

## 1 Reflexive Introduction

### *Objectives*

- To justify the need for a text on interculturality for teacher education;
- To understand what the Element is about and who it is aimed at;
- To reflect on the complexities and polysemy of the notion of interculturality.

### *Reflect Before Reading the Section*

- Why did you pick up this Element? What kind of knowledge are you looking for? Why is interculturality important to you as a (future) teacher, a teacher educator and/or a researcher?
- What comes to mind when you hear the word *interculturality* in English and in other languages? What is it about?
- Who does the notion refer to concretely? When you say *intercultural communication*, for example, who do you imagine to be involved?
- Is the notion of interculturality omnipresent in your own institution and context? Are other similar words used? What do they mean in comparison and why do you think they are also in use?
- How much is interculturality embedded in teacher training and education in your country? What are the expected outcomes of learning about it?
- Finally, reflect on your own experiences of interculturality as a teacher and as an individual. Pick three examples and reflect on these questions: how would you describe your experience? Why did you pick these three examples? How relevant and important have they been in your life? How much have they shaped you?

### Preamble: What This Element Is About and for Whom

The notion of interculturality, and its derivatives and companions such as *intercultural communication*, *multiculturalism* and *transculturality*, is multifaceted. It can be defined, understood and used in many different ways in different walks of life. At times, it is not even circumscribed but used as an ‘automaton’ to refer to, for example, ‘meeting people from abroad’, ‘meeting cultures’ or ‘clashing with other cultures’. Usually the way we engage with the broad range of terms denoting interculturality relates to the way we have been made to think about *us* and *them*, to compare our ‘country’/‘culture’ with other ‘countries’/‘cultures’ and to locate our own position in the global world. Foreign and domestic politics, the media, social media, the arts, our acquaintances, friends and family, as well as

education (amongst other aspects) have all shaped the way we see and ‘do’ interculturality, often in unstable ways. One day we might think that ‘Brits are this or that’, uttering a coarse generalization, and the next day, talking to a British individual, we might make a statement that counters the stereotype we held the previous day. One day we might face discrimination in another country, and start being sensitive to the issue of racism in our own context upon return. Finally, after reading a media report about the plight of refugees in another part of the world, we might change our own views on the issue of migration. As educators, all of these elements also influence us in the way we think, unthink, rethink and do interculturality in our classrooms and beyond. As a central component of any society, education interacts indirectly or directly with the ways people are perceived and treated outside schools. As such, education is a place of otherness par excellence; being confronted by the other and othering (considering the other through limited lenses) is a common experience in schools. One could say that the other, *us versus them*, is part and parcel of education and that interculturality is inevitable. However, what the notion means and how it can be applied to the work of teachers is multifaceted around the world. The way it is introduced in teacher education might also differ immensely. For example, I am writing from Finland, a country famed for its education and whose teachers seem to be revered around the world. In this context, teacher education does not aim to equip future teachers with a few ‘tricks’ to engage with interculturality but to help them build up enough criticality and reflexivity around the notion to be able to deal with the complex intercultural situations that they will face when they start working with diverse individuals in their classrooms, schools and beyond. As a teacher educator myself, I do not provide pre-service teachers with ‘ready-made’ knowledge about what interculturality is, what it does or what to do about it but I ‘learn’ with them how to consider the notion from multiple scientific, economic-political and ideological angles so we can multiply and adapt our (re-)actions to it. We thus acquaint ourselves with global research on the notion (from ‘dominating’ models to lesser-known perspectives), try out ideas in groups and with future teachers from Finland and other parts of the world (e.g. Peng & Dervin, 2022; Chen & Dervin, 2023), and reflect on interculturality as a notion that deserves opening up again and again. Preparing in-service teachers for interculturality in the Finnish context is not about providing them with ‘miraculous tools’ but about empowering them to make decisions about interculturality together with others in different contexts and situations. One recurring argument made in this Element is that interculturality as a phenomenon is ‘fluid’ (e.g. Holliday, 2010; Dervin & R’boul, 2022) and that dealing with it educationally and academically requires ‘dissolving’ the way we have been made to think about it.

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I have written the Element not to provide easy recipes to ‘doing’ interculturality in teacher education but for us to reflect further on the complexities of engaging with a notion that appears to be central in our current fragmented and conflictual worlds with, for example, a war in Europe, economic crises, increasing social and racial injustice, and geopolitical polarization. I use the word ‘world’ in the plural on purpose, as a first reminder that we need to think of *us* and *them* as complex entities as we engage with interculturality. Considering the grave situation of today – which derives from past issues – interculturality should be taken seriously.

