



Intercultural Competence in Schools: The Role of Leadership and Organizational Contexts

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Abstract. This paper examines intercultural competence in schools as a systemic and practice-oriented dimension of contemporary education, moving beyond compensatory or emergency approaches aimed only at migrant pupils. It argues that intercultural education should be understood as a whole-school project grounded in democratic citizenship, inclusion, mutual recognition, and social justice. Intercultural competence is framed as “knowledge in action”: a dynamic, reflective, and relational capacity shaped through daily educational practices, empathy, cultural intelligence, and critical awareness of one’s own assumptions. The paper highlights the central role of educational leadership in creating the organizational, relational, and symbolic conditions necessary for intercultural change. Rather than relying solely on the headteacher, it emphasizes distributed and teacher leadership, collaborative responsibility, community engagement, and reflective professional cultures. Methodologies such as action research, self-evaluation, participatory teaching practices, induction protocols, and community education agreements are presented as tools for transforming school cultures. Ultimately, the paper proposes intercultural leadership as a process of “reculturing” schools, transforming diversity from a challenge to be managed into a structural resource for educational innovation, inclusion, and democratic participation.

Keywords: Intercultural Competence, Intercultural Education, Educational Leadership, Inclusive Schools, Distributed Leadership, Teacher Leadership, School Culture, Action Research, Democratic Citizenship, Social Justice.

1 Introduction

1.1 Interculturalism in the contemporary school system

In the current global context, characterised by high complexity and increasingly intense patterns of human mobility, intercultural education can no longer be regarded as an ‘emergency’ measure or as a specialised pedagogical approach aimed exclusively at foreign pupils (Bufalino & D’Aprile, 2019; Fiorucci, 2020). Rather, it takes the form of a deliberate educational project designed for all students, both native and migrant, with the aim of transforming the perceptions and cognitive frameworks through which we represent otherness and relate to it (Fiorucci, Pinto Minerva & Portera, 2017). From this perspective, interculturalism takes on the characteristics of an active political and

pedagogical task, geared towards building relationships founded on dialogue, equal engagement and mutual transformation (Bufalino & D'Aprile, 2019; Fiorucci, 2020).

This approach requires the adoption of a 'migratory' mindset (Pinto Minerva, 2002), capable of navigating multiple frames of reference, adapting educational practice, and engaging in constant reflection on the latent pedagogies and cultural assumptions that shape these practices (Agar, 1996; Becchi, 2005). Attention to participation cannot, therefore, translate into standardising mechanisms, but implies the ability to distinguish and recognise differences, avoiding the flattening of biographical trajectories and family histories. Some differences, in fact, carry greater weight in terms of access to educational spaces and the opportunity to have one's say, having a concrete impact on the conditions for encounter, mutual recognition and collective participation in growth pathways (Casalbone A., Meloni G., Stillo L. & Riccardi V., 2026, p. 7).

From this perspective, inclusion is understood as a process of transforming educational contexts that shifts the focus from individuals to contexts, critically examining educational practices, organisations and cultures, and prioritising the removal of barriers that limit full and meaningful participation in educational processes (Bocci, 2017). The definition of inclusion proposed by Santi and Ghedin (2012, p. 100) is particularly significant in highlighting the relational and multi-systemic nature of this educational approach. Drawing on set theory, the authors conceive of inclusion not as an intrinsic property of individuals, but as a relationship established between elements belonging to different sets. In this view, being 'included' or 'containing' does not depend on individual characteristics, but emerges from the interaction between contexts and systems of belonging. The relationship of inclusion is characterised by a principle of antisymmetry, which allows the identity of the individual sets to be preserved despite the mutual belonging of the elements involved. Inclusion, therefore, does not imply assimilation or homogenisation, but rather the recognition of differences within a relationship that holds them together. It is precisely through this dynamic that the possibility of a coincidence between sets is realised, understood as the involvement of all elements in the relationship of belonging. Applied to the field of social and educational sciences, this model enables us to grasp the complex and systemic nature of inclusion, understood as a condition of (well)being that is built within a network of relationships. It involves feeling recognised, respected and valued for who one is, alongside the perception of an adequate level of support, energy and mutual commitment, such that everyone is able to express their full potential. From this perspective, inclusion is not a state acquired once and for all, but a dynamic process that takes shape through the interaction between individuals, contexts and educational systems – a journey that must be consciously built day by day.

