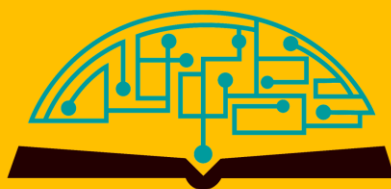


IJEPL

International Journal of
Educational
Practice &
Leadership



January 2025
Volume 1
Issue 1

ijepl.terrajournals.org

ISBN (print): 9798991524117

ISBN (online): 9798991524124

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The Case for Emotional Competence and Intercultural Competence in School Leadership

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ABSTRACT: This article explores the critical intersection of emotional competence and intercultural competence, emphasizing their combined significance in fostering effective leadership, particularly in educational settings. Emotional competence involves understanding, regulating, and utilizing emotions to navigate interpersonal dynamics, while intercultural competence focuses on bridging cultural differences through empathy and awareness. Together, these competencies form Emotional-Cultural Intelligence, a framework that enhances leaders' abilities to manage diverse teams and create inclusive environments. The paper highlights practical applications of these competencies in school leadership, illustrating how emotionally intelligent leaders cultivate tolerance and productivity while addressing challenges like bullying and discrimination. Additionally, it underscores the importance of intercultural competence in promoting social justice, dismantling biases, and fostering harmonious race relations. Through real-world examples and reflective narratives, this study demonstrates how integrating emotional and intercultural competencies equips leaders to navigate complex social dynamics with compassion, empathy, and cultural sensitivity. The article concludes with actionable recommendations that guide school leaders in building emotional and intercultural competence through reflective practice, immersive experiences, and mindful communication. This synthesis is presented as an essential paradigm for leadership in today's multicultural world.

KEYWORDS: Education, Leadership, Emotional Competence, Intercultural Competence, Emotional-Cultural Intelligence, School Leadership.

■ Introduction

Intercultural competence signifies the ability to socialize and engage effectively with individuals from diverse backgrounds, with special consideration of mindfulness, cultural norms, and performance. On the other hand, emotional competence is a constructive framework that everyone must learn and apply, regardless of discipline or occupation, to enable individuals to navigate complex social dynamics with empathy and understanding. Additionally, individuals must acknowledge the presence of conscious and unconscious biases within themselves and actively work towards breaking free from such flawed thinking. By doing so, people can effectively collaborate and engage with diverse individuals, leading to successful outcomes in their endeavors.

Equally important is that in order to be a successful leader in whatever one pursues, one must understand the relationship between emotional competence and intercultural competence. The amalgamation of these two concepts lies in finding a middle ground, a nexus where they converge. This integration of intercultural competence and emotional competence gives rise to Emotional-Cultural Intelligence. Emotional-cultural intelligence refers to the profound understanding of the intricate dynamics of human emotions and the complex interplay between psychology and culture. It entails a heightened awareness of the continuum that encompasses the psychology of emotions and the psychology of culture.

■ Overview of Emotional Competence

Several definitions aim to clarify the concept of emotional competence (EC). The most frequently cited definition of EC is described as "refers to how individuals deal with intra-personal and interpersonal emotional information ... how an individual identifies, expresses, understands, regulates and uses his emotions or those of others."¹

We conceptualize emotional competence as an attainable ability and the capacity to identify the emotional expressions of others within diverse cultural contexts. This conceptualization implies that emotional competence involves acquiring factual information about emotions and the development of practical skills and a predisposition toward exhibiting emotionally intelligent behaviors. Emotional competence is regarded as an advantageous skill that benefits individuals in everyday interactions and fosters a positive and productive work environment. It has been recognized as a crucial skill for leadership roles in various businesses and corporate settings, and warrants further evaluation of its application in the K-12 academic environment.

■ Overview of Intercultural Competence

Intercultural competence (IC) is one's ability to interact and conduct oneself appropriately and efficiently within another culture. IC also referred to as cultural competence, has been defined by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) *Intercultural Competencies: Conceptual and Operational Framework* as "adequate knowledge

about particular cultures, as well as general knowledge about issues arising when members of different cultures interact, holding receptive attitudes that encourage establishing and maintaining contact with diverse others, as well as having the skills required in interacting with others from different cultures."²

The concept of intercultural competence strives to dismantle ethnocentrism, promoting respect and facilitating meaningful cultural interactions. To this end, Hammer writes, "Building intercultural competence involves increasing cultural self-awareness; deepening understanding of the experiences, values, perceptions, and behaviors of people from diverse cultural communities; and expanding the capability to shift cultural perspective and adapt behavior to bridge across cultural differences."³ By embracing intercultural competence, individuals can bridge gaps and foster positive engagement between different cultures.

