

Intercultural Communication: The Perceptions of Lebanese High School Directors

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Abstract

Because intercultural communication has become one of the most demanded skills in the current digitalized world, many educational institutions aspire to graduate students who possess intercultural skills and are able to successfully communicate with people from diverse cultures. However, intercultural communication has not received much attention in the Lebanese context, especially in schools. To this end, this paper examined the Lebanese high school directors' perceptions of intercultural communication. As pragmatists, the researchers employed quantitative and qualitative methods to better understand the problem under investigation. Using a snowball sampling, they surveyed the perceptions of 55 Lebanese directors in private and public high schools and interviewed two informants in the Center for Educational Research and Development. The collected data were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. Then, the derived conclusions were compared to ensure trustworthiness of the findings. Major findings showed that though intercultural communication is a learning outcome in most schools, it is mostly taught at the knowledge level in the foreign language classrooms. Assessment of this outcome was neither systematic nor consistent. It was also shown that directors in private schools tended to be more informed than those in the public sector. Recommendations are made for enhancing intercultural communication skills in Lebanese educational institutions.

Keywords: cultural diversity, curriculum design, intercultural communication, intercultural competence, Lebanon, schools

Developing intercultural competence is paramount in the globalized world. In fact, many scholars have stressed the importance of graduating interculturally competent communicators who are able to interact with multicultural customers, colleagues, and partners within and across international borders (Gün, 2023; Saba ‘Ayon & Harb, 2022a; Winstead, 2021). For example, Gün (2023) states that as the world has turned into a global village with advanced technological means for communication, it becomes customary for people from diverse cultures to communicate, rendering intercultural communication a necessary skill to be learned (p. 2780). In addition, Saba ‘Ayon and Harb (2022b, p. 3347) assert that there is a need to graduate global citizens who understand the nuances of otherness to succeed in communicating effectively with multicultural people and hence meet the demands of the digitalized world. Winstead (2021) stipulates that effective intercultural communication is a must in today's workplaces as an increasing number of company leaders “prioritize diversity and inclusion in their workplaces” (para. 1).

Unfortunately, intercultural education is not explicitly stated in the national Lebanese school or higher education curricula. The only reference to it is in the schools' foreign language curriculum as cultural awareness. However, it is limited to the English-speaking culture, and its main purpose is to help Lebanese students recognize the similarities and differences between their culture and the target culture (New National Curriculum, 1997, p. 147). This raised the researchers' curiosity and concern about the absence of such an indispensable objective from the Lebanese curricula. To this end, the researchers aimed to investigate the Lebanese educators' perceptions of intercultural communication and its status in the Lebanese high schools. The importance of the study lies in its being among the first to address this topic from the perspectives of Lebanese educators.

Theoretical Framework: Intercultural Communicative Competence

The study draws from Byram's (1997; 2021) and Deardorff's (2004; 2006) understanding of intercultural competence and is based on Byram's intercultural communicative competence (ICC) model. Byram's (1997; 2021) ICC was selected for the study because it focuses on the role of foreign language education in developing students' ICC as a learning outcome, hence aligning with intercultural learning found in the Lebanese context.

Terms and Definitions

It is worth noting that several terms are used to refer to intercultural competence in the literature, among which are intercultural communicative competence, intercultural dialogue, and global citizenship (See Saba ‘Ayon & Harb, 2022a). According to Deardorff (2015), these terms are even discipline-specific. For example, ICC is used in language learning, while intercultural competence is used in the field of education in general. However, due to their similarity, they are sometimes used interchangeably.

In addition, scholars define intercultural competence differently (See Byram, 1997; Council of Europe, 2007; Deardorff 2004; 2006; Dypedahl, 2019; UNESCO, 2013). For example,

UNESCO (2013), citing Byram (1997; 2008), defines intercultural competence as “having adequate relevant knowledge about particular cultures, as well as general knowledge about the sorts of 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 to draw upon both knowledge and attitudes when interacting with others from different cultures” (p. 16). This definition indicates that the main components of intercultural competence are, therefore, knowledge, skills, and attitude. Deardorff (2004) also includes these components in her intercultural competence model, which serves as an operational framework that can be implemented in educational institutions.

