




## Article

# A Qualitative Study on the Intercultural Educational Sensitivity of the Professors at the University of Malaga (Spain)

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**Abstract:** This paper deals with the intercultural sensitivity of professors of Educational Sciences at the University of Malaga (Spain). The methodological approach of the study was qualitative, and the research techniques for data collection were in-depth interviews. The main technique for analyzing the information was content analysis. The results of the study show that the majority of university teachers identify interculturality as a value and a pedagogical proposal of great importance. Thus, there is a need to promote intercultural competences and a critical view of culture. In conclusion, the study highlights the existence of difficulties in developing interculturality, which requires a change towards comprehensive training and education in values in the university context.

**Keywords:** intercultural skills; intercultural attitudes; teacher training; values education; educational inclusion



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## 1. Introduction

Intercultural education has become one of the main challenges for universities in the 21st century, with special attention given to the intercultural training of future professionals, as the central axis with which to build the foundations of a democratic and inclusive society [1–8]. The purpose of this pedagogical proposal is to generate equitable, inclusive, solidarity, and quality educational actions, seeking to actively promote an education for all, where cultural difference is valued from the parameters of acceptance, tolerance, commitment, and mutual enrichment in educational contexts [9,10].

In the university setting, several investigations have emphasized the importance of promoting an updated and coherent initial training of future education professionals, who respond to the diversity of the students and integrate the paradigm of interculturality in a transversal way [3,11–17]. We understand intercultural sensitivity as the ability to identify and appreciate cultural differences and similarities, and intercultural competence as the ability to think and act in a manner which is appropriate to the context.

The curricular and didactic treatment of intercultural education requires an interdisciplinary approach to promote a comprehensive training in democratic values that favor the acquisition of intercultural skills as key elements to enhance professional development in contexts marked by multiculturalism. The construction of personal, social, and cultural identity is also a key factor in the generation of intercultural education as a reflective proposal and critical educational action [18,19].

University faculties must encourage experiential intercultural learning situations through the use of innovative methodologies to promote commitment to cultural diversity [20,21]. It is becoming increasingly important for training institutions to work within the framework of a holistic and open conception of interculturality. In the case of Spain, studies on intercultural attitudes and intercultural educational sensitivity are scarcer in

the university context, and other studies tend to be applied to the primary and secondary stages of education [22]. Studies focusing on the development of intercultural sensitivity in university professors are practically inexistent. This latter point justifies studies such as the one presented here.

University education tries to respond to the constant changes in the current reality, promoting a whole set of educational practices based on values of solidarity, tolerance, and understanding of the different cultures to establish a true dialogue and intercultural encounter [8,23–25]. For these reasons, university lecturers must assume a change in their pedagogical role and adapt their training to the needs of a society; a permanent social change in university teaching, where not only concepts and disciplinary content are important, but also values and transversal competences.

The purpose of this study was to identify the attitudes and perceptions towards cultural diversity and interculturality in the university context, as well as to analyze the pedagogical and inclusive perspective of university teaching staff of the bachelor's degree in Early Childhood and Primary Education in relation to intercultural education in the initial and lifelong training of future teachers.

## 2. Materials and Methods

A qualitative methodology was used in this study. The data were studied through content analysis, and as an instrument for collecting information, in-depth interviews were carried out with the teaching staff of the degree in Early Childhood and Primary Education of the Faculty of Education Sciences at the University of Malaga.

### 2.1. Participants and Procedure

In this study, 24 teachers participated voluntarily (14 female and 10 male), representing a heterogeneous distribution in relation to the years of work experience at the university. The selected teaching staff taught in the degree in Early Childhood and Primary Education, which is focused on inclusive education (conceptually linked to intercultural issues). They taught in educational institutions outside the university in Early Childhood Education and Primary Education.

In order to select the participants for this study, a letter was drafted via e-mail considering their possible interest in this topic, and using other indicators such as their teaching experience, both in higher education and in external institutions in early childhood education and primary education. In this letter, the main objectives of the research and the reason for conducting the interview were presented. The interviews took place in the offices of each of the university professors and lasted one hour. They were previously informed of their right to withdraw from the interview at any time they considered appropriate. Throughout the six months of fieldwork, in-depth interviews were conducted and recorded with the permission of the participants, who signed a consent form guaranteeing confidentiality throughout the data collection process.

### 2.2. Information Collection and Data Analysis Tool

For the collection of information, in-depth interviews were carried out ad hoc with university faculty. The interview questions were drafted by the researchers, considering both the objectives of the study and the conceptual foundation of intercultural education in the university context. The literature review allowed for a better understanding of how cultural diversity and interculturality are addressed in the university curriculum [2,3,6,8,17,26–29]. Likewise, it made it possible to understand how intercultural competences are acquired in the different subjects that make up university curricula.

