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EDITED BY

Denchai Prabjandee,
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REVIEWED BY

Juan Sánchez García,
Autonomous University of Nuevo
León, Mexico

*CORRESPONDENCE

Christina Hajisoteriou
✉ hajisoteriou.c@unic.ac.cy

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The challenges and prospects of intercultural adult education

Christina Hajisoteriou*

School of Education, University of Nicosia, Nicosia, Cyprus

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Introduction

Our globalized era has intensified what Appadurai (1996) calls as the increased movement of people. In more detail, intensified migration, advanced communication technologies, and the dynamics of a global economy have resulted in the super diversity of societies, which according to Hajisoteriou and Angelides (2020) is qualitatively different from traditional forms of diversity, and point to “new patterns of inequality and prejudice including emergent forms of racism, new patterns of segregation, new experiences of space and ‘contact,’ new forms of cosmopolitanism and creolization” (Vertovec, 2019, p. 125). At the same time, the local impact of global crises requires transnational and cross-cultural collaboration and initiative for social, political, environmental, and economic actions on a global scale, which point to the imperative need for fostering intercultural citizenship and responsibility (Byram and Golubeva, 2020).

In this context, cross-cultural interactions have become more frequent and immediate, requiring individuals not only to respect cultural diversity, but also to effectively communicate and collaborate in multicultural groups in their personal, societal, and professional lives (Jarcáua, 2014). Consequently, the need for individuals to navigate these complex dynamics becomes imperative. In addressing the challenges stemming out of globalization, adult education may play a crucial role by supporting individuals to engage with diverse cultures in meaningful and respectful ways, while collaborating to promote socio-political and economic cohesion and sustainability (Merriam, 2010). However, for reasons that we explain below, intercultural adult education seems to be still lagging behind the progress made in the field of cultural studies and its interconnection with education (Schellhammer, 2018).

In acknowledging the importance of intercultural adult education in building intercultural respect, collaboration, and citizenship for the betterment of our societies, this article aims to navigate the challenges to intercultural adult education, so as to explore and suggest possible ways to overcome them. More specifically, it aims to navigate three key levels of challenges: theoretical, pedagogical, and practical. In this way, it aims to urge both adult education stakeholders and adult educators around the globe to develop curricula and adopt practices that sufficiently respond to these new developments in the field, especially when it comes to pedagogy and culture theories.

Intercultural adult education: conceptions, dimensions, and goals

One can identify different strands or dimensions of intercultural adult education spanning from higher education, or professional and vocational settings to civil-society contexts. In more detail, a strand of intercultural adult education predominately focuses on supporting individuals to understand theoretical nuances and frameworks of culture,

while prompting them to challenge their own biases and stereotypes, and thus act and enact toward social justice (i.e., [Kaya, 2014](#)). Some other research sets intercultural adult education in the professional context and argues that it should provide individuals with the knowledge, skills, and strategies to communicate, interact, and function in multicultural environments. In this way, they can effectively navigate and manage cultural diversity in their professional lives (i.e., [Hajisoteriou et al., 2019](#); [Parkhouse et al., 2019](#)).

In addition, a core of research suggests that intercultural adult education should be used “as a model to promote citizenship education” ([Kumi-Yeboah and James, 2011](#), p. 10), particularly in the context of global citizenship education, cosmopolitanism, and democratic citizenship education (i.e., [Brown et al., 2021](#); [Sanchez, 2021](#)). Last but not least, one more sub-category of intercultural adult education is migrant adult education that focuses specifically on migrant or refugee populations ([Hajisoteriou, 2024](#)). It aims to promote migrants’ knowledge and skills so as to overcome challenges such as unemployment, skill gaps, and social integration (i.e., [Shan and Walter, 2015](#); [Gravani et al., 2021](#)) or for purposes of integration and citizenship (i.e., [Carrera, 2016](#)).

Despite the aforementioned different strands, most research argues that the goal of intercultural adult education is to develop intercultural competence in adults ([Kaya, 2014](#)). Literature defines intercultural competence as an “umbrella” term encompassing various skills such as demonstrating respect to others, adapting to diverse cultural environments, language learning, intercultural communication, and openness to new ideas and ways of thinking ([Byram and Golubeva, 2020](#)). What has been argued is that adults with high intercultural competence may play a crucial role in bridging diversity in a given society, and influencing their peers to adopt optimal ways of acting in a variety of cultural environments. They may also transfer knowledge within and between culturally-diverse groups, and help build interpersonal relationships among multicultural societies to fight for socio-political and other causes at the global level ([Jackson, 2015](#)). For example, [Kaihlansen et al. \(2019\)](#) explain that intercultural competence helps healthcare professionals to understand “cultural pain,” differences in personal space, and patients’ diverse spiritual needs due to their different backgrounds. In this way, they may actively engage in ongoing efforts to provide culturally responsive healthcare services and facilitate the communication with patients.

