

# Developing Intercultural Attitude and Action Competence

## Attitude Before Method: Intercultural Competence Begins Within

Intercultural competence is not primarily a scheme of action, but a matter of inner attitude – shaped by respect, critical reflection, and the willingness not to absolutize one's own perspective.

Educators need the willingness to question their own notions of normality – especially when these are unconsciously linked with judgment.

### This attitude includes:

- willingness to perceive difference, even where it appears subtle (e.g., tone of voice, pauses, expectations of proximity-distance),
- curiosity without exoticization,
- empathy without projection,
- critical questioning without hurting.

### Examples

- A father answers evasively when asked why his child rarely plays in the group. The educator feels irritated. Only later does she realize: her direct question was perceived as "interference," since in the family's cultural background conversations about family are conducted differently.
- In a daycare, a professional notices that a child from a Vietnamese family never seeks eye contact in the morning. Instead of interpreting this as rude, she reflects on cultural differences in dealing with authority.
- A school social worker wonders why young people with Kurdish backgrounds speak little in group discussions. He discovers that in their background, collective responsibility is placed above individual expression – and adapts his conversation settings.

→ *Instead of evaluation: develop understanding for different formats of conversation.*

## Conscious Handling of Power, Norms, and Language

Language is never neutral. It structures belonging, shifts power relations, and influences who is heard. Intercultural competence requires the ability to recognize power relations mediated through language, institutions, and “rules” – even when they act unintentionally.

This is particularly relevant for people in educational responsibility: those who normalize, control, and evaluate also help determine who experiences themselves as belonging or foreign. Educational professionals thus carry special responsibility to make norms visible and to negotiate them with children, adolescents, and parents.

### Examples

- In job application training at a youth center, young people are expected to maintain eye contact and appear “active and self-confident.” A reserved youth is repeatedly criticized. Only in a team discussion does it become clear: the standards come from a Western ideal of performance – which is foreign to the youth.
- In an elementary school, all children are supposed to bring a “typical breakfast.” Many parents feel insecure – what is “typical”? The school realizes such terms can exclude and replaces them with “a breakfast from your family.”
- A mother with limited German skills is repeatedly interrupted at a parent evening. A colleague notices the dialogue is shaped by language dominance – and suggests restructuring conversations with visual support and pauses.

→ *Intercultural competence does not mean demanding adaptation – but opening formats so diversity has space.*

## Acting Under Uncertainty: Training Ambiguity Tolerance

Educational work is full of situations that cannot be clearly classified. Especially in intercultural encounters, the ability is needed to endure contradictions, reflect on uncertainties, and not judge immediately.

Cultural encounter is never free of conflict. It is characterized by ambiguity, misunderstanding, and friction.

**The central competence is therefore:** ambiguity tolerance – learning to live with uncertainty without categorizing prematurely.

This competence can be trained – through self-reflection, simulation, supervision, tandem work.

## Examples

- A volunteer in an intercultural language café wonders why participants answer “How are you?” only briefly. In reflection she realizes: in German the question is ritualized – in other languages it needs more context or is understood differently.
- At a holiday camp a child asks why boys and girls shower together. The supervisor initially reacts uncertainly – then decides to enter into a conversation with the group about different body cultures.
- At a school event a boy refuses to shake a girl’s hand. The teacher consciously refrains from immediate sanctions – and later uses the moment as an opportunity for reflection about manners and cultural frameworks.

→ *Understand uncertainties not as “errors” but as learning moments.*

## Intersectional Understanding Instead of Cultural Reduction

An intercultural attitude does not mean reducing everything to “culture.” People bring multiple affiliations and social positions:

- gender
- age
- religion
- disability
- social background
- sexual orientation

These can overlap – leading to specific opportunities or exclusions.

Children and adolescents are not only “Muslim,” only “neurodivergent,” or only “affected by poverty.” Educators need to perceive these intersections.

## Examples

- A single mother with refugee experience seeks help because of conflicts in shared housing. In counseling only “her culture” is discussed – her financial distress or lack of privacy remain unaddressed.
- A girl wearing a headscarf and with ADHD is constantly admonished for “inattention.” Only a multiprofessional team recognizes: it is not only about religion or behavior – but about a double burden through discrimination and neurodivergent perception.

- In a day group, a child with a refugee background acts out when parents do not attend celebrations. Professionals recognize: the family lives in great material insecurity – and is ashamed of not being able to contribute.

→ *Intercultural competence must always include intersectional sensitivity.*

## **Conflicts as Learning Opportunities – Not as Disturbance**

Cultural misunderstandings are not evidence of integration failure – but the norm in living together. What matters is whether they are seen, named, and worked on – without blame, with the attitude: “What can we learn from this together?”

### **Examples**

- Two children argue loudly – one calls the other “weird” because of his food. Instead of reacting with sanctions, professionals turn the situation into a discussion: What is important to us in food? Where do our habits come from? The situation becomes a space for perspective-taking.
- In a peer group, young people insult each other about their origin. Instead of immediate punishment, the social pedagogue moderates a role play: How does exclusion feel? The conflict becomes a starting point for perspective-taking.
- Two children in daycare argue about a craft project. One says: “That’s ugly – we don’t do that where we’re from.” The educator recognizes: it is about cultural aesthetics and belonging – and turns the topic into a project “How do we design beauty?”

→ *Understand conflicts as entry points into dialogue, not dominance.*

## **Creating Spaces for Genuine Participation**

Intercultural competence also means dismantling participation barriers. Structural conditions are needed so that all children, adolescents, and families can truly participate.

Professionals should regularly check:

- Who participates – and who does not?
- Who feels addressed?
- Who understands the rules – who does not?

## Examples

- Invitations are only written in one language, the event follows a fixed format. Some parents do not attend. A colleague suggests setting up a multilingual welcome team and designing the format more participatively.
- In a youth center the weekly schedule is changed because Muslim youths often miss Friday activities. After joint consultation, appointments are moved – and the prayer room is permanently opened.
- A parent café in an elementary school is redesigned: instead of frontal information, there are thematic tables in several languages, a children's corner, and a peer-to-peer format with experienced parents.

→ *Intercultural competence shows in design, language, atmosphere, and access – not only in workshops.*

## Reflection on One's Own Conditioning: Where Does My View Come From?

Every pedagogical action is shaped by one's own experiences. Many professionals are unaware that they also wear "cultural lenses" – shaped by socialization, education, media, religious background, professional traditions, and what they learned as "normal."

Only those who critically question themselves can meet others openly.

## Examples

- A childminder emphasizes during settling-in how important fixed rules and structure are. Only later does she realize her idea of "reliable rhythm" is strongly shaped by her own upbringing – other families think about relationships very differently.
- An educator wonders why parents from a Roma family ignore invitations. In supervision she realizes: her idea of "reliability" is culturally shaped – and asks: how can trust grow beyond predictability?
- A teacher gets annoyed when parents do not greet him with a handshake. In training he realizes: his reaction has more to do with his own need for respect – than with an objective violation of "politeness."