Specifically, the questions asked were the following:

- How would you define interculturality?
- From your point of view, is there an interest in working on intercultural educational issues in university classrooms?

- Do you think that students in Early Childhood and Primary Education degrees acquire sufficient knowledge of intercultural education in their training?
- Is the same true for intercultural competences?
- Do the new curricula include the development of intercultural competences at university?
- Do you consider university teaching staff to be trained in intercultural competences?
- In your opinion, what attitudes do university students show towards cultural diversity?
- At present, there are emerging issues of social interest related to interculturality. Are these issues considered in the initial and ongoing training of future education professionals?
- Do you consider that the expectations of students in relation to intercultural education are met?

The in-depth interviews were a methodological tool to investigate and understand the attitudes of university lecturers towards cultural diversity and interculturality. The study of the assessments of the teachers interviewed and the information derived from the literature was carried out through a process of qualitative content analysis using Atlas software Ti 8.04 (2013). The information was organized in a series of categories, which allowed the understanding and interpretation of the research focus in a structured and systematic way. For this purpose, a process of categorization by nuclei or thematic and vertebral axes was carried out, once all the relevant information had been collected.

In defining the categories, concrete dimensions consistent with the purpose of the study were first delimited. The literary evidence was referenced throughout the process of content analysis, categorization, review of results, and delineation of conclusions. The elaboration of the system of categories was carried out through a deductive process, based on the bibliographical and conceptual review of the object of study.

Table 1 shows the dimensions and thematic categories that have supported the study of the data. Each of the dimensions and categories used in the content analysis of the interviews are defined below.

**Table 1.** Dimensions and categories used in the analysis of interview fragments.

Dimensions	Categories
Perceptions towards interculturality	Intercultural pedagogical conception Attitudes towards cultural diversity
Interculturality in the university setting	Curricular interculturalization
Training in interculturality	Initial and lifelong training in interculturality Intercultural competences
The challenge of interculturality	Emerging issues in cultural diversity

The dimension “perceptions towards interculturality” refers to the opinions and pedagogical conceptions of education professionals about interculturality, as well as personal experiences and behaviors towards cultural diversity. Within this dimension, the category “intercultural pedagogical conception” is understood as a socio-educational phenomenon, in which the forms of interaction of social groups in different contexts are highlighted as processes of enrichment through respect for differences. The category “attitudes towards cultural diversity” is based on the personal configuration of the plurality and diversity of individuals as a key element in the construction of group structures that facilitate coexistence.

The dimension “interculturality in the university setting” refers to the recognition of this paradigm as a learning object in higher education, whose main purpose is to provide students with learning experiences with which to acquire the necessary skills to interpret the socio-cultural reality, and thus respond to their training needs. In the category “curricular interculturalization”, the arguments expressed by the participants in

this study have allowed for an in-depth study of university teaching practices committed to cultural diversity.

The dimension “training in interculturality” is focused on analyzing the knowledge in intercultural education that is indispensable in the initial and lifelong training of future teachers. This training will enhance the development of cognitive, social, and communicative skills capable of generating intercultural dialogue between members of the school community. Two specific categories are included in this dimension; one referring to the initial and continuous training in these issues, and the other relating to the acquisition, development, and promotion of intercultural competences during the training trajectory at the university. Concerning the category “initial and lifelong training in interculturality”, the arguments of the teaching staff allowed us to glimpse the compensatory treatment granted from university education to the intercultural perspective, linking, in many cases, to groups in situations of vulnerability. Regarding the category “intercultural competences”, fragments of the interviews were evaluated according to different aspects: definition, development in curricula, in teaching methodology, and other options to face them.

The dimension “the challenge of interculturality” refers to the study of intercultural education and its relationship with the social and historical events of current reality, as a source of learning through analysis and shared dialogue in the processes of cultural interaction. It includes the category called “emerging issues in cultural diversity”, which allows the analysis of the opportunity offered by intercultural education in the transversal approach to issues of social significance.

### 3. Results

In order to present the most significant results, the main contributions of the participants were considered in coherence with the categorization process and the established objectives.

Focusing on the first dimension, “perceptions towards interculturality”, participants pointed out that intercultural education allows working on issues related to human rights and values such as respect, tolerance, and empathy. The arguments expressed by the interviewed faculty allow us to verify the pedagogical assessment of interculturality in terms of personal and social enrichment. The evidence expressed by the teaching staff allowed us to evaluate the experiences lived with foreign students in class, along with the contributions and impressions generated in each of the teachers and in the rest of their colleagues. The participants in this study positively valued the presence of students from other cultures in their classrooms. They also emphasized the tendency of these students to place themselves with others with similar traits.

