have people from different cultures in that group but if you have something that is intercultural then you just have some kind of interaction between two cultures . that's what comes to my mind

The students were also asked what should be done or changed in STEP to actually make studying in the programme intercultural. Although the students explained that multicultural issues had been brought up in discussions, not all thought that they had had enough encouragement or time to share different experiences.

Student 2: the first thing that comes to my mind is is . somehow somehow making benefit of the experiences of the different . of people with different backgrounds . [...] make people share their . their . their experiences from different countries . and i think in many occasions that was done . we talked about different cultures and . and teaching in different cultures

Student 1: er . . it has been there all the time but sort of in a random way that . i know the people are from other countries and then some context we have discussed what has it been in this and that situation . but maybe this side could have been forced more so so . so . er . because it's it's so vast richness of this program that you have people from different countries so . [...] that we should compare our experiences from different countries and how things are done and . this this kind of things

The students felt that having a diverse student body is a definite benefit and richness in the programme because it gives a chance for the students to widen their own views by sharing and trading ideas and opinions with their peers. Yet for many, it was difficult to actually formulate their thoughts or conceptualize the idea of intercultural competences in their own words.

Student 3: i don't . i wasn't expecting . what should i expect . how you treat multicultural groups or people . how you do that

Interviewer: that's a good point . what do you think interculturality means . what do you think it includes for you

Student 3: for me ah ah it means well that we have different cultures within a group or i don't know . within a topic or a concept or . something like that so . ah parts of different cultures in sort of ... different cultures come together

It was interesting how one student elaborated on the forming of a STEP culture and thus went beyond "national" or "ethnic" cultures. Many other students also explained that because of the very small group size (usually less than 15 students), discussion in the lessons appeared as vibrant and the students

seemed to form quickly a sense of belonging. Studying in a new programme is not without its challenges and support from the peers was appreciated and welcomed.

Student 4: everyone was more . very active . it influenced . it had influence on us all . because we had to build ah this culture . this culture here . for this step . so it had influence from from these different backgrounds [...]

The concepts of multiculturalism and intercultural competences seem to be difficult to grasp for students in the STEP programme. Note that in all the quotes the word culture (“interaction between cultures”, “people from different cultures”...) – alternating with countries! – and differences to quality multiculturalism are omnipresent and thus correspond to the discussion in the previous sections. The absence of any discussion on e.g. justice, equity but also epistemologies is in a way astonishing. Yet the fact that some students started using “culture” to describe what was being created in the international group is interesting as it could indicate a move towards a similarity-oriented approach. We are hoping that in the future, through being introduced to critical, socio-constructivist and “knowledge-problematic” approaches to the ‘multicultural’, the students will be able to reflect on and develop renewed intercultural competences.

4. Creating Glocal Meanings in Finnish Art Education

4.1. An Intertextual Art Method for Developing Intercultural Competences

This section looks at how an understanding of renewed intercultural competences can be implemented in teacher education through the concept of intertextualities in art education. Intertextuality can be approached from different angles and perspectives (see Allen, 2000; Orr, 2003; Worton & Still, 1990). The term *text* in *intertextuality* refers to visual, verbal and auditory documents studied in relation to each other. In intertextuality a text transforms other texts and connects people, times and places and thus can offer strategies to study practices, meanings, subjectivity, and “heritage” – many components of renewed intercultural competences.

An intertextual art method for art education was developed by one of the authors (Paatela-Nieminen, 2000) in Finland both for understanding and creating pluralities interculturality, intermedially, and intersubjectively. It was felt that it is important to create understanding of differences/similarities and their textual relations as a space for plural meanings. In other words, instead of learning one fixed truth or insight there are several different interpretations of representations to be studied simultaneously.

When using the intertextual art method one learns, on the one hand, about one’s “heritage” (as a construction) and memory but also, on the other hand, about other global memories. In practice one produces local, global and glocal competences (see Paatela-Nieminen 2008, 2009). This is done by studying a text in its context open-endedly (Genette, 1997b), in a visual continuum (Genette,

1997a) and plural interpretations about the greatest differences interculturally (Kristeva, 1984). In this way one can understand interpretations of representations and transformations of meanings in plural ways. In addition one can create new glocal interpretations when making one's own works of art thanks to the intertextual learning process.

4.2. A Case Study of Intertextuality and Interculturality

One case study of a class teacher student is presented in this section to illustrate this new approach to intercultural competences. The student, Hanna, was an art education minor at the University of Helsinki in 2011-12 (25 credits, 5 different courses). She took part in an environmental art education course where Finnish culture and identity were studied intertextually and interculturally. The task for the students was to study "My place".

Hanna's intertextual process started with the idea of finding a proper text. Students' motivation should be intrinsic to the learner in such an intertextual process. Hanna started to look for something that constructs her Finnish identity at her home. On her walls she had placed several covers of vinyl records on top of each other. Her curiosity arose from the covers. In reference to Genette (1997b) she asked herself an open-ended question: what do these covers represent as a whole? She thought of a rug as an answer. She also realized that rugs were important for her in her childhood. She connected the vinyl cover rug to her grandmother's rug. As a child Hanna often slept near her grandmother's Karelian rug⁴. Dealing with the task, "My place", arose from her grandmother's Karelian rug that she studied in its context.