This is the main message of this Element: as educators, there is a need for us to consider the idea of interculturality from multiple perspectives, to examine and revise consciously and constantly our own takes on the notion. Interculturality is not a monolith and as soon as we start interacting with others around the notion, we notice that we do not necessarily share the same meanings, connotations and even values about interculturality. For some of us, interculturality might be about ‘cultures’, about the ‘international’; for others, it could be about ‘migrants from certain parts of the world’, ‘Indigenous people’, ‘races’ and/or ‘ethnicities’ – or a mix of all of these. What is more, when it comes to what we are supposed to be aiming at ‘interculturality’, different ideological constructs might also apply. Here I use the concept of *ideology* not in a negative way but to refer to what, for example, education tells us is the ‘right’ thing to do (Roucek, 1944). As far as interculturality is concerned, one might promote *tolerance*, *respect*, *sensitivity*, *open-mindedness*, *brotherhood*, *unity*, but also *social justice* and/or *equality* (amongst others). All these terms can also be indefinite and ambiguous in the ways they are used in different contexts and especially in different languages.

Like most scholars and educators, I have my own beliefs about what interculturality could be and how to ‘do’ it. Throughout my career, I have kept and modified certain aspects of its definition. Some of these elements were influenced directly by my reading, my research (interviews, focus groups and ethnographies of thousands of people in different parts of the world), my learning in the classroom as an educator, my engagement with junior and senior scholars from around the world and my own life experiences. Other aspects of my take on interculturality might be more related to worldviews and ideologies that were passed on to me without me being fully aware of them. I could share with you what I think interculturality is and how you should do it. I have done so in the past, preferring a so-called postmodern, liquid and anti-essentialist form of interculturality, which puts the emphasis on co-constructions, identity (re-)negotiations, power and processes of encountering (see e.g. Dervin, 2016; Dervin, 2022a; Dervin et al., 2022). But I don’t feel that my role in this Element

is to put forward this ‘Western’ perspective, which is somewhat dominating research today (e.g. Dervin & Jacobsson, 2022). I would not want to give the impression that interculturality is *one* and that my way of engaging with it is the only and right way, or that there is some kind of universal way of doing it in research and education. As such, in Finland, discussions of interculturality tend to revolve around immigrants and refugees, and ‘elite’ educational internationalization. In 2022, the key topics of *diversity*, *social justice* and *anti-racism* seem to dominate the Finnish educational context and teacher education/training. Speaking to different colleagues and teachers from around the world, I notice that their takes on these terms are many and varied and that there does not seem to be a unified way of engaging with them. In recent years, I have also worked extensively in the Chinese context, both with scholars working on, for example, language and intercultural education (e.g. Tan et al., 2022) and on Chinese Minzu (‘ethnic’) education (e.g. Dervin & Yuan, 2021). These two different strands of ‘interculturality’ have their own specific mixed discourses, methods and practices, with very few intersections. It means that when I work on Minzu education with my colleagues, we do not use the same terms and references as when I work with Chinese language specialists. Similarly, the educational objectives set differ. For example, the language and intercultural education strand focuses on tolerance and global-mindedness (amongst other aspects), while the Minzu education one, which focuses on the education of the diverse fifty-six Minzu groups of Mainland China, looks into fostering a sense of ‘diversity in unity’ in students and providing students from less-developed areas with opportunities through affirmative actions. In this Element, I often use examples from Mainland China to either illustrate points that I make or to make us think further about the need to consider ways of engaging with interculturality beyond the ‘West’. My experiences with China have been the most significant ones in helping me to unthink and rethink the notion. I have also cooperated extensively with colleagues from France, Malaysia and the United States, where the terms used and objectives set can also differ. So, promoting my own beliefs about interculturality, especially in relation to how we could ‘do’ it, is out of the question here. Again, I am more interested in going on a journey of discovery with you.

