

# HOW TO IMPROVE CULTURAL IDENTITY AND EQUALITY: EXPERIENCES FROM INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUES IN A SCHOOL FOR ALL<sup>1</sup>

Jorun Buli-Holmberg<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract:** This article presents results of a research project concerning intercultural education in Norway. The increasing diversity of students in inclusive schools in Norway calls for increased cultural competence on behalf of educators to teach them effectively. To teach and learn from an intercultural perspective is to build understanding for diversity and equality. Focusing on intercultural education is to switch from a homogeneous perspective to a diverse perspective in the process of learning which acknowledges and develops individual variation. When teachers focus on diversity they will encourage abandoning the idea of the model student. If students are not pressurised to fit into homogeneity, some stress is going to be removed from the student and in this way it will be easier to recognize individual merit in an individual way. That means that teachers and students should learn to negotiate norms and values that we share as a group and which will let us set up and reach our goals. This will create room to work on a positive self-image, improving each student's abilities and capabilities and let them benefit from their classmates, and avoiding the traditional pictures of success and failure. In the intercultural classroom the teacher's task is to guide and facilitate students' learning towards cultural differences and self-efficacy. The methodology design of this research project involved dialogues between the researcher, teachers and pupils with the purpose of discovering what they were thinking in relation to self-esteem and empathy, and how they put emphasis on these aspects in the classroom. The procedure adopted was based on dialogues by means of the group interview method, with open questions. Ten teachers and twenty students in one school participated in the workshops, one for the teachers and one for the students. The result of this research is that the action learning approach helped the teachers and students to get a better understanding of different cultural customs and beliefs of each student in their class.

**Keywords:** intercultural; self-efficacy; equality; diversity; identity

**Resumo:** Este artigo apresenta os resultados de um projeto de investigação sobre a Educação Intercultural na Noruega. A crescente diversidade dos alunos das escolas inclusivas norueguesas requer uma maior competência intercultural por parte dos educadores para que possam ensinar eficazmente. Ensinar e aprender numa perspetiva intercultural implica construir a compreensão da diversidade e da igualdade. Dar atenção à Educação Intercultural é mudar de uma perspetiva homogénea para uma perspetiva de diversidade do processo de aprendizagem, que reconheça e

*Buli-Holmberg, J. (2011). How to improve cultural identity and equality: experiences from intercultural dialogues in a school for all. DEDICA. REVISTA DE EDUCAÇÃO E HUMANIDADES, 1 (2011) Março, 137-146*

utilize as variações individuais. Quando os professores se centram na diversidade, encorajam o abandono da ideia do estudante ideal. Se os estudantes não são pressionados para se moldarem à homogeneidade, serão poupados a algum stress e assim será mais fácil reconhecer o mérito de uma forma individual. Isto significa que os professores e os alunos devem aprender as normas e os valores que partilhamos como um grupo e que nos permitem estabelecer e atingir os nossos objetivos. Deste modo, criar-se-á espaço para trabalhar uma autoimagem positiva, melhorando as capacidades e habilidades de cada aluno e permitindo-lhe beneficiar dos seus companheiros, evitando as imagens habituais de sucesso e de fracasso. Numa aula intercultural, a tarefa do professor é guiar e facilitar a aprendizagem dos alunos em direção às diferenças culturais e à autoeficácia. O desenho metodológico deste projeto de investigação pressupõe o desenvolvimento de diálogos entre a investigadora, os professores e os alunos com o propósito de revelar o que pensavam relativamente à autoestima e empatia, e que importância concediam a esses aspetos na aula. O procedimento adotado baseou-se em diálogos mediante o método da entrevista em grupo utilizando questões abertas. Dez professores e vinte alunos de uma escola participaram em oficinas, uma para os professores e outra para os alunos. O resultado deste projeto de investigação é o de que uma perspetiva ativa da aprendizagem ajuda os professores e os alunos a conseguirem uma melhor compreensão dos diferentes costumes culturais e crenças de cada aluno da sua aula.