The most recent European and international educational policies align with this approach, recognising that intercultural education plays a structural role in fostering democratic citizenship. In particular, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, through Target 4.7 of Goal 4, highlights the need to ensure that all learners acquire knowledge, skills and attitudes geared towards global citizenship, respect for human rights, the appreciation of cultural diversity and the promotion of a culture of peace. From this perspective, interculturalism is not seen as an additional thematic area, but as

a defining dimension of citizenship education processes in complex social and interdependent contexts.

This approach is further reinforced, at European level, by the Council of Europe Recommendation (2022), which establishes a close link between intercultural education, democratic skills and active citizenship, calling on Member States to systematically integrate these dimensions into curricula, teacher training and the life of educational institutions. Interculturalism is thus adopted as a pedagogical lever for fostering individuals capable of exercising informed, dialogical and inclusive citizenship.

In the Italian context, this framework is explicitly reflected in the Intercultural Guidelines of the National Observatory for the Integration of Foreign Pupils and Intercultural Education (Ministry of Education and Merit, 2022), which emphasise the convergence between the intercultural perspective and civic education, understood as education for democratic coexistence, participation and social responsibility. This approach is further confirmed by the New National Guidelines for the Curriculum of Nursery Schools and the First Cycle of Education (2025), which treat cultural and social pluralism as a structural feature of the educational experience and call for curriculum design geared towards the development of citizenship skills based on relationships, mutual recognition and active participation.

Promoting a genuinely intercultural school therefore means moving beyond compensatory approaches to embrace a process of ‘reculturing’ (Bufalino & D’Aprile, 2019), understood as a profound and intentional transformation of school cultures, curricula and educational practices. From this perspective, interculturalism is not limited to the addition of specific content or interventions, but calls for a critical review of the symbolic and normative frameworks that guide educational practice, in line with the concept of the whole-school approach (Banks, 2008; Ainscow, 2020). Re-culturing implies the recognition of plurality as a normal feature of school life and of diversity as an epistemic and democratic resource, leading to a rethinking of educational relationships, modes of participation and forms of citizenship practised daily in schools (UNESCO, 2015; Council of Europe, 2022). The challenge does not concern the actions of individual teachers alone, but affects the entire organisational and cultural system of the school. The role of educational leadership—exercised both by the Headteacher and through forms of leadership shared amongst teachers (teacher leadership)—thus becomes central, understood as the ability to guide and transform professional cultures, acting as a true cultural architect capable of promoting a school ethos founded on mutual recognition, participation and social justice (Bufalino & D’Aprile, 2019; Bove, 2019; Milani, 2018). Homer, as Pinneri (2022, p. 11) points out,

“had already realised that sharing is a powerful element in work contexts, capable of making work less burdensome but, above all, more engaging and rewarding. No one can think of isolating their work and isolating themselves in any social or work context. This is all the more true in a work environment such as the school setting, which requires teamwork to organise a joint and harmonious educational programme aimed at instructing, training and educating the younger generations, and where it is impossible to imagine not connecting with others, from teachers to students, to headteachers, to administrative staff and, finally, to the pupils’ families themselves”.

2 Intercultural competence as “knowledge in action”

Within the context of contemporary pedagogical debate, intercultural competence is no longer interpreted as a mere set of theoretical concepts, but has been redefined as genuine ‘knowledge in action’ or ‘situational knowledge’ (Milani, 2018). This paradigm shift suggests that being competent does not merely mean ‘knowing what’ to do in theory, but possessing the dynamic ability to interact effectively and appropriately within relationships characterised by diversity. Such competence is not a static goal, but rather a continuous process that emerges from a variable alchemy of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that manifest themselves in the midst of daily practice (Milani, 2018; Portera, 2013).