Various educational approaches and methods are used to develop adults’ intercultural competence including formal training and workshops, academic programmes (i.e., in global citizenship or intercultural education), experiential learning (i.e., role-playing, case studies, simulations, and reflective journals; [Kaihlansen et al., 2019](#); [Luo and Chan, 2022](#)), and collaborative online international learning ([Anderson and Or, 2024](#)). Similarly, various methods, quantitative and qualitative, have been used to assess intercultural competence including “self-report surveys, situational judgement tests, portfolios,” and “interactive role-plays in intercultural settings” ([Luo and Chan, 2022](#)). For instance, the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) is a validated assessment tool designed to measure an individual’s or a group’s intercultural competence ([Tamer et al., 2023](#)). The IDI is widely

used in educational, professional, and organizational settings to assess cultural awareness through a series of statements rated on a Likert scale. Results are presented in a customized report detailing the individual’s or group’s developmental stage, perceived and developmental orientations, and recommendations for growth. Results are used to guide training, and improve cross-cultural effectiveness.

Challenges to intercultural adult education

Despite the broader recognition of the importance of intercultural competence and skills, intercultural adult education, around the world, appears to face some challenges that hinder its effectiveness. The first level of challenges relates to its theoretical grounding. [Schellhammer \(2018\)](#) cautions that many programmes of intercultural adult education are based on oversimplified conceptualisations of culture. Such reductionist programmes suggest that each cultural group (and the individuals belonging to this group) has distinct, self-contained, and uniform cultural characteristics. An example is a workshop that simplifies cultural diversity into a checklist of “do’s and don’ts” for interacting with people from a specific country (i.e., in the business field).

On the other hand, programmes that apply universalist notions of culture have also drawn criticism (i.e., [Gravani et al., 2021](#)). These programmes “negate differences by emphasizing common human denominators” ([Schellhammer, 2018](#), p. 8–9), and therefore, disregard cultural influences on the ways people live, learn, collaborate, and act. [Weigl \(2009, p. 350\)](#) cautions that these programmes “see culture as superficial decorations of the universal.” An example, is a programme that emphasizes universal human values such as equality, respect, empathy, and collaboration, assuming these are interpreted and applied similarly across cultures. It downplays the idea that cultural backgrounds influence how people perceive and prioritize these values. Both of the aforementioned approaches oversimplify culture by viewing it as a homogenous, static, and narrow entity, rather than by recognizing its fluid and dynamic nature ([Sorrels, 2020](#)).

The second level of challenges relates to the pedagogical grounding of intercultural adult education. The field is dominated by traditional technocratic programmes that follow top-down and hierarchical designs ([Schellhammer, 2018](#); [Hajisoteriou et al., 2019](#); [Aydarova, 2021](#)). These programmes view knowledge as objective, and measurable, and thus learning as linear and transferable. Therefore, their primary goal is to transmit predefined knowledge and skills from educators to adults, aiming to “fix” perceived deficiencies in adult.

This technocratic approach does not engage adult learners in critical and reflective practices. Nonetheless, critical reflection is necessary in intercultural education for allowing learners to examine their inner perceptions and beliefs, question their assumptions and the outer world, and imagine more-just alternatives to social order ([Hajisoteriou, 2024](#)). For [Fischer \(1990\)](#), technocratic practices are “a strategy to impede this process of political activation and facilitate the maintenance of a depoliticized mass public” (p. 30). Such practices perpetuate

the status quo of inequalities by privileging cultural norms and perspectives, often reflecting “whiteness” by default. Notably, [Aydarova \(2021\)](#) criticizes how positivity of knowledge and scientific rationality is often used to uphold Western dominance. For example, technocratic programmes might impose Western frameworks (e.g., Hofstede’s cultural dimensions), while neglecting indigenous or non-Western perspectives on culture. Also, adopting linear pedagogical practices often reflect Western educational traditions, which may not align with collective, relational, or experiential learning styles prevalent in other cultures.

The third level of challenges refers to the absence of a mechanism of change in intercultural adult education, and the inability of such programmes to support individuals in transforming their newly acquired knowledge and understandings into sustainable action ([Kumi-Yeboah and James, 2011](#)). This challenge is rooted in a significant gap in the educational process, where adult learners may gain insights and awareness only at a theoretical level, and struggle to implement new knowledge effectively in their daily lives ([Jackson, 2015](#)). The disconnection of some programmes with practical implementation and hands-on practice exacerbates this issue, as adult learners are often not provided with the necessary tools and opportunities to apply their newly-acquired knowledge in meaningful ways. This disconnect can lead to a superficial understanding of intercultural dynamics, where knowledge about culture and/or cultural diversity remains abstract and theoretical rather than becoming a lived and practiced reality.

