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INTERCULTURALITY AND THE POLITICAL WITHIN EDUCATION

Fred Dervin and Ashley Simpson

ROUTLEDGE
Focus

Interculturality and the Political within Education

This innovative book problematises the internal relationships within and between the intercultural and the political in education. It engages in a critical dialogue with current practices and discourses, and the focus on ‘the political’ offers an alternative trajectory to explore interculturality within education.

Drawing on international research and consolidated with the application of top interdisciplinary theories in the field, Dervin and Simpson alert us to the current dangers of treating interculturality loosely in education. The authors engage in a dialogue to encourage readers to examine the meaning of interculturality and the state of research in education today, suggesting that we move beyond merely rehearsing theories, concepts and methods. More importantly they urge researchers, teachers and students to question Western-centric ideologies of interculturality.

Interculturality and the Political within Education is a must read for those who are dissatisfied with current intercultural research and education. It will be of great interest to researchers and students of the philosophy of education and those interested in the contemporary debates concerning ideologies, definitions and ownership of interculturality.

Fred Dervin is Professor of Multicultural Education at the University of Helsinki, Finland. He also holds distinguished professorships in Australia, Canada, China, Luxembourg, Malaysia and Sweden.

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Interculturality and the Political within Education

**Fred Dervin and
Ashley Simpson**

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Introduction

In Spring 1865, while visiting his family, Karl Marx filled out a questionnaire entitled *Confessions*, which was very popular in Victorian England. The questionnaire contained items such as “The quality you like best”, “Your aversion”, “Your favourite colour of eyes and hair”. For the item “Your motto”, he wrote down in Latin “De omnibus dubitandum” [doubt everything] (Singer, 1980: 93). This motto applies to what we are attempting to do in this book about the omnipresent, yet problematic, notion of *interculturality*.

Interculturality is a word of consequence, a word that matters in education, although it might be used as a mere ‘stop-gap’ at times.

All things ‘intercultural’ in research and education have spread around the world in different waves. To start with, it is important to say that the idea of interculturality is not a new ‘thing’. The phenomenon and the education that goes with it (*how to prepare people to meet other people*) have occurred throughout history under different guises. In research and education, it found an official voice in the 20th century. In the 1950s American diplomacy led the way with the work of the anthropologist E. T. Hall who set a stepping stone by providing American diplomats with training in intercultural communication. The business world followed suit, first in the ‘West’. Interculturality has become a global industry today (e.g. intercultural consultancy). Education has also witnessed some kind of ‘intercultural revolution’, especially since mass migration to the Western world and the increased internationalisation of higher education.

Discussions of civil rights, social justice, racism, ‘clash of civilisations’, orientalism, etc. over the past decades have also had to do with interculturality. We should remember, however, that although we use the word *intercultural* in this book, many other (similar) initiatives have emerged over the past decades, under different labels: multicultural, transcultural and the fashionable term ‘global’ as in ‘global citizenship’ and ‘global competence’.

2 Introduction

Things have changed over the decades, and many ideas from the past 70 years have been questioned – although they can still be identified in some books, research papers and curricula. Amongst the critiques about past perspectives on interculturality, different kinds of *-isms* have been under attack: Euro- and Western-centrism (the influence of Western and European ideologies on how we deal with interculturality), culturalism (culture as the explanation for everything in interculturality), essentialism (people's essence as the only explanatory force for what they do and say), East-Westism, etc. More postmodern, so-called non-essentialist, perspectives have appeared to do away with some of these issues. Some other approaches try to include voices that have been silent/silenced in intercultural scholarship and to open up dialogues about the notion of interculturality. For example, a recent textbook for English majors, published in China, promises just to do that. Written by Yuxin, J., Byram, M., Xuerui, J., Li, S. and Xuerui, J. (2019), *Experiencing global intercultural communication: Preparing for a community of shared future for mankind and global citizenship* attempts a pluralistic approach to 'global intercultural communication'. However, we feel that it does not do justice to real global perspectives. As such, although some elements of 'Chinese culture and philosophy' are included *here and there* in the book, it is hard to see how they work with the canonical 'Western' intercultural knowledge that fills the book. The imbalance between 'Western' and other knowledge is obvious for example in the collection of about 50 quotes that appear throughout *Experiencing global intercultural communication*. Less than five quotes are from/about China and a few quotes from other parts of the world (e.g. India and Turkey). The rest are from British and American scholars from the broad field of intercultural communication education. Ideologically, this makes such a potentially important initiative still dominated by what has been critiqued about scholarship on interculturality.

Why did we write this book?

For Althusser (1965: 67), the way we deal with a specific issue relies on a range of concepts which guide the questions we ask, and therefore the answers we provide. Our main motivation in writing this book is to send the message that we need to treat the notion of interculturality very carefully. We know this complex field very well, having been involved and engaged with top scholars and participated in many international research projects on intercultural issues. What is more, our research and teaching experiences in places like China and Russia have alerted us to the current dangers of treating interculturality loosely. What we have witnessed in these contexts is 'desperate' teachers and researchers being forced implicitly to teach about interculturality

from American textbooks and to research the notion following e.g. American and British models of *intercultural competence* (a central concept in the field of interculturality). This often leads to students merely ‘parroting’ these theories, models, concepts and methods, without realising that they do not always make sense in their own context and in their languages. The answers they receive to their questions about interculturality are thus (wrongly) ‘governed’ by concepts that are provided to them in intercultural communication education. We have witnessed the same in Finland where some scholars and students rehearsed ‘by rote’ ideologies passed onto them by American multiculturalists such as James Banks or the European Union and the Council of Europe – two important marketers of everything ‘intercultural’.