**Palavras-chave:** autoeficácia; equidade; diversidade; identidade; intercultural

### **Background and theoretical framework**

To promote intercultural education in a school for all there is a need for developing a fundamental understanding of human dignity and equality. Therefore teachers focus on self value and empathy will be a central dimension in their teaching. These concepts is based on psychological theories that emphasize these aspects as important for personality development, but also sociological theories that focus on the interaction with people is natural and key environmental conditions that support the personality development. To develop an inclusive society where everyone is recognized by each other as equal persons means that teachers need knowledge of self worth and equality, but also skills to include these dimensions in the daily teaching situation in class. Awareness of “who” you are impacts “how” we behave. “How” one learns and teaches is reliant on awareness of “what” one thinks and feels which forms belief and value systems (Buli-Holmberg; Schiering; Bogner 2008). Thinking and feeling are a natural process for everyone and influences everyday happenings. Therefore it is important that the teacher focus

on how students develop thinking and what can be provided to open the mind to cognitive development that promotes positive attitudes to themselves and others. Individual's thinking and feelings are continually co-joined and impact each other in a reciprocal fashion and there are common social and societal realities that encompass and transcend one's culture. These are basic issues to address in intercultural educational guidance. Self-esteem and empathy are important factors in personal development that also influences how we live together the intercultural community in schools. Self-esteem and Self-efficacy are related concepts.

*Self-efficacy* determines how people feel, think, motivate themselves and behave. Such beliefs produce these diverse effects through four major processes. They include cognitive, motivational, affective and selection processes. Perceived self-efficacy is defined as people's beliefs about their capabilities that influence and affect their lives (Bandura, 1994; 1999). A strong sense of self-efficacy enhances human accomplishment and personal well-being in many ways. People with high assurance in their capabilities approach difficult tasks as challenges to be mastered rather than as threats to be avoided. They attribute failure to insufficient effort knowledge and skills which are acquirable. Such an efficacious outlook produces personal accomplishments and reduces stress.

*Empathy* is the capability to share and understand another's emotions and feelings. Empathy is a platform for effective understanding, communication and relationships. Empathy is essential to develop solutions and avoiding or diffusing conflict. Self-development refers in one way or another to the importance of empathy – really understanding the other person's position and feelings –. Being able to 'step back', and achieve a detachment from our own emotions, is essential for effective, constructive relationships. To show empathy is to identify with another's feelings. It is to emotionally put yourself in the place of another. An emotion is a mental and physiological state associated with a wide variety of feelings, thoughts, and behavior. Emotions are subjective experiences, often associated with temperament, personality and dispositions (Saarni, 1999). A related distinction is between the emotion and the results of the emotion, principally behaviors and emotional expressions. Emotional intelligence (EI) is to be successful requires the effective awareness, control and management of one's own emotions, and those of other people (Goleman, 1995).

He embraces two aspects of emotional intelligence:

- Understanding yourself.
- Understanding others.

Goleman identified the five 'domains' of Emotional intelligence as:

1. Knowing your emotions.
2. Managing your own emotions.
3. Motivating your self.
4. Recognising and understanding other people's emotions.
5. Managing relationships, managing the emotions of others.

By developing our Emotional Intelligence in these areas and the five domains we can become more successful at what we do, and help others to be more successful too. The process and outcomes of Emotional Intelligence development also contain many elements known to reduce stress for individuals and systems, by decreasing conflict, improving relationships and understanding, and increasing stability, continuity and harmony. The teacher role improving equality for all is to provide instruction with framework of self-efficacy and cultural diversity to contribute a learning community (Wenger, 1998).

### **Intercultural Education Program**

The general aim of intercultural education is to promote the diverse teacher initiatives in school practices as an approach to deal with cultural differences at school in terms of theoretical foundations and practical implications. The purpose of implementing Intercultural Education Program in schools is to develop intercultural educational settings that focus on human dignity, and facilitate the development of individual students' self-esteem and empathy for others. The target audience is the teachers and students in primary school. The program is based on dialogues between teachers and students. Dialogues are based on a number of issues related to:

a) Self-efficacy and self-understanding. It involves the understanding their inner strengths and weakness related to their cultural identity development. Here, the emphasis is placed to appreciate themselves and to be responsible for their actions.

b) Empathy and understanding of others cultural diversity.