■ What Emotional Competence Looks Like in School Leaders

The primary focal point of school leadership has traditionally revolved around principals since they carry much of the responsibility for their school's achievements. Furthermore, the extent to which a school principal can manage and instill a culture of emotional stability within the organization undoubtedly contributes to its success. This skill set is recognized as emotionally intelligent leadership and encompasses the reflection and acknowledgment of one's emotional proficiencies and limitations, in addition to the awareness of the strengths, contributions, and shortcomings of those one supervises. In order to gain valuable insights into their emotional competence and leadership approach, effective school leaders must engage in self-assessment and actively seek feedback from those they oversee.⁴

Emotional competence among school leaders is of utmost importance in cultivating a school culture that proactively addresses and eradicates detrimental behaviors, including bullying and discrimination. It fosters an environment characterized by tolerance, safety, and productivity. As articulated by Saarni, emotional competence encompasses qualities such as resilience and self-efficacy, wherein individuals exhibit their efficacy in effectively managing emotional interactions.⁵ This can be done by emphasizing compassion, respect, empathy, and sensitivity and drawing upon knowledge from diverse fields, such as sociology, psychology, neuroscience, and anthropology, to help foster emotional intelligence. Educational leaders who possess strong emotional competence understand the importance of approaching differences with amiability, sensitivity, and empathy.

Amidst our exploration of what emotional competence looks like in school leaders, Dr. Perkins' personal experience stood out as a poignant example. We seamlessly integrated Dr. Perkins' story within the article, presenting it as a reflective passage:

A few years ago, one of the former students called to share a difficult leadership challenge that he faced in a small, inner-city charter school. One of his

middle school math teachers had experienced some difficulty since the onset of the school year with classroom management and lesson preparation. After several conversations, the former student, a first-year principal at the time, discovered that the teacher had been homeless for a few months and was living out of their car. With great concern, he offered a spare bedroom in their home with their family until the crisis could be resolved, and ultimately found a small apartment suitable for the struggling teacher. However, even after a few more months, the teacher continued to struggle with colleagues, parents, and students who were now complaining of the disorganization and poor instructional plan. As I listened attentively, I could feel the pain and anguish my former student experienced while sharing his dilemma over the phone. He expressed, "Today, I struggled with a decision I had to make." Intrigued, I requested further details, to which he replied, "I had to dismiss the teacher that I wanted so much to help."

He went on to tell me how dire the situation had become regarding classroom management and how students were not getting the feedback needed to master the skills necessary to be ready for *Algebra I* the following year. After a significant pause in the conversation, I carefully chose my words and conveyed my gratitude by saying, "Thank you for struggling. Thank you for recognizing the human being on the other side of your decision. Also, thank you for taking care of those children." So many times, decisions are made to help and protect adults, as they should. However, regrettably, these decisions sometimes come at the expense of the children in our schools. Principals must possess the emotional intelligence to discern when and how to show compassion, empathy, and care in a myriad of scenarios. From this perspective, Emotional competence can be defined as *compassion and empathy tempered with good judgment*.

■ What Intercultural Competence Looks Like in School Leaders

Intercultural competence in a multicultural world is an essential and imperative skill in educational leadership. Intercultural competence paired with leadership is a catalyst for positive transformation and a bridge fostering genuine understanding of individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. Additionally, leaders must remain cognizant of their empathic biases and how these prejudices can impede their leadership abilities and communicative style. Therefore, it is crucial to comprehend empathy and how it is allocated when interacting with people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Culture assists in framing our epistemology, axiology, and, subsequently, how one behaves.⁶ Equally important, the bio-socio-political construct of race purposefully, and at times unintentionally, places people into in-groups and out-groups. Hence, garnering a keen understanding of cultural norms and values that one will

be interacting with is paramount to the purpose of intercultural leadership in schools.⁷

