

Understanding Culture – Multidimensional Perspectives on Interculturality

Why We Need to Talk About Culture

In a diverse society, educational professionals encounter culturally shaped situations every day – consciously or unconsciously. Culture influences how we build relationships, communicate, learn, give feedback, or exercise power. Pedagogical action is never “neutral,” but always culturally embedded.

At the same time, many professionals experience uncertainty:

- What exactly is meant by “culture”?
- How do I recognize cultural patterns?
- Where does respect for diversity end – and where does unequal treatment begin?

A deeper engagement with concepts of culture helps to avoid stereotyping, clarify misunderstandings, and create inclusive learning spaces in which all participants feel safe, recognized, and empowered.

Culture Is Not a Container – But a Process

In many pedagogical contexts, culture is implicitly treated like a “container”: a child is seen as “Turkish,” “Arab,” or “Eastern European” – and thus tied to a fixed “culture.” This view is convenient but reductive. It overlooks the fact that every biography is hybrid, individual, and in motion.

Example from elementary school practice

A teacher asks all the “Arab children” in an intercultural project to design a poster about Islam. But the children experience themselves very differently: some speak Arabic, others not. Some are religiously Muslim, others Christian, others not religious at all. The container-attribution leads to insecurity and rejection.

Example from youth work

A teenager with Romanian background is automatically assigned to a workshop on “Roma culture” – although he has no connection to this group. He feels externally determined and stigmatized.

Pedagogical implication

Move away from categorization – toward biographical storytelling. Ask instead of ascribe. Understand diversity as a process, not as a collection of labels.

Culture Is Relationship, Communication and Context

UNESCO emphasizes: culture arises where people create meaning. This shows itself in language, gestures, concepts of time, proximity/distance, dealing with emotions – but also in misunderstandings.

Culture is not only at work in “big differences,” but in everyday interactions – often where communication falters, expectations are disappointed, or nonverbal signs are interpreted differently.

Example from daycare

A boy never looks the educator directly in the eye. She perceives this as disrespectful. In his family, however, it is considered polite not to look adults in the eye. → Misunderstanding through culturally different rules.

Example from parent work

A mother arrives 15 minutes late for a meeting. The teacher interprets this as disinterest. The mother, however, sees it as natural to arrange appointments “in flow” – and for her it is polite to arrive 15 minutes later. → Understanding of time as cultural dimension.

Pedagogical implication

Practice **ambiguity tolerance**, i.e.:

- endure ambiguity,
- avoid hasty judgments,
- enter dialogue openly.

Culture Is Not Neutral – Language, Norms and Power

Culture is never value-free. It is always also an expression of power relations that define what is considered “normal,” “appropriate,” or “professional.” In Western-oriented educational contexts, a Eurocentric perspective often dominates: i.e., thought patterns, values, and expressions from European traditions are treated as universal – while other perspectives are seen as “deviant,” “foreign,” or “special.”

Example from secondary education

A project on “discoveries” refers only to Columbus, Magellan, and Vasco da Gama. Perspectives of Indigenous peoples are missing. Africa only appears in the context of colonialism or poverty. → Invisibility as structural exclusion.

Example from teacher training

A participant from a non-European country reports that she likes to introduce her students with stories and pictures. The moderator comments: “But here, argumentation counts most.” → Implicit devaluation of other teaching traditions.

Pedagogical implication

- Who has the right to define what counts as “knowledge,” “education,” or “competence”?
- Which norms remain invisible – and who is excluded by them?

Cultural sensitivity here does not mean organizing “culture days,” but critically questioning one’s own normality.

Language as Cultural Practice – and Instrument of Power

Language shapes our thinking – and directs which perspectives become visible. In many educational contexts, “academic language” is treated as the standard. Other forms of expression – dialects, multilingual utterances, narrative styles – are often corrected or devalued.

Example from elementary school

A child tells a story enthusiastically – in German, with Arabic insertions. The teacher interrupts: “Please speak proper German.” The child falls silent. → Not only the flow of speech, but also identity is interrupted.

Example from parent conversation

A mother feels insecure because she does not understand certain technical terms. The professional speaks exclusively “pedagogical.” → Hierarchical language prevents dialogue.

Pedagogical implication

- Value multilingualism
- Allow code-switching
- Address language biographies
- Barrier-free communication: simple language, visualizations, shared understanding of terms
- Reflect on one’s own linguistic power: who gets to participate – who is left out?

Intercultural Misunderstandings – The Potential of Irritation

Misunderstandings are not mistakes, but valuable learning opportunities. They make invisible norms and values visible – and open spaces for perspective shifts. The decisive factor is how we react to irritation.

Case study

A lecturer asks the new student Beibei where she comes from. She answers: “From Leer.” He continues: “But where do you really come from?” → The implicit message: “You do not belong.”

Case study from parent communication

A father repeatedly asks for “parenting tips” that sound familiar. The professional appears annoyed. Later it becomes clear: in his background, child-rearing is organized collectively – his questions aimed at coordination between family and pedagogy.

Pedagogical learning question

- What does the irritation show me?
- Which of my expectations are culturally shaped?
- How can I restore relationship?

Shaping Culture in Everyday Life – Instead of Talking About Culture

Interculturality is not a special topic, but a structuring principle of pedagogical practice. It shows in how spaces are designed, how decisions are made, how participation is enabled.

Example from after-school care

Craft materials reflect only Eurocentric festivals and figures – no variety of skin colors or cultural symbols, no materials for other religious holidays except Christmas. → Signal: only part of your world is welcome here.

Example from team culture

All training sessions are held in German, although several team members feel more confident in English. → Participation remains selective.

Questions for practice:

- Which voices are missing in decision-making processes?
- Who feels addressed – who remains excluded?
- How do I make cultural diversity visible without exoticizing it?

Interculturality Begins with Ourselves

A multidimensional understanding of culture challenges us – not only cognitively, but personally. It requires educators to question their own interpretive patterns, endure uncertainty, and shape relationship as a space for negotiation and perspective change.

Intercultural competence is not a skill one “acquires,” but a reflexive attitude that must prove itself repeatedly in professional everyday life – in conversations with parents, in dealing with children, in designing learning processes, in collegial work.

To understand culture means:

- not only to see “otherness,” but also to relativize one’s own.
- not only to inform, but to unlearn and relearn.

- not only to shape, but also to listen and share.

Key Principles for Practice

Principle	Meaning for pedagogical work
Culture is dynamic	Every encounter is unique – avoid attributions.
Culture is relationship	Do not speak “about,” but “with” people.
Culture is context	Always ask: what does this mean here – and for whom?
Language is power	Take forms of expression seriously – do not correct, but understand.
Diversity is normal	Not only tolerate heterogeneity, but actively include it.
Irritation = learning moment	See misunderstandings as opportunities – not as disruptions.
Reflection = prerequisite	To understand others, one must question oneself.

Reflection Questions for Everyday Life

These questions support you in further developing intercultural competence as part of your professional self-concept:

- Which situations irritated me in the past – why?
- In which moments did I judge cultural differences too quickly?
- What is “good behavior” for me – and where does this image come from?
- How do I talk about families with other cultural backgrounds – also within the team?
- Which languages, symbols, rituals shape my everyday work – whom might they exclude?
- How can I create spaces in which children, adolescents, and parents feel welcome with all their perspectives?
- Which of my “pedagogical standards” are truly open – and which normative?