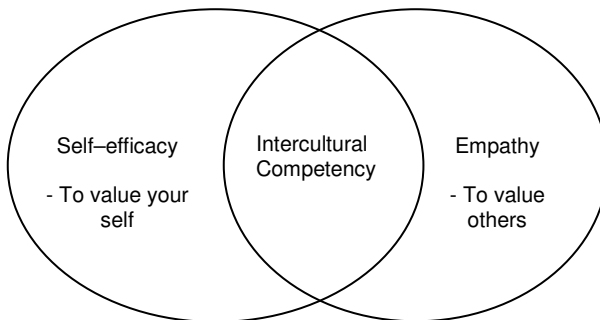
This highlights the recognition of others, appreciation and understanding of others and equality to challenge unfair discrimination.

In an intercultural classroom the teacher provides instruction with framework of cultural diversity and looks each student as a potential contributor of the learning community. The goal of the Intercultural program was to make teachers and students aware of their differences and importance of equality and to promote awareness on different cultural ethics.

The teachers should be helped to be aware of the intercultural practice they have today with a focus on curriculum. The students should also be helped to be aware of how they see themselves and others, and how they have to react to the others positive and negative reactions.

The Intercultural Program is based on the following principles:

1. Development of increased awareness of self-efficacy and cultural identity. Here the intention is to build up students to be aware of who they are, what they want to be and feel what they are. They should be aware of why I am here, who am I and think what he can be.
2. Development of increased empathy and awareness of other's intrinsic value - equality and cultural diversity. Here the goal is to understand who the other students are, what the others to be and how others differ than that they think the others are. The students are prepared to focus on the above issues and trained to act the way they value.



*Fig. 1. 1. Building self-efficacy and empathy in the intercultural classroom*

To understand who I am, who you are and who are we, teachers need to build intercultural competency by teaching students to value themselves and others. A person's level of self-efficacy and

empathy will influence the learning community either in a positive or negative way. Therefore teachers have a central role supporting students to develop high level of self- efficacy and empathy.

### **Methodology**

The methodology used is an action study and conducted dialogues with teachers. There where 10 teachers and 20 students in one school participating in two workshops, one for the teachers and one for the students. The focus was on finding teachers and students thoughts of self-efficacy and empathy related to intercultural perspectives, and data from the respondent has been collected in spring 2009.

The main goal is to reveal here and to know the situation to identify their pre-understanding and assess the need for efforts in relation to their awareness of self-efficacy and cultural identity.

Action 1: To conduct a workshop with teachers through dialogues to identify their understanding on self-efficacy and cultural identity.

Action 2: To conduct workshop with students through dialogues to identify their understanding self-efficacy and cultural identity.

Action 3: To analyze results from the material in the first phase as a starting point for phase 2.

The workshop for teachers was arranged for teachers teaching at 5<sup>th</sup> grade from one school. The purpose was to discover teachers' knowledge of the two concepts; self-efficacy and empathy. Through dialogues with the researchers and teachers the purpose was to reveal where the teachers stood in relation to self-efficacy and empathy. How they put emphasis on these aspects of class and education. Procedure adopted was based on dialogues on group interview with open questions as the method approach. Teachers were given sticky notes where they were to answer how they defined self-efficacy and equality. The answer was then shared with all. The same method was used with the students, but the question was reformulated and adapted to the students' level at 5<sup>th</sup> grade.

The results served as background for this presentation. This experiment will be carried to find out the effectiveness of the instructional package prepared for intercultural education and will be implemented in the school.

## Findings

Self-efficacy and empathy is closely connected to each other and it was difficult in distinguishing these concepts. For the students, self-efficacy is important in both academic and cultural aspects. Our hypothesis is that it can be difficult to value others if you don't value your self. Often the teachers focus more on the social dimension (empathy) than the individual dimension (self-efficacy). Intercultural education is related to those two dimensions. That is the main reason for why we focused on those two concepts when we conducted this action research. The result of this research project is that the action learning approach helped the teachers and students to get a better understanding for different cultural customs and beliefs of each student in their class.

The table bellows show selected quotes from the teachers and students.