According to Deardorff (2004; 2006), embracing a curious, respectful, and open attitude and building knowledge that includes cultural self-awareness, sociolinguistic awareness, and deep cultural understanding leads to the targeted intercultural competence-related outcomes. The internal outcomes are the ability to empathize, adapt, assume an ethnorelative view, and be flexible, and these manifest in the external outcome as suitable and effective communication and behavior in each intercultural situation. Therefore, intercultural competence is essentially about enhancing interactions between people who are different within the same society or across borders (Deardorff, 2020, p. 5). In other words, cultural difference does not merely refer to differences in nationality or geography but includes any type of differences within a society such as age, gender, and religion among others.

The Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) Model

Within educational institutions, intercultural competence is commonly targeted in foreign language programs and demonstrated in people’s communication skills and interactions. Byram (1997; 2021; See also Porto & Byram, 2015; Wagner & Byram, 2017) has worked extensively on the ICC model to guide curriculum designers and teachers in their teaching and assessment practices. The model includes the following five dimensions: 1) Knowledge about one’s social group and culture as well as that of the other in addition to knowledge on how to navigate societal and individual interactions; 2) An attitude that is willing to both consider the others’ behaviors, values, and beliefs and analyze them from their perspectives (Byram, 2021, p. 45); 3) Education, as it serves a pivotal role in developing ICC, and educational institutions have a role in building knowledge and developing critical cultural awareness and the skills needed for intercultural interactions and experiences; 4) The skills to interpret and relate during interactions between people and while working on a document; 5) The skills to discover, which Byram (2021) defines as “the ability to recognise significant phenomena in a foreign environment and to elicit their meanings and connotations and their relationship to other phenomena” (p. 49).

Educators can support learners in achieving ICC by developing critical cultural awareness in the classroom. Byram (2021) defines critical cultural awareness as “the ability to critique one’s own way of thinking and acting and how this is influenced by societal factors” (p. 45). Porto and Byram (2015) explain that criticality should not be confused with criticism; it is the ability to analyze both weaknesses and strengths as well as to seek to deeply comprehend the other’s

point of view. Criticality requires reasoning, argumentation, and evaluative analysis as the individual engages with people or texts from a different culture (Byram, 2021).

The Role of the Educational Setting in Developing Intercultural Competence

The education setting has been recommended as the most effective venue for beginning the journey of developing intercultural competence (Al-Sumait et al., 2022; Byram, 2021; UNESCO, 2013). This has motivated institutions and organizations to revamp their national curricula, specifically their foreign language (FL) in some contexts and develop frameworks as well as models for targeting intercultural competence. A systematic approach that includes a clear definition and a guiding model or framework is helpful for educators because it ensures that they are clear about which aspects of culture should be addressed, and it creates an environment inside and outside the classroom that facilitates knowledge building and the development of intercultural communication skills.

To successfully target ICC as a learning outcome in the FL classroom, educators need to redefine FL education, examine teachers' beliefs and understanding, set educational policies, provide guides for effective pedagogical approaches, and foster a school culture that celebrates cultural diversity. For instance, Malazonia and colleagues (2018) investigated how the school culture, teachers' ICC and style of teaching and learning affect students' view of cultural diversity and quality of intercultural education in Georgian schools. They found that intercultural education is not effective because of the lack of a suitable learning environment, resources, and pedagogical approaches.

Redefining Foreign Language Education

The value of learning a FL today goes beyond the practical purposes of communicating with those who do not speak one's native language; therefore, the objectives of teaching foreign languages need to be redefined. According to Porto and Byram (2015), the responsibility of FL instructors should not be limited to the teaching of communication skills; instead, it should educate learners about the values of criticality and humanistic education (p. 10). These authors assert that the purpose of learning a FL should not only be instrumentally motivated but also be approached as a way to improve at the personal and societal level.

The FL classroom should serve as an environment for developing criticality, an important component of ICC. Porto and Byram (2015) argue that the FL classroom should foster criticality and direct learners towards taking action to improve society. Byram (2021) contends that FL classrooms in a general education institution have an obligation to build critical awareness of the values and importance of cultural practices in one's country as well as of those in the other's (p. 57). Critical cultural awareness is the key to developing the components of ICC in learners.