A fundamental pillar of this approach is the figure of the reflective professional, who does not merely apply standardised protocols, but constructs their own intervention strategy in the course of action, continually negotiating between their own skill set, experience and the unexpected (Schön, 1993). From this perspective, intercultural competence is inherently multidimensional and relational: it does not reside exclusively in the individual’s mind, but takes shape in the encounter with the other and in the specific context in which the exchange takes place (Milani, 2018).

To navigate this complexity, teachers and school leaders can draw on the concept of Cultural Intelligence (CQ), defined as the ability to function and act effectively in culturally diverse contexts (Schmidt & Hunter, 2000). It comprises a cognitive dimension, relating to knowledge of cultural norms and contexts; a motivational dimension, linked to interest and curiosity regarding difference; a behavioural dimension, concerning the adaptability of communicative behaviours; and a metacognitive dimension, connected to the ability to consciously monitor and regulate one’s own intercultural strategies (Milani, 2018). Alongside these dimensions, certain cross-cutting skills – such as empathy, active listening, suspension of judgement and tolerance of ambiguity – are central, enabling one to navigate difference without being overwhelmed by it (Gozzoli & Regalia, 2005).

From this perspective, empathy plays a central role not only in educational practice but also in teachers’ professional development, emerging as a skill to be deliberately developed within initial and continuing professional development programmes. As Nussbaum emphasises, empathy consists of ‘the ability to put oneself in another person’s shoes, to be an intelligent reader of their story, to understand the emotions, expectations and desires of the person facing them’ (1999, p. 111); this ability is an essential prerequisite for the exercise of a teaching profession oriented towards dialogue, recognition of the other and educational responsibility.

Within the framework of teacher training, empathy cannot be regarded as an innate disposition or a spontaneous skill, but rather as a complex professional knowledge that requires reflective, experiential and situated training practices. In this sense, it is intertwined with the interpersonal intelligence described by Gardner (2007), understood as the ability to understand and interact effectively with others, grasping their emotions, intentions and relational dynamics. Teacher training is therefore called upon to promote pedagogical approaches capable of supporting these skills, through engagement with

diversity, the analysis of practices, self-narration and the reflective processing of educational experience. As Moretti (2022, p. 24) argues, it is essential to value the

“emotional dimension in the exercise of leadership, in particular by fostering, within the educational relationship with peers, certain aspects clearly outlined by Goleman (1996; 2016): sensitivity, empathy, creativity, flexibility in human behaviour, and the ability to motivate and engage people. It is not possible to adopt the same solutions to address similar problems, especially when referring to contexts and situations that differ from one another, as is the case when we examine different schools or work contexts”.

Teacher training focused on developing empathy promotes cognitive and emotional decentring, which is essential for overcoming ethnocentric attitudes and stereotypical interpretations of pupils’ behaviour and needs. Empathy thus becomes a key competence for understanding multicultural educational contexts, interpreting students’ experiences, and developing inclusive teaching practices that are sensitive to cultural, linguistic and social differences. Teacher training cannot, therefore, be limited to the transmission of theoretical knowledge, but must take the form of a transformative process, capable of influencing the perceptions, attitudes and professional stances of teachers, who must be able to exercise

“a democratic leadership, characterised by equal and respectful relationships, capable of addressing the human aspects of the professional and educational relationship, which by its very nature implies the possibility of accepting the presence of doubt, fears, second thoughts, enthusiasm and the sharing of the emotional dimension” (Moretti, 2022, p. 25).

Empathy thus translates into an ethical and professional competence that supports the negotiation of differences, the creation of spaces for dialogue, and the promotion of inclusive learning environments, contributing significantly to the prevention of prejudice and the promotion of a school understood as a democratic and pluralistic educational community.