As seen in the contributions of the interviewees (Table 2), an intercultural and inclusive approach predominates, where interaction between different people and cultures is valued in order to generate spaces and establish cultural relationships within a common project. It is a project of personal and social enrichment, in which social values are to be shared among all people.

These definitions also emphasize the general acceptance that, in today’s society, we cannot speak of culture, but rather of the coexistence of multiple cultures sharing the same living space. In effect, it is a matter of promoting the generation of collective identity through the interaction of different identities and individual cultures, seeking common elements of coexistence, respect, and joint construction in a positive way.

The teachers interviewed considered it relevant to assume the challenge of promoting interaction between their students by using methodological strategies capable of fostering cooperative learning structures, the development of social skills, and spaces in which emotional education is present. Table 2 provides a description of the categories with a selection of the most significant fragments.

Regarding the second dimension, called “interculturalization of the curriculum”, the participants pointed to the insufficient approach to interculturality in the university in general, and in the Faculty of Education Science in particular.

**Table 2.** Categories and fragments extracted from the interviews.

Category	Fragments
Intercultural pedagogical conception	“Interculturality is a pedagogical proposal that has the objective of positively valuing cultural diversity and at this time I believe that it is also a way of thinking, of being in education where it is key, not only to respect and take advantage of the cultural difference, but also, to seek meeting spaces between the different students and the different agents, regardless of the context”. D11:3 (18:18)
	“Interculturality is more than a paradigm, it is rather an attitude towards life based on human rights and democratic values. I consider that interculturality prevails, in the sense that we are talking about shared values such as respect, empathy, tolerance and that goes beyond functional diversity, it is something inherent to the human being”. D17:7 (20:20)
Attitudes towards cultural diversity	“In fact, I had a group in Pedagogy in which there were people from Venezuela and Brazil, and it is curious that in university classrooms older people tend to sit with older people, but people of immigrant origin tend to interact with people of immigrant origin, that is, in my opinion as a general rule it is usually very difficult for them to relate to people from other cultures”. D11:3 (18:18)
	“For me, interculturality is a mixture of cultures. Cultures interrelated with each other, whether through physical means, social means and above all from the perspective of interculturality. The aim is to implement a perspective of coexistence between all cultures and not only the meeting in physical space without establishing any kind of relationship, or the creation of ghettos or a particular group of a particular culture. That is what should be eradicated”. D17:7 (28:28)

The concept of interculturality has been worked on as an element linked to educational inclusion, lacking its own space and development in the university context. In fact, the teachers defined interculturality as a social process of inclusion, in which different societies interact with each other. They determined that intercultural education is framed within educational inclusion, because both aspects defend the inclusion of the person regardless of their social, personal, cultural, and cognitive traits. Table 3 provides a description of the main fragments related to this category.

**Table 3.** Category and fragments extracted from the interviews.

Category	Fragments
Curricular interculturalization	“I think that the work of intercultural education in the university context is something that has yet to be done, to grow and to be built. It depends a lot on people and university professionals because there are many faculty members who can have a perspective, an intercultural approach, but others perhaps, well, they don’t”. D11:3 (18:18)
	“You don’t work as much as you should, rather not. Because sometimes, depending on the character of the university teacher training, it is only in a transversal manner, as core subjects or within specific competences, since it does not usually appear, then rather not, perhaps in the specialization of inclusive education it may appear and it is worked in one subject, but in general, it is not worked systematically within the university curriculum”. D17:7 (20:20)

In the dimension “initial and lifelong training in interculturality”, the participants pointed out that intercultural education is in no way a compensatory construct, but rather a key competence that must be developed at all educational levels.

Another interesting aspect is that the professors interviewed admitted that, for example, in the specific case of the degree in Primary Education, there was only one subject

in which they worked in a structured and explicit way on content related to intercultural education. This reality has led to the emergence of statements that reveal the difficulty in acquiring good intercultural practices in the future working life of tomorrow's teachers; this content is not integrated into the university curriculum, regardless of the major chosen when developing the initial training.

The arguments of the faculty interviewed also show that in the development of initial training, it is important that students have the possibility of going outside the university campus to learn about the different organizations, associations, specific teams, and so forth, and all the potential they represent within the educational intervention. Internships, therefore, are identified as effective resources to favor contact to the intercultural reality and its approach from education, in the same way that the participation of the faculty of different educational stages in research groups within the university classrooms promotes lifelong training and the contact of the university faculty with the school. Table 4 shows the most significant fragments associated with these questions.