Dr. Perkins offers another compelling reflection on the subject of intercultural competence, summarized as follows:

I once had occasion to witness a veteran trainer and instructor engage in an activity with largely American-born teachers around bias and prejudice and how these influence our worldview. In this exercise, he distributed hard candies imported from China with flavors of seaweed, fish, and squid, to name a few. Most American-born participants reacted adversely and communicated their displeasure with the candies. Eventually, participants with Chinese heritage communicated how uncomfortable the exercise made them feel. They felt insulted that candies associated with their holidays and family celebrations were made an example of displeasure. The instructor had not anticipated this and did not intend to insult, so he promptly apologized. He found other candies with flavors such as dirt, dishwater, and rotten egg to exemplify his point. This shift in approach demonstrated the sensitivity required to provide a comfortable learning experience for all participants, regardless of ethnic background and tradition. School leaders must anticipate potential offenses and step outside of their own cultural lens to understand the values of others.

Undoubtedly, intercultural leadership within academia commences with our administrators and educators and then permeates to our students. Given this hierarchical structure of school leadership, it is vitally important that the principal demonstrates intercultural leadership. This entails educating the faculty, staff, and students about cultural differences, promoting harmonious race relations, and advocating for social justice felicitously. This also requires humility and cooperation in understanding how one's racial and cultural status benefits the dominant group in a specific geographic context. It is important to acknowledge that this privilege is not always afforded to minority groups. Therefore, to address the inequities these groups face, it is necessary to actively listen and understand the perspectives of people outside of the dominant cultural group. Admittedly, this poses a considerable challenge for all involved and necessitates patience, humility, transparency, a willingness to learn, and to participate in these discussions. There are different forms of oppression and mistreatment that non-minority groups will never fully comprehend or have to confront personally. Therefore, they must display a willingness to listen and engage with minority groups to develop awareness and understanding about these matters. Furthermore, non-minority individuals need to learn about each type of systemic oppression and how it impacts particular minority groups throughout their lifespan to bring about positive change.

Dr. Perkins provides a vivid and instructive account that sheds light on the nuanced dynamics of intercultural competence in organizational settings, illustrated in the following example:

During an organizational consultation, I interacted with a c-suite leadership team where the chief finan-

cial officer was trying to offer an opposing perspective to what the rest of the team thought was the best path forward. The CFO was from a cultural context where positional authority is strongly revered and rarely, if ever, questioned or contradicted. I watched carefully to the interaction as the team galvanized around what seemed to be a mounting desire to not just discredit the opinion offered but squash any future possibility that he might dare go against the team again in the future. Fast forward to a post-mortem analysis with the board of directors, when one director asked why the CFO didn't come forward sooner to disclose possible financial malfeasance. I disclosed that being familiar with the cultural context from which the CFO was likely operating was important to understanding the timing of actions taken. It was also important to not over-generalize and impose some stereotypical traits rather rely upon my experiences and global cultural knowledge that led to an empathetic understanding of the circumstances. Further understanding the power of socialization well into our adult lives provided the backdrop for how the actions of the CFO played out in real time. Cultural values play a critical role in shaping leadership styles, decision-making processes, and attitudes toward teamwork. Hofstede's cultural dimensions framework helps illuminate these differences in organizational behavior. This interaction was a textbook example of when early cultural influences show up in adult behavior. Having spent time developing my emotional competencies and intercultural competencies helped me make informed leadership assessments and decisions.

Figure 1 summarizes the need to balance emotional competence and intercultural competence. Successful school leaders leverage their expertise and aptitude to appropriately demonstrate compassion and empathy while recognizing the nuances between and within cultures. Possessing a profound reservoir for emotional competence and genuine compassion alone is insufficient. Likewise, a multitude of strategies and proficiencies in intercultural competency are also inadequate. The intersection and interplay between the two are the disposition necessary for an effective and impactful leader in today's context.