Intercultural competence, understood as knowledge in action, follows a process-oriented and spiral logic: every intercultural encounter, when accompanied by reflection, produces transformations that are both internal – such as the shifting and relativisation of one’s own frames of reference – and external, resulting in more conscious and constructive interactions (Deardorff, 2006; Milani, 2018). Possessing such competence ultimately means being capable of practising ‘critical ethnocentrism’ (De Martino, 1977), questioning one’s own interpretative paradigms in order to reduce the level of ethnocentrism present in the education system and make the school a place of genuine participation and mutual recognition (Fiorucci, 2015; 2020).

3 What role does educational leadership play?

Over the years, educational leadership has become a fertile field for study and research: there is a wide range of conceptual, methodological and even terminological approaches, and it is not always easy to navigate them. Depending on the researcher’s

perspective and the aspects they wish to investigate, the terms used include moral, institutional and managerial leadership, among others. What emerges are images, sometimes conflicting with one another, yet always highlighting the challenge facing the Headteacher: that of managing, in a positive manner, an educational context that is constantly changing, at times unpredictable, uncertain, turbulent and full of upheaval (Barzanò, 2008). As Ruzzanti (2016) argues, the headteacher plays a crucial role in the exercise of educational leadership, aimed at ensuring educational inclusion through the adoption of organisational and managerial solutions consistent with the principles of equity and equal learning opportunities. As the guarantor of the educational provision, they are responsible for the learning processes of all pupils and contribute significantly to the construction of a school system capable of responding to diverse educational needs, including through the educational and organisational choices formalised in the Educational Provision P Within the Italian school system, where inclusion is a fundamental and structural element, the Headteacher is called upon to promote an inclusive culture by implementing specific training programmes, designing initiatives aimed at families and the local community, participating in school networks, and supporting bodies responsible for inclusion. The headteacher's role is primarily focused on organisational, managerial and institutional coordination; however, it takes on strategic importance in promoting a school understood as an educational community, collectively oriented towards the goal of inclusion.

This role is thus characterised as a sort of tightrope walker (Cerulo, 2015), constantly balancing between the pedagogical demands mentioned above—which stem from educational leadership—and the managerial demands that characterise the school-as-organisation, often caught in the tension between efficiency and effectiveness typical of managerial leadership.

The headteacher is, in fact, second only to the teaching staff as one of the key factors in determining the level of inclusivity within an educational institution (Ruzzante, 2016). In a context where inclusion is understood in its broadest sense:

“a principles-based approach to the functioning of education and society, linked to democratic participation both within and beyond education. This is not an aspect of education that concerns a particular group of pupils, but rather a proposal that aims to bring coherence to the expansion of activities generally situated in separate areas, so as to stimulate the learning and participation of everyone: pupils, families, staff, headteachers and other members of the community” (Booth & Ainscow, 2014, p. 47).

In light of this interpretative framework, schools are called upon to function as educational communities, within which

“members demonstrate total mutual engagement; learning communities where learning is both an attitude and an activity [...] inclusive communities where differences are welcomed and valued within a framework of mutual respect; and research communities where members are inspired by a spirit of collective inquiry. But to become each of these things, schools must first become communities with a clear purpose. They must become places where members have developed a community of thought that binds them together in a special way and links them to a shared ideology” (Sergiovanno, 2002, p. XVI).