**Table 4.** Category and fragments derived from the interviews.

Category	Fragments
Initial and lifelong training in interculturality	"Students do not receive adequate initial training. In my personal experience, both in university classes and in my work as a teacher at school, I observe that there is a great need to work on the intercultural and inclusive competences of children and young people who are being educated in university classrooms. I am surprised that there are young people who have neither attitude nor values towards difference, be it a foreigner, blond, brown or with any kind of functional diversity". D11:3 (25:25)
	"In-service training is insufficient. I think there could be an improvement, more training from an intercultural approach for teachers to be able to instill and develop it in their classes. I believe that there are hardly programs focused on intercultural models that understand cultural diversity and the importance of training in values". D 17:7 (29:29)

With regard to intercultural competences, the participants in this study defined them as prerequisites for coexistence based on tolerance and respect for difference, as a factor of enrichment. This is done through the inclusion of the values reflected in the different cultures, as well as in each of the cultural elements and customs of the different cultural groups.

There were diverse opinions on how to address and work on intercultural competences. On the one hand, they focused on the demand for curricula that included intercultural competences as core competences and as specific subjects related to this paradigm; on the other hand, they referred to the importance of the teaching profile and their personal and professional interests. Table 5 shows the most significant fragments associated with these questions.

**Table 5.** Category and fragments of interviews.

Category	Fragments
Intercultural competences	"Intercultural competences encompass the set of cognitive and social skills aimed at fostering the potential of different students, of the different educational contexts, in order to achieve not only educational but also social and cultural inclusion". D11:3 (18:18)
	"For me, it is all those learnings, skills, abilities that we acquire and that later we can put into practice in our professional life as well as in our personal life, where we are allowed to manage the general diversity and within this, cultural diversity ... we are talking about democratic values, communication skills, and empathy". D17:7 (20:20)

The teachers' contributions showed that the conceptual profile of education professionals is currently more highly valued than their commitment to current issues such as peace, interculturality, or human rights. However, teachers admitted that all these issues are in line with the values of education, and that they will enable them to take a critical stance in the face of situations of injustice and social vulnerability. Table 6 includes the most prominent fragments associated with these questions.

**Table 6.** Category and fragments extracted from the interviews.

Category	Fragments
Emerging issues in cultural diversity	"I think so, that we have to make a space to talk about current affairs because in this global world, we have no choice but to mix, and, what is more, there is a growing inequality in this world and if we want the earth and human civilization to survive, there is no other option, it is a question of justice". D11:3 (18:18)
	"I believe that there are groups in faculties and in research projects that are working in educational innovation to try to create virtual communities, especially through networks from an intercultural approach. I believe that there are emerging groups that are working, and they are addressing the importance of training for society and the country". D17:7 (20:20)

The teachers pointed to the importance of studying and analyzing current issues related to cultural diversity at all levels of education. They also recognized that we live in a globalized world where decisions taken in one place affect the whole planet; for example, measures taken directly on the environment, invasions of peoples, and other measures that threaten freedom, human rights, and the care of our planet. In particular, the teachers stated that it is necessary to make students aware of the difficulties encountered and to help people in difficulty, as an act of justice.

The participants highlighted that the university is working on a series of emerging issues, such as migration, Islamophobia, or racist behavior, caused by ignorance of a particular cultural group, and there are teaching staff who collaborate with associations and organizations of various kinds, such as NGOs and associations representing emerging groups at the university. Their testimonies reflect the importance of promoting national and international agreements to favor and guarantee commitment to such basic current issues as human rights, the culture of peace, and interculturality.

Finally, they referred to the importance of intercultural education as a strategy that favors skills and competences for understanding difference, through comprehensive dialogue and respect, promoting both interaction and coexistence between peoples.

#### 4. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to identify the attitudes and perceptions towards cultural diversity and interculturality in the university context, as well as to analyze the pedagogical and inclusive perspective of university teaching staff of the Infant and Primary Education degrees in relation to intercultural education in the initial and lifelong training of future teachers. The results of this research highlight that interculturality constitutes an inherent part of inclusive education, as well as a pedagogical tool at the service of interaction between different people and cultures. It is presented as a way to generate spaces for mutual construction, accentuating the need to promote cultural relationships destined to the execution of a common project. These data have been seen in other studies [1,4,30], which emphasize the need to attend to cultural diversity under the parameters of a tolerant and respectful school, where difference is considered a value that nourishes, defines, and enriches us.