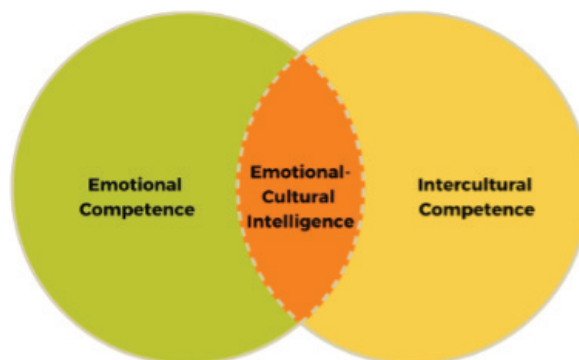


Figure 1: Relationship between emotional and intercultural competence.

At the fundamental level, leadership requires self-improvement to serve the individuals, families, and groups in one's community. Leaders must equip themselves and those they supervise with the necessary strategies to operate successfully in their positions within their multicultural communities. Therefore, addressing the needs of the community locally, globally, and in our education system requires cultivating both intercultural competence and emotional competence. These two interconnected qualities enable leaders to navigate the complexities of diverse environments, fostering understanding, empathy, and effective communication across cultural boundaries. That intersection, as we envision, is emotional-cultural intelligence.

■ The Intersection of Emotional Competence and Intercultural Competence

Our emotions play an integral role in how people communicate and the messages they convey. Moreover, our emotional responses are profoundly shaped by our cultural backgrounds. Therefore, to develop intercultural competence, one must develop emotional competence. These conceptual skills are interdependent for interactions within one's cultural group and successfully function within other cultural groups. Emotions develop from sociocultural interactions that can serve to censure or empower certain emotions. Furthermore, there exists a predisposition towards particular emotions and the manner in which they are expressed.

Emotions are woven into every aspect of an individual's life, exerting control over their actions and impacting their well-being. People interpret verbal and non-verbal expressions through a specific cultural and contextual framework. Within every culture and subculture, distinct paradigms regulate how individuals are expected to operate in a given environment. The psychology of emotions delves into the influence that emotions exert on human behavior, while the psychology of culture investigates the intricate fabric of cultural intricacies. Consequently, the encompassing of profound awareness and comprehensive understanding of the intricate interplay between emotions and cultural dynamics is Emotional Cultural Intelligence.

Emotional-cultural intelligence is the combined ability to value and recognize differences from another culture's dominant or minority and have the desire to learn, listen, and engage on the terms laid out by another culture - allowing one to navigate and adapt to diverse cultural contexts while effectively managing and understanding one's own emotions and those of others. Moreover, it is the acknowledgment that one will not have a sense of fitting in until one emotionally invests in educating themselves about the culture in which one desires to participate. It is important to note that an emotionally and culturally intelligent leader can develop a greater capacity to interact, communicate, and build relationships across cultures while being attuned to their own emotional responses and those of people from different cultural backgrounds. Such leaders are prepared to thrive in today's complex educational contexts.

■ Research-Informed Recommendations

1. Engage in Reflective Practice Through Structured Feedback

School leaders should routinely seek and reflect on feedback from colleagues, staff, and students. Tools such as 360-degree assessments, journaling, or leadership coaching can help uncover blind spots and build emotional self-awareness and empathy. Reflection on interpersonal dynamics also promotes greater cultural humility and responsiveness.⁸⁻¹⁰

2. Participate in Intercultural Dialogue and Immersive Experiences

Intentionally engaging with culturally diverse communities (through community forums, cultural events, or exchange programs) helps leaders build perspective-taking and intercultural empathy. This exposure challenges assumptions and enhances the capacity to lead inclusively in diverse school environments.¹¹⁻¹³

3. Practice Mindful Communication in High-Stakes Settings

Leaders can develop emotional regulation and relationship management skills by practicing mindful listening and non-defensive communication during conflict or emotionally charged discussions. Role-playing, conflict resolution training, and scenario-based learning are useful methods for honing these skills in a safe, structured environment.¹⁴⁻¹⁶

■ Acknowledgements

The authors received no financial support or external assistance for the research, authorship, or publication of this paper.

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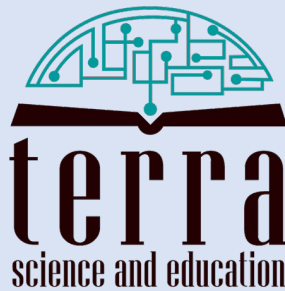
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