Example from dialogues with teachers	Example from dialogues with students
<p><b>Self value:</b> How do you define self value?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- To feel respected</li> <li>- To be valued</li> <li>- All individuals are equal valued</li> <li>- What you think about your self</li> <li>- Valuing your self</li> <li>- To feel important</li> <li>-To like myself</li> </ul>	<p><b>Self value:</b> Tell me who you feel and think about yourself?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- I will be a kind and good person</li> <li>- I will help someone and be honest</li> <li>- I will be less angry</li> <li>- I will be less stubborn</li> <li>- I will not be bad looser</li> <li>- I will not think that I am better than others</li> <li>- I will be supportive</li> </ul>
<p><b>Empathy:</b> How do you define empathy?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- To be able to take others' perspective</li> <li>- To be able to see and understand other peoples situations and reactions</li> <li>- Shows insight of others</li> <li>- Shows empathy</li> <li>- Helps others to feel as a part of the society</li> </ul>	<p><b>Empathy:</b> Tell how you want to behave with others?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Kind and nice</li> <li>- Help some one</li> <li>- Justice and honest</li> <li>- Trustful</li> <li>- Considerable</li> <li>- Take care</li> <li>- Supportive</li> <li>- To be themselves</li> <li>- Listening</li> </ul>

**Table: 1.** 1 Findings from dialogues with teachers and students

The conclusions from the dialogues with the teachers showed that it helped them to be aware of the importance to focus on building a better environment for developing a climate where the students focused on I am OK and you are OK. Even if the teachers knew the concept of self value and empathy they did not actively practiced this in their teaching. The teachers challenge was to put

their theory into practice. It was found that teachers had a basic understanding of concepts, but they had difficulty in distinguishing the concepts, self-value and equality. They understood the importance of this was an important part of their job in teaching, but expressed that to small extent had the opportunity to activate this in the daily teaching situation. It was more sporadic efforts by the needs that arose in class, such as bullying.

The conclusions from the dialogues the students are that it is a topic that engaged them. They were aware of and expressed their own needs, strengths and weakness may be more than the other students needs. They said that the teachers seldom focused on this topic in their teaching and that they would like to do this workshop again with the teacher. This supports conclusions from the teachers that their challenge is to put their theory about these concepts into practice. It was also found that students and the teachers had a basic understanding of concepts, but they had difficulty in distinguishing the concepts, self-efficacy and equality. In the dialogue with the students two of the students openly expressed example of bullying that was not told to the teacher before. As often as when bullying occurred, and it was necessary to take certain measures for it. That is, it was barely prevention efforts in this area. There was no program at school that included these intercultural topics specific, but they made more as part of other programs such as anti-bullying programs. Therefore it is needed an hour to develop a program to follow up those bullying example in this school and also prevent bullying to develop and implement a more overall program that focuses on intercultural dimensions. This is also a starting point for the second phases in this action research.

## **Conclusion**

Through positive interaction and sharing responsibilities in the group activities promote the understanding of self-efficacy and cultural diversity among the group. It was a starting point to provide a chance for the teachers and students to value the other cultural practice. In the future, this experience will make possible to create a curriculum and a pedagogy that validates the dignity and humanity of each learner. They are noted through the data collection that the teachers and student's had respect for themselves and the others. The students experienced that they were as worth as much as others and that others are worth as much as themselves. The action study helped to promote a starting point for developing a better intercultural



environment. The experience gained from dialogues with teachers and students shows that this is a well-known issue for teachers and students, but they are not working very actively with these issues daily. The actions used as a methodology approach to intercultural education, both the content and the structure worked well in relation to the objectives “cultural identity and diversity”, but it has to be improved as an integrated part of teaching in classrooms in a long run for fruitful effect.

## References

Bandura, A. (1994). Self-efficacy. In V. S. Ramachaudran (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of human behaviour*. Vol. 4, 71-81. New York: Academic Press.

Bandura, A. (1999). *Self-efficacy in Changing Societies*. Cambridge: University Press.

Buli-Holmberg, J.; Schiering, M.; Bogner, D. (2008). Awareness of thinking and feelings as a natural process for every learner: Implications for guidance. *Revista española de orientación y psicopedagogía*, 19, 2 (2008) 123-137.

Goleman, D. (1995): *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*. New York – USA: Bantam Books.

Saarni, C. (1999). *The development of Emotional Competence*. New York: The Guildford Press.

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of Practice. Learning, Meaning and Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

---

<sup>1</sup> **Como promover a identidade e igualdade cultural: experiências de diálogos interculturais numa escola para todos**

<sup>2</sup> PhD.

University of Oslo, Norway.

Email: jorun.buli-holmberg@isp.uio.no