Conclusion

Contemporary approaches to intercultural adult education should address all three levels of challenges related to its theoretical, pedagogical, and practical grounding. Having said that, any programme of intercultural adult education should acknowledge the complex interrelationship between the three levels, and particularly the ways past and transformed dispositions and beliefs, but also past and new knowledge, influence practice. In response to the aforementioned challenges, it is important to examine the prospects of intercultural adult education to succeed in bringing change in adults’ dispositions, knowledge, competencies and skills ([Kaya, 2014](#); [Jarcáua, 2014](#)).

To address the first level of challenges, programmes of intercultural adult education have to move away from essentialist to ethnorelativist concepts of culture ([Jackson, 2015](#); [Shan and Walter, 2015](#)). They should reinforce the dynamic character of cultures as an unstable mixture of both sameness and otherness ([Zapata-Barrero, 2017](#)), and thus motivate adults to perceive culture as being subject to change. To do so, [Weigl \(2009\)](#) contends that intercultural adult education should allow the space for learner’s self-study exercise, giving the impetus to firstly reflect on their inner understandings of, and feelings toward culture, but also on the ways “they are vehicles for the expression of culture” (p. 346). This exercise for [Schellhammer \(2018\)](#) should take the form of self-reflection giving adults the opportunity to

reflect on culture and their cultural capital through a dialogical self that is confronted with diversity both as a personal and a social experience. Adults thus engage with fostering a deep, reflective understanding of one’s own identity as being inertly diverse, and experiences as a foundation for appreciating and interacting with others. Although, self-reflection for Schellhammer is rather an individual process facilitated by the adult educator, we endorse [Weigl’s \(2009\)](#) argument that this should only be the stepping stone for adult learners to become involved in a synergistic and public process of reflection. For Weigl, this process may empower learners to apply new knowledge of culture as part of self-construction not only on themselves, but also on cultural others.

To address the second level of challenges, we argue that intercultural adult education should transit from technocratic models to critical pedagogy ([Merriam, 2010](#); [Aydarova, 2021](#)). Critical pedagogy may empower adults to critically reflect on the ways social structures, but also their own cultural assumptions, influence intercultural interactions. It is only through critical pedagogy that learners can become engaged in authentic interculturalism, which presupposes “undertaking a series of shifts in consciousness that acknowledge sociopolitical context, raise questions regarding control and power and inform rather differing to, shifts in practice” ([Gorski, 2008](#), p. 522). Authentic interculturalism, rather than concentrating on cultures and histories as traditional interculturalism does, it turns its focus on power analyses and “insists first and foremost on the construction of an equitable and just world” ([Gorski, 2009](#), p. 88). By fostering a deep understanding of authentic interculturalism and social justice, critical pedagogy urges learners to become active agents of change within their communities.

To achieve this transition from technocracy to critical pedagogy, and in turn authentic interculturalism, we endorse [Aydarova’s \(2021\)](#) urgent call to provide adult learners with the opportunities for critical reflection that will allow them to develop their critical political consciousness. To do so, intercultural adult education should allow them to engage in “envisioning new forms of relationships and economic structures as well as an activist stance in seeking to disrupt systems of oppression” (*ibid.*, p. 5). For this reason, intercultural adult education to be critical, and in turn authentic, should focus on promoting intercultural competence and not cross-cultural competence. Although in practice, many programmes of intercultural adult education seem to use the two concepts interchangeably, the two concepts have nuanced differences. On the one hand, we define cross-cultural competence as the competence acquired through an individual’s knowledge of and interaction with other lifestyles, languages, welfare, and arts. On the other hand, we define intercultural competence as the competence being developed as adults “internalize concepts of culture in a way that they comprehend the power of culture, through recognition both cognitively and emotionally of how they are vehicles for the expression of culture” ([Weigl, 2009](#), p. 346).

To address the third level of challenges, intercultural education programmes for adults should promote direct and supervised experience and opportunities to practice within ethnically diverse

groups, allowing individuals to develop culturally-relevant skills and repertoires of practices. The findings of past research show that experiential learning accompanied by field experience entail a more effective approach to intercultural adult education, particularly for transforming adults' beliefs of cultural diversity (Gross and Rutland, 2017). Experiential learning, which involves active engagement and reflection on experiences, is necessary for in-depth learning and the internalization of new knowledge and concepts. Without this component, adult learners may find it challenging to bridge the gap between theory and practice, resulting in a limited impact of their education (Jackson, 2015). Real-life application not only reinforces learning, but also helps learners to develop competencies and skills that are crucial for navigating and succeeding in culturally-diverse environments.

Author contributions

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