As a consequence of the points made earlier, I need to say that this Element will not train you to ‘do’ interculturality ‘properly’ since this adverb could mean different things in many different contexts. Instead, following the Finnish trend to stimulate criticality and reflexivity in teacher education, the Element will support you in reflecting critically about how you ‘do’ it, the meaning(s) you give to the notion and the lifelong changes that you can make to it. Depending on the context and interests, the Element can be used by

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teacher educators, pre-service and in-service teachers and scholars involved in researching interculturality. Readers interested in inclusive education and language education, for example, might also find the Element stimulating. Both subfields have contributed directly and indirectly to scholarship on the notion (e.g. Ferguson-Patrick & Jolliffe, 2018; Cobb & Bower, 2021). Since interculturality is included in many educational and academic discussions surrounding teacher education, I will only make passing remarks on these subfields so as not to ‘overcrowd’ the Element.

I have now been addressing you, my reader, many times. But as I am writing these words, I am wondering who is it that I am talking to. Who are the heterogenous ‘ears’ that are listening to me now? As a writer, I need to imagine who you are. You could be from any part of the world, from Ghana to Bolivia, from Norway to Oman, from Tajikistan to China. You could be a scholar, a novice researcher, a colleague and friend, a teacher in primary school, a teacher educator, in-service and pre-service teachers from all levels of the curriculum. You might work for a private institution, a public/state one, an NGO or a professional development centre. You might be a Christian, a Mormon, a Sikh or an atheist. You might have travelled the world or never left your country, your town or your village. Some of you might have several passports. Some of you might work in another country, in one of your countries, online. Some of you might speak several languages and dialects, write in two different languages or understand five languages orally. Finally, some of you will have read hundreds of books and articles on the topic of interculturality, while others might have just taken a short course on how to develop intercultural competence, for example. These selective (and limited) categories represent a good reminder to me as the one writing this Element and to you, my extremely complex range of readers: our interaction mediated by paper or a screen is also very much intercultural.

No one would ever be able to publish a book that addresses all these different identities, profiles and needs. Different readers will have their special interests and priorities. As soon as a book is published in English today, it is aimed at the whole world. My duty here is to consider that you are all from different parts of the world, that you have different statuses (teacher educators, in-service and pre-service teachers. . .) with different starting points concerning interculturality and that I must take this consistently into account in problematizing how we could deal with interculturality in teacher education. Some of my own (restricted) beliefs will most likely pop up here and there in the Element. Use these moments as opportunities to reflect on why I could be writing in a such or such way or why I might make a given point. In general, I would say that the Element is aimed at those of us who (think they) know about interculturality and at those who (think they) don’t and who have an interest in teacher education.

Finally, while I consider myself a specialist of interculturality in education, I constantly need to remind myself that I don't know everything about it. Although there is a hierarchy established between me as a writer and you as a reader – I have the 'power to speak', the reader remains silent somewhat – my approach does not consist in *looking down upon you* and in *telling you that you don't know*. Unfortunately, I can't *hear* you as you are reading through the sections: I can't listen to your thoughts, your hesitations, your worries, your disagreements or even your laughter, your tears, your anger. These all matter to me as a writer since in dealing with interculturality as an object of research and education, we need all of these in order to move forward in the way we engage with the notion, to enrich our own knowledge. I have no other choice but to accept the limits of our communication here, hoping that I will hear from some of you one day.

What the Element does is to make us think together, asking questions about the ways we might want to engage with interculturality and change as we experience other voices about it. I also have a special responsibility here: there is often an underground accusatory tone in research on interculturality in teacher education, either about students or teachers themselves. As we shall see in the first section, scholars have often looked at how educators understand and perceive interculturality and categorized them into 'neat' boxes that often impose judgements about educators' take. My task here is not to contribute to this but to explore with you how we could deal with such a complex notion throughout our careers. I will not give the illusion that I have answers to all the questions I will be asking and especially not the illusion that I know how to 'do' and deal with interculturality. This Element is meant to be a safe space where we can ask important questions about a notion that urgently needs to be unpacked and discussed today. So, put the atelophobia (the fear of making mistakes) that many of us experience about interculturality aside and join me on this important journey.