It has been possible to appreciate the need to attend to the visible diversity that emerges in school scenarios, as a reference in the planning, design, and execution of activities, and, therefore, in aspects related to evaluation. These data coincide with other

research [5,7,10,27,31,32], which shows that working on intercultural education from a practical perspective and close to reality in the university context requires the design of curricular, didactic, and pedagogical bases. The design of these bases is intended to generate critical and shared learning among students that allows them to value other cultures and cultural identities.

When reflecting on the most effective methods to address interculturality in the university curriculum, the teachers in this research highlighted the value of interactive methodologies to integrate the principles of an education that respects cultural diversity in the subjects they teach. These aspects are also reflected in other studies [2,8,18,29], which expose the relevance of opting for methods that favor the exchange of contributions, the argued and constructive discussion around specific cultural topics, and, in general, all those experiences that allow building knowledge in interaction.

It has been possible to appreciate that the development of shared learning experiences can contribute decisively to acquiring intercultural competences in the university setting. When students can undertake group research work and actively interact with their peers, the quality of collaboration in terms of verbal interaction improves significantly, in the same way that there is an increase in the development of intercultural competences. These data coincide with other studies [9,28], in which it is noted that the processes of exchange of information, feelings, and emotions, in addition to the self-reflection that accompanies them, are fundamental to develop the understanding of one's own identity and that of others.

This study also provides results about the initial training of future education professionals in order to facilitate the promotion of intercultural competences that are in line with those of other studies [6,21–23]. These studies highlight that the role of the university teacher should be to identify, design, and develop intercultural learning opportunities. Furthermore, they should involve the development of innovative and participatory methodologies to stimulate students' awareness of intercultural issues. Likewise, the results reveal that the experiences of lifelong training of teaching staff within the framework of interculturality should be oriented; mainly, to make these professionals aware of their great responsibility in the conformation of democratic, intercultural, and inclusive curricular structures [3,20].

In relation to the training programs for future education professionals, the aim is to prioritize the development of intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes, as a way of facing the challenge of cultural heterogeneity that defines education institutions today. In this sense, this study and several others show that when students study subjects related to interculturality, they ensure a preparation and awareness to work in educational contexts marked by cultural diversity, while this training stays incomplete for those who have not studied university subjects that have allowed the approach of migration and interculturality [17,28].

Throughout this study, it has been highlighted that the combination of theory with experiential activities constitutes one of the cornerstones of the current university curriculum, aimed at encouraging students to become closer to the educational reality and acquire those competences that will allow them to develop their professional work effectively and responsibly. Translating this approach to interculturality, this research has recognized the importance of promoting, during the educational trajectory at the university, a wide variety of learning experiences with which to learn about cultural diversity, teachers being aware of their roles as education professionals, and understanding the complexities they will encounter when working in multicultural contexts. These data are consistent with other studies [8,24,33–37], which emphasize the need to open university classrooms to the intercultural reality, as a way to promote experiential learning and provide students with the necessary tools to work optimally on interculturality during their professional careers.

In the university context and with the purpose of favoring the acquisition of intercultural competences in future education professionals, it is necessary to offer learning



experiences that lead to self-reflection and the progressive appropriation of pedagogical skills with which to respond appropriately to cultural, linguistic, and experiential diversity.

## 5. Conclusions

The university faculty participating in this study had a positive sensitivity to cultural diversity and the pedagogical potential of interculturality as a revitalizing element of their own initial teacher training and, therefore, of the education system. In this regard, we can emphasize the need for university teaching staff to share quality training experiences, where cultural difference is seen as an enriching element for learning and coexistence in the university context. The problem does not lie so much in promoting interculturality in specific subjects, whether optional or compulsory, but in the quality of its treatment and pedagogical approach that must be holistic and inscribed in the paradigm of inclusive education.

It is noted that intercultural education goes beyond the mere appropriation of knowledge during the initial training process, and is impregnated with values, attitudes, procedures, and skills that make up a constructive combination that assumes synergies within a wide amalgam of intercultural competences.

This research is limited by the exclusive use of a qualitative approach and a single-university research context, and further studies are needed. It would be interesting to explore what is happening in other universities from the perspective of university staff. Additionally, other voices could be heard, such as those of students and administrative and service staff. It would be advisable for other studies to address this issue in the future, carrying out analyses from different voices or with different informants, using other data collection instruments and in a more specific way and with a more detailed analysis in each of the faculties of the different campuses of the University of Malaga and other Spanish and European universities.

This study provides some guidelines for the development of new training practices, aimed at the active promotion of interculturality.

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