Leadership is very often not regarded as a phenomenon relating exclusively to the role of the headteacher but, from a broader perspective, as a process of shared responsibility involving all stakeholders within the school, not just the headteacher. Indeed, it is not uncommon to find studies – whether theoretical or applied – that refer to ‘distributed leadership’ (Manariti, 2004; Moretti, 2011), ‘distributed leadership’ (Paletta and Pisanu, 2015; Treelle, 2007, 2013), ‘collaborative leadership’ (Leithwood and Menzies, 1998; Murphy, 2005), ‘a school’s leadership potential’ (Barzanò, 2008) and ‘community of leaders’ (Comoglio, 2002). Leadership is therefore regarded as a social and shared process, capable of finding solutions and making decisions by mobilising the participation and reflection – including critical reflection – of everyone: the Headteacher, teachers, pupils, parents and the community with which the school interacts. This does not mean that the Headteacher’s role is diminished, but that their work shifts towards planning, managing interactions between all those involved, focusing on the school’s educational and teaching tasks, fostering a collaborative school environment, and ensuring the participation of all stakeholders in choices, decisions and school life, so that they feel they are ‘shaping’ its future.

To ensure that intercultural engagement is effective and sustainable, we must move beyond the notion that the responsibility for inclusion rests solely on the shoulders of individual teachers and school leaders. This shift suggests that leadership should no longer be understood as the exercise of solitary power based on hierarchy, but as a shared or distributed form of leadership, which sees teachers themselves (teacher leadership) as genuine agents of change capable of influencing the quality of teaching and the school climate (Bufalino & D’Aprile, 2019; Harris, 2014). The school must be understood as a complex and ecological system, as a learning community (Wenger, 1998) in which the development of intercultural competence depends on the synergy between the individual, the family, services and the local community (Milani, 2018; Bronfenbrenner, 1986).

The role of the leader – whether the headteacher or a teacher with coordinating responsibilities – acts as a facilitator of processes, fostering organisational conditions, opportunities for dialogue and reflective practices that enable a collective and context-specific development of interculturalism as the guiding principle of school life. For intercultural commitment to take root effectively and sustainably, the school must adopt a systemic perspective, capable of influencing its own organisational cultures and not merely individual teaching practices. This implies, first and foremost, that interculturalism is explicitly adopted as a political and pedagogical horizon in the institution’s strategic documents – starting with the PTOF – by orienting its mission, vision and guidelines towards inclusivity and removing those institutional obstacles, often implicit, which can translate into resistance or forms of organisational obstructionism (Milani, 2018). In this regard, the development of human capital plays a central role: recognising and capitalising on the professional, linguistic and experiential backgrounds of teachers and staff means countering a deficit-based view of diversity and promoting work environments capable of learning from differences (Milani, 2018; Ciancio, 2014). However, this openness cannot be confined within the school’s walls; rather, it requires the school to function as an open system, capable of establishing educational networks and partnerships with families, third-sector organisations and local

welfare services, in accordance with a principle of shared educational responsibility that is now being put into practice through Community Education Agreements (Bufalino & D'Aprile, 2019; Milani, 2018). From an intercultural perspective, institutional communication and access to information take on a profoundly educational and political significance. The production of clear, accessible and culturally mediated information is not merely a bureaucratic formality, but constitutes an essential condition for promoting the empowerment of families with a migrant background and supporting genuine forms of participation in school life (Portera, 2006; Milani, 2018). A focus on communicative transparency, including through the use of multilingual tools and linguistic and cultural mediation, helps to reduce information asymmetries and build relationships based on trust and mutual recognition. In this sense, communication becomes an integral part of processes of inclusion and interactionist integration, directly influencing the quality of educational relationships and the overall atmosphere of the school.

Educational leadership is called upon to shift symbolically from 'ducere' to 'cum ducere', taking on a role of accompaniment and care that values the uniqueness of individuals and promotes widespread forms of democratic participation (Fiorucci et al., 2021). International literature on inclusive leadership emphasises that this approach requires an integrated set of dispositions and skills, often traced back to the 6 Cs model, which should not be viewed as a technical repertoire, but as an ethical and relational grammar of educational practice in complex contexts. Commitment and courage are intertwined in the ability to embrace diversity as a value and to challenge the status quo; awareness of bias and curiosity underpin processes of individual and organisational reflective learning; cultural intelligence enables one to navigate the plurality of contexts with awareness; finally, collaboration creates the conditions of psychological safety necessary for diversity of thought to become a resource for innovation (Harris, 2014; Milani, 2018; Edmondson, 1999; Deloitte University Press, 2016).