### What Is Interculturality?

When people ask me what I do and hear that I am a researcher working on interculturality, they often appear to be confused by the word. A few days ago, a friend of mine asked me this question: 'How would you define interculturality in one sentence?' I replied that it has already taken me twenty years of my life to try to make sense of what it is and how people 'do' it and that one sentence would never be enough to summarize what I found. What is interculturality then, the core object of this Element? I am tempted to say *I don't know any more*. When I started in the field, I used interculturality as a mere synonym for *international*. After twenty years of research, cooperating with people from

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Australia, Canada, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Iceland, Israel, Mainland China, Malaysia, Norway, Spain, Sweden, the UK and the United States (amongst others), I have shifted my thoughts about the notion in many and varied ways. Defining interculturality for an international audience is, in a way, imposing one's own ideological take on such a polysemic concept. By not defining it here, some of you might think that I am putting an end to potential conversations, as if I were saying 'interculturality is interculturality'. But, in fact, the reason why I don't wish to define it here is to keep it floating, to let diverse voices speak about it, and to let you explore with me interculturality in its different facets in the following sections – first listening to research on interculturality and teacher education published in English in top journals and second getting to reflect together on what it might mean and entail in our respective complex contexts.

The question *what is interculturality?* sounds like a very 'normal' and 'obvious' question to start with (the word is on the cover of this Element). I would argue that other kinds of questions could be more relevant for our purpose. For instance:

- What matters most in the word *inter-cultur-ality*? *Inter-?* *Culture?* And/or *-ality*? What do each of these elements mean and refer to, especially when combined? What should be done with the problematic concept of *culture*, which seems to mean everything and nothing at the same time (see Wikan, 2002)? About *inter-*: is it meant to indicate *in-betweenness*, *mixing*, *mélange* or something else?
- Why do we (want to) use the notion of interculturality in teacher education? Who urges us directly or indirectly to use this label? Why don't we use *multicultural* or *culturally responsive* instead – two other dominating terms used globally?
- How do people engage with the notion of interculturality (and its companions) around the world? What meanings do they give to them? What concepts and words do they use to explain it or to make it workable (e.g. race, worldview, ethnicity, nationality, diversity)?

Before I continue to discuss the very question of *what is interculturality?* I would like to pause for a few moments to reflect with you on one keyword that comes back again and again in English in education today: *diversity*. A few years ago, I was a member of a Nordic research team entitled *Diverse Teachers for Diverse Learners*. At the very first meeting, I patiently waited for someone to explain who the label *diverse* referred to since no one had told me what it was meant to signify before the meeting. At the end of the day, no one had voiced what was 'hiding' behind the word. I thus ventured a question: 'Who are we



talking about here? We have spent eight hours talking to each other but we have not named the core of the issue that we are discussing: who is diverse?' My question was met with silence and embarrassment. We were all white Nordics in the room. I then said: 'Is the word a substitute for another word? *Migrant* perhaps? *Migrant Teachers for Migrant Learners*?' Most of my colleagues nodded and we quickly moved on to the next topic.

The vast majority of articles dealing with interculturality in education tend to start with a statement like 'Schools have never been as diverse as they are today'. What does the word *diverse* mean here? As you read the sentence, certain images probably came to your mind, and depending on where you work in the world, the people that you pictured might have been very different. Some of us might see 'migrant children from certain parts of the world', 'Indigenous pupils', 'pupils from specific ethnic groups' or 'pupils of different races'. Beyond interculturality, some might picture 'children of different genders', 'different socio-economic backgrounds' and even 'children with special needs'. Maybe a minority of us might just picture any group of students that they have worked with, arguing that *every child is diverse*. This leads us to important questions: what is the border between *intercultural* and *non-intercultural* when the people we refer to as *diverse* can encompass such large groups of people? Who decides what is and what is not intercultural? Here again, the answer would depend on contexts, beliefs and ideologies, and economic-political positions.

Many research articles have tried to understand how researchers and educators understand the idea of diversity in education. For example, Holm and Londen (2010) have noted that the word is used as a synonym for 'immigrant pupils' in Finnish policies and curricula. Liu and Ball (2019: 71) demonstrate how scholars dealing with diversity present 'lists of characteristics such as ethnicity, race, language and social class' – with religious and sexual diversity, for example, being less frequently included. They also share their concern about the overuse of the concept of 'cultural diversity' as a potential substitute for other terms that seem to be avoided such as *race* and *ethnicity*. Fylkesnes (2017) agrees that teacher education researchers do not explicitly define 'cultural diversity', with some using it interchangeably with *multicultural*. Interestingly, in a review of papers engaging with the concept of diversity in teacher education, Rowan et al. (2021: 134) note the systematic presence of the following claims:

1. Diversity (in both student and community populations) is a fact of contemporary life.
2. Diversity makes new, and/or increased and/or difficult demands on today's (still largely homogenous) teaching population, which therefore requires particular or further forms of support/preparation.