Later on Hanna studied several rugs similar to her grandmother's (Genette, 1997a). Her visual image continuum was made from vinyl covers, band flags from the 80-90's, and Marimekko's textiles⁵ to Karelian rugs. She studied these rugs and found a difference between them that interested her: identity. Having been exiled from Karelia by the Russians after the Second World War and moved to another Finnish region, both her grandmothers were Karelian and their 'local', Karelian identity was very strong. The rugs were not mere designs or decorations on the wall but they enhanced the grandmothers' Karelian identity. But for Hanna her rug made of vinyl covers was different as it was composed of global bands.

Hanna also studied the meanings of identity and global aspects in Finnish design and cultures and created a place of plural identities by applying Kristeva's ideas on producing plurality (1984). She wrote about global companies and their international values. Hanna noticed that she had found it important before to hide her Finnish roots in order to enhance her Finnish local identity. The rug of vinyl covers enhanced these global interests. However, she also appreciated what she considered to be Finnish cultural heritage and locality. For example she had brought from her grandmother's attic old cross-country skis and made a bedhead of them. Hanna explained that she likes to talk about her Finnish 'roots' to her foreign friends who "couch-surf" at her place. She also claimed to appreciate plural identities and to mix global and local issues to create glocal combinations.

Hanna's work in the course was a glocal work of art that she created as part of an intercultural process. She designed a "rug" from six pieces of red clay plates. She created delicate dragonflies on a few pieces and stylised reed on other plates, which were all embossed. These relief details were painted with ceramic colours and glazed. All the plates were connected to each other and placed on the wall as a *glocal rug*. She combined ideas to create the form of the rug from global vinyl record covers. The red colour is a strong 'local' element in Karelian rugs that is seen in her choice of material (red clay). She also used memories, feelings and subconscious as part of her intercultural learning process. Besides she developed the idea of a rug further by thinking of producing plates at the school where she was training. Every pupil could produce their own plate from clay. These would be linked together to form a large intersubjective work to show the intercultural identities of school children. Hanna's process was interesting because it was subjective, rhizomatic (see Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) and intercultural in nature. A good example of how renewed intercultural competences can be developed.

The intertextual art method is an open-ended method to stimulate intercultural competences by offering strategies to study practices, meanings, subjectivity, and 'heritage'. The process is at best subjectively profound and allows crossing borders interculturally (i.e. gender, generation, social class, etc.). Finally, intertextuality offers a method for understanding and creating different meanings of representations interculturally.

Conclusion and Discussion: Towards a Glocally Oriented Approach to Multicultural Education and Intercultural Competences in Finland – and Elsewhere?

The discussion in this article has considered the pitfalls and changes in multicultural education and intercultural competences both in policies, theory and practice through the example of Finland. Our goal was to examine how current discussions of multicultural education and intercultural competences were taken into account in this context. One example of renewed intercultural competences in art education was provided as an illustration of changes.

The way forward in Finland and elsewhere seems to lay in glocally oriented multicultural education that has its roots in cultural-historical analysis and global ethics in terms of ethical engagement with the 'Other' (Andreotti, 2007). Such education reaches both beyond the liberal order of education and an equity problematic approach towards an approach that puts stress on knowing (i.e. how knowledge is constructed) and representation (i.e. how the constructed knowledge is represented). The aims of this kind of multicultural education are not to domesticate students into nation states or in developing competences that serve such purposes. Nor do they aim to produce 'global citizens' for a new universal economic order (Andreotti, 2011). Glocally oriented multicultural education – and accompanying intercultural competences – aims for justice, conceptualised differently from the equity problematic perspective (cf. section 2). This is why a shift from the socio-political to the discursive and the epistemic is

vital. V. Andreotti (2011 p. 242) has already formulated some ideas that take these elements seriously into account. We claim that her *postcolonial* or *post-critical global citizenship education* is very useful as they open new vistas for the future of multicultural education and intercultural competences – in Finland and elsewhere:

- “to engage with complex local or global processes and diverse perspectives: to face humanity (warts and all) and not feel overwhelmed;
- to examine the origins and implications of their own and other people’s assumptions;
- to negotiate change, to transform relationships, to dream different dreams, to confront fears and to make ethical choices about their own lives and how they affect the lives of others by analysing and using power and privilege in ethical and accountable ways;
- to live with and learn from difference and conflict and to know how to prevent conflict from escalating into aggression and violence;
- to cherish life’s unsolved questions and to sit comfortably in the discomfort and uncertainty that it creates;
- to establish ethical relationships across linguistic, regional, ideological and representational boundaries (i.e. to be open to the Other) and to negotiate principles and values ‘in context’; and
- to enjoy their open and uncertain individual and collective learning journeys”. (Andreotti 2010, p.242)

Notes

1. In this article we use the multifaceted notion of the ‘multicultural’ but consider it as a synonym of another polysemic concept: the ‘intercultural’. The latter is often used interchangeably in global scholarship and in Finland. We agree with Holm and Zilliacus (2009) that, considering the polysemy of these notions, their dichotomization may just be “a thing of the past”.
2. Cf. an exhaustive lists of definitions and “tools” on the Intercultural Communication Institute (Portland) website: <http://www.intercultural.org/tools.php>
3. The data in this section are derived from an ongoing PhD study entitled *Towards International and Intercultural Teacher Education* (Kuoppala). The excerpts are directly from the interview data in English. The codes used in transcription are as follows: omitted speech [...]; 1-second pause . .
4. Karelia is situated in Northern Europe and is currently divided between Finland and Russia.
5. Marimekko is a fashion and design Finnish company known for its brightly-colored printed fabrics and simple patterns.

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