People tend to recycle, rehearse, apply, judge their students and/or research participants against these ideologies, without a hint of criticality. This is why we felt the need to examine the current situation and to launch debates concerning ideologies, definitions and ownership of interculturality. We suggest breaking the dominating habitual ways of thinking about and ‘doing’ interculturality but also to reconfigure current ‘critical’ discussions of the notion (to which e.g. Fred has contributed in the past, see Dervin, 2016).

Book structure

Amongst the six chapters that compose the book, five were written in the form of dialogues. We wanted our readers to witness the way scholars unthink concepts, notions, epistemologies, methods and assumptions related to interculturality and renegotiate them together. Each chapter corresponds to a question about interculturality: (*Chapter 1*) *What to make of the notion of interculturality?* (*Chapter 2*) *Who was influential in the ways we understand interculturality?* (*Chapter 3*) *How does intercultural research and education influence experiences of interculturality?* (*Chapter 4*) *Can we prepare/get prepared for interculturality?* (*Chapter 5*) *What is the state of research on interculturality today?* We each take the floor to provide answers and then explore our differences and similarities. We also ask questions to the reader at the end of each chapter. The final chapter entitled “The intercultural is always ideological and political” is a response to a response to one of our critical articles about a reference framework of interculturality – disguised under the label of ‘democratic culture’, produced by a European team led by two white British ‘native speakers’ of English. We use this chapter as a concrete illustration of how the political (and ideologies of not being ideological about interculturality) and interculturality are enmeshed in education. The conclusion to the book offers a clear and succinct summary of what to take away from this book and covers three aspects that we feel are essential: conceptualising, researching and preparing for interculturality.

Working method

Our working principles are as follow:

1. Systematically, we examine the ‘travel’ of the words that are used in English and other languages to deal with interculturality. There is a tendency to use notions and concepts in English without questioning their meanings in this global language – and other languages – as if words were just mere equivalents. We argue that this increases the gap between the powerful voices that impose them and the voiceless who just have to accept them and use them to survive if they wish to e.g. publish in international journals (‘governed’ by the powerful voices) and/or to be allowed to speak at international conferences. In their volume entitled *Words in Motion*, Gluck and Lowenhaupt Tsing (2009: 11) maintain:

Words stabilize our understanding. They allow us to insert ourselves into discourses, institutions, and social relations. . . . Our focus is how words and worlds are made at different scales, ranging from particular class niches and political campaigns to transnational realignments of culture and power. This task involves watching words move across space and time.

Take for example the simple word of *a thing* in English. According to Merriam-Webster (www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/thing), a thing is “1. an object or entity not precisely designated or capable of being designated use this thing; 2. an inanimate object distinguished from a living being”. When we are taught to write, we are asked not to use this ‘nothing word’ since it is not exact enough and has no ‘being’. Interestingly, in the Chinese language, *a thing* translates as 东西, which refers to East and West. In this language, a thing is thought of in terms of relations and movement between these two positions, rather than hinting at the *not-being*. This might have an influence on the way different people see their relation to the word and to the realities this very word represents.

In the book, we include archaeologies, discussions of untranslatable words as much as possible to emphasise the need to be critical of recycling words from English. This will allow us to become aware of the ideologies that such words impose on the users and listeners. This will also allow us to revise some notions and assumptions related to interculturality.

2. Our book relies on genuine interdisciplinarity. Dealing with interculturality requires awareness and use of updated knowledge from other fields of scholarship. Too often in education, old-fashioned terms, rejected in the field where they originally appeared, are used to look into certain phenomena. We must do an archeology of all the concepts that we use in the field of

interculturality and look for alternative ways of thinking about it. By doing so, we can rewrite our imaginations about interculturality. In this book, we use knowledge from philosophy, sociology, anthropology, psychology and cultural studies (amongst others). Input from literature, the graphic arts, the performing arts and music also enrich our discussions. We believe that it is only through such interdisciplinary engagement that interculturality can be problematised. We should not create boundaries between the different fields of knowledge and the arts since they all can contribute to renewing the notion.

3. Having had the opportunity to explore the way interculturality is taught and researched in different parts of the world, we note that the overall emphasis is still on individuals interacting with each other, with an exclusive focus on each of these individuals. As such, their relations or what they do and co-construct together are rarely taken into account – all seems to relate to the ‘self’. For example, those researching the concept of intercultural competence will tend to ‘test’, ‘analyse’, ‘observe’, ‘report on’ one interactant’s skills, ignoring the fact that their skills relate to a specific context and to the interlocutors’ identity, behaviours and intertextuality (e.g. how much they remind them of another social being). Even more important, the influence of research, (global) administration, (global) politics, the economy and the media on how people interact with each other, what they (don’t) say or do, is systematically ignored to focus on e.g. stereotyping, individual racism and discrimination. In this book, we open up these discussions to include all these aspects in the way we problematise interculturality.

We hope that this book highlights the urgency to revise our often simplistic or mechanic ways of thinking about interculturality and that it can lead to changes in the way the notion is used around the world. There is a need to make the notion more intercultural itself by including alternative voices about it. An increased awareness of the economic and political determinants of intercultural knowledge and practice in education is also crucial more than ever.

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