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3. Teacher educators have a major responsibility for ensuring future teachers are as prepared as possible to work effectively and respectfully with the entire student population.

In general, researchers conclude that diversity is conceptually weak in teacher education research and programmes and that this might impede effective and precise communication between different educational actors and decision makers, for example. In the Element I do make use of the words *diverse* and *diversity* without positioning them clearly. I am doing this on purpose not to impose my own biases on you. I know that many of you will place different entities behind the very words. However, when you come across the words in my writing, try to bear in mind that 1. diversity is always a viewpoint (who defines who as *diverse*? Who is included in it and excluded from it?); 2. diversity is a potential misnomer (one could argue that *everybody is in fact diverse*); 3. diversity is a term that can be a substitute for a word that we might not want to voice (e.g. *race* or *culture*).

After this short and important detour, let's go back to the question of *what is interculturality*? I started my career with the label *intercultural* and have stayed with it ever since. In Finland, my professorship is in *multicultural education* but I have only used the label once in my publications. Politically and in terms of research, these two terms do differ and when I was appointed in multicultural education I panicked somehow: *what to do with this label*? At that time, I thought that it was too 'US-centric' and contained ideologies that I did not necessarily back. A few years after I was appointed, several labels appeared on the Finnish academic 'market': *global*, *social justice* and *sustainable*. Talking to colleagues from these subfields of education, I realized that we often shared the same research interests and that our ideological take on, for example, *us* and *them*, issues of *communication* and *learning/teaching* were quite similar. Travelling the world to give talks and collect data prior to the 2020 pandemic, I also realized that some colleagues used the notion of interculturality in different ways and that some who referred to their work as being *transcultural* or *global* often shared very similar interests and ideas with me. Over the years I have thus decided to stick to interculturality, although I could have used other terms. What matters in the end is to be very explicit about how one understands the notion when we cooperate with others, to be open and curious about other ways of engaging with it, and to modify our own takes whenever we feel it is possible and needed. I do believe that interculturality as an object of research and education should be itself *interculturalized* to open up to others and, especially, to counter current 'Western-centric' perspectives on the notion (Aman, 2017; R'boul, 2021).

*What is interculturality?* I would say that interculturality is always in the eye of the beholder and that we should never assume that what it refers to and what it urges people to do in education are in line with what we think and (are asked to) do. Discourses of interculturality always take place in a ‘space’ that goes well beyond the national and yet they are embedded in glocal (global + local) contexts. I have used the label *intercultural* throughout my career but I feel that I cannot close the door to other labels and other ways of perceiving, understanding and dealing with what it symbolizes.

One final point about defining interculturality, which will be used as a red thread throughout the Element: the importance of language. In English, interculturality and its companions are already very diverse semantically. When one adds other languages, the complexity is staggering. In some languages the idea of interculturality is not even available (e.g. Chinese and Finnish), while in others one needs to play around to translate both *inter-* and *-ality*. In some languages, such as Spanish in South America, the word *interculturalidad* exists but it has very specific connotations and often relates to Indigenous groups. This is something that we also need to be curious about and reflecting on the (mis-)translation of terms matters as much as trying to find a clear definition of interculturality in ‘one sentence’.

The Element thus urges us to be curious about other ways of defining, understanding and delimiting interculturality, not in order to restrict it but to help us open up to other ways of thinking about it so we may enrich ourselves as educators. Enclosing ourselves in a given monolingual and ideological cocoon of interculturality could easily go against the very idea of interculturality. I argue that teachers could deal with issues of interculturality more effectively if they could take the time and had the opportunity to reflect on and make sense of how others (students, colleagues, parents, decision makers) view the notion ideologically.

### Why Should Interculturality Matter for Teachers, Teacher Educators and Scholars?

This subsection serves to continue justifying the importance of ‘caring about’ interculturality as educators. To me, the question goes hand in hand with another question: *why do we educate people?* As we have seen, what interculturality means and entails can be multiform in different contexts, languages and for different people. What is more, I have mentioned the fact that some of its companions (e.g. *multicultural* but also *cross-cultural*, *transcultural* or even *social justice*) can refer to similar realities or different ones, depending on the key terms used, foci and ideological backgrounds. I have also insisted on the polysemic use of the concept of *diversity*, which often appears alongside interculturality, referring to different entities. What could be similar in many perspectives relating to the notion in