From this perspective, the challenge of intercultural educational leadership lies not so much in altering procedures or formal structures (restructuring), but rather in initiating profound processes of re-culturing, capable of redefining the shared meanings that guide school life and of transforming diversity from a crisis to be managed into a structural resource for learning and social justice (Bufalino & D'Aprile, 2019; Lynn, 2002; Milani, 2018). Such symbolic decentralisation – a 'shifting of the centre of the world' – perhaps represents the most radical condition for building a school that is truly open, pluralistic and democratic (Fiorucci et al., 2021; Wa Thiong'o, 2000).

4 Methodologies and tools for change

To translate the intercultural perspective into structural and lasting change, educational leadership is called upon to promote methodologies and tools capable of supporting processes of shared reflection and organisational learning. In this regard, action research represents a key tool, as it enables school professionals to critically examine their own practices through iterative cycles of planning, action, observation and reflection, thereby bridging the gap between statements of principle and everyday practice (Losito & Pozzo, 2005; Bove, 2019). This approach helps to transform the school into

a context of situated research, in which teachers and school leaders take on the role of active agents of change, capable of learning from experience and consciously reorienting their actions (Milani, 2018; Nanni & Vaccarelli, 2019). As Ruzzante (2025, p. 111) emphasises:

“Self-evaluation provides an opportunity to reflect on the inclusive processes that have been implemented, with a view to planning improvements. The headteacher plays a central role in monitoring inclusion, focusing on both pupils’ learning outcomes and the inclusiveness of the school as a whole”.

To ensure that these processes do not remain isolated incidents, they must be formalised within the frameworks governing school autonomy, starting with the Three-Year Educational Plan and self-evaluation processes, in line with the Headteacher’s policy statement. In this context, tools such as the induction protocol and Community Education Agreements take on strategic value, not as bureaucratic formalities, but as educational mechanisms capable of steering organisational and teaching practices towards a genuine shared educational responsibility with the local community (Bufalino & D’Aprile, 2019; Milani, 2018). In terms of teaching practice, the adoption of active and participatory methodologies fosters the creation of cooperative learning environments, in which diversity becomes a resource for peer interaction and cognitive decentralisation, helping to make the school a genuinely open and inclusive space.

5 Towards intercultural leadership

The intercultural perspective, as outlined above, cannot be understood as a set of sector-specific or remedial measures aimed at specific groups of pupils, but rather as a deliberate educational project that permeates the entire school organisation. In this sense, intercultural competence is not limited to a repertoire of individual knowledge or skills, but takes the form of knowledge in action that is shaped by daily practices, educational relationships and the professional cultures of the school.

Within this framework, educational leadership plays a decisive role not so much in prescribing solutions, but in creating the organisational, relational and symbolic conditions that make authentic and shared change possible. Promoting widespread and reflective leadership means supporting processes of participation, shared responsibility and organisational learning, capable of guiding the school in addressing the complexity and diversity that characterise contemporary societies.

The challenge of interculturalism, therefore, does not lie solely in modifying structures or procedures, but in redefining the meanings that guide educational practice, by initiating processes of ‘reculturing’ capable of transforming diversity from a problem to be managed into a structural resource for educational innovation and social justice. From this perspective, the school can be conceived as a learning professional community, capable of practising decentralisation, of setting aside ethnocentric interpretations and of ‘shifting the centre of the world’, recognising in the plurality of experiences and life stories a constitutive condition of educational democracy.

Fully embracing this stance entails a pedagogical and political responsibility that calls upon school leaders, teachers and local communities to work together to build a

school that is truly open, welcoming and oriented towards recognition, in which everyone – whether native-born or migrant – can fully exercise their right to education and citizenship.

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