Examining Teachers' Beliefs and Understanding of ICC

Teachers' beliefs and understanding of ICC affect their ability to target the inherent components of ICC as learning outcomes. Ensuring the development of a teacher's intercultural competence should be a component of their education and teacher training. In fact, Ishida (2023) states that developing teachers' and administrators' ICC is an urgent challenge in the current global world (p. 13). Gün (2023), for example, assessed pre-service teachers' intercultural competence and cultural component perspectives in a Turkish university and examined whether gender, year of study, and grade point average (GPA) could be variables that relate to variation in the participants' scores. The findings showed that the pre-service teachers generally scored high. Though gender and GPA could impact the participants' scores, there was no significant correlation between the year of study and the scores. Gün (2023) recommends that English language teaching programs include ICC courses in their curricula to increase student teachers' ICC instead of leaving it to personal experiences, individual opportunities, and luck in the student teachers' lives (p. 2796).

That teacher training needs to target knowledge of intercultural communication more explicitly and effectively is also reinforced by Mardešić (2023), who found that the participants, student-teachers of English, French, and Italian, failed to draw connections between language and culture although these concepts are mentioned in the Common European Framework of Reference. Similarly, Sańczyk-Cruz (2023) suggests that language teacher education include more “systemic intercultural exposure” by adding more intercultural education courses, creating more inclusive environment for student teachers, and providing more professional opportunities for lecturers among others (p. 33).

Developing teachers' knowledge of intercultural communication, however, is not sufficient to ensure proper implementation and effective teaching practices. In fact, Nafisah and colleagues (2024), who in their systematic review examined the perceptions and practices of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in incorporating ICC into their language classes, found a discrepancy between these teachers' perceptions of ICC and their classroom practice due to several factors such as rigid curricula, time constraints, and vague teaching strategies (p. 16). That is why these authors recommend “bridging the gap between teachers' perceptions and practices [which] demands a holistic strategy that aligns theoretical acknowledgement with practical implementation” (Nafisah et al., 2024, p.17). Similarly, Tiurikova and Haukås (2022) examined teachers' beliefs and conceptualizations of three concepts, namely multilingualism, intercultural competence, and identity, using the Norwegian national curriculum for foreign languages as a point of reference. The interviews with the teachers showed that they understand these concepts but have a limited understanding of their connection in their teaching practices. The authors recommended that teacher education provide student teachers with more knowledge as well as training on how to teach these phenomena, in combination or in isolation.

Teaching ICC in Educational Policies and Curricula

Teachers need policy documents, a well-designed curriculum and syllabus, textbooks, and materials to effectively target ICC. Educators can support students in developing intercultural communicative competence by ensuring that their instructional material represents the various social groups in a country, which include those of low socio-economic backgrounds (Byram, 2021). The significance of such representation is to prompt learners through a reflexive methodology to “problematize a society’s treatment of all its social groups” (p. 56) and thus question their society’s attitude towards underprivileged ones (Byram, 2021). To illustrate, Byram (2021) gives an example from an EFL textbook taught in Germany of a fictional story about a Pakistani family that faces much racial prejudice in the neighborhood where they reside.

Integrating the cultural component in FL education would also include, as has traditionally been the case, the culture of the target language. For example, Ousiali and colleagues (2023) recognize the importance of including the cultures of English-speaking people in the EFL classroom in Morocco. Their study examined whether exposing Moroccan high school students in the EFL classroom to literary texts enhances their intercultural competence, and they found that learners' cultural awareness had slightly improved (Ousiali et al. 2023, p. 79).

Fostering a Classroom Environment for ICC

Other aspects of the classroom environment need to be considered when aiming to develop ICC. Schwarzenthal and colleagues (2020) examined how three types of cultural diversity climate in the classroom, namely multiculturalism, fostering contact and cooperation, and color-evasion, relate to students’ intercultural competence in secondary schools in Germany. They found that each of the three types of climates has its strengths and can make valuable contributions towards developing ICC. It is also worth examining student perspectives and experiences to foster a classroom environment for ICC. Tarp (2017), for instance, who examined students’ perspectives, found that the students’ capacity to develop intercultural communication and learning outcomes is affected by their level of participation, willingness to share their insecurities, and acceptance of the risk of losing face and being wrong. In addition, Saba ‘Ayon (2016), who investigated the impact of telecollaboration on students’ ICC, found that the telecollaborative experience, which students enjoyed, improved their ICC as instances of Byram’s (1997) learning objectives were noticeable in the participants’ interactions with their partners. The author recommends that telecollaboration be incorporated in FL classes as it provides an opportunity for students to interact with diverse students in “real-life situations” (p. 116).

In a nutshell, helping students develop their ICC is dependent on several variables in the educational setting: redefining educational objectives, developing teachers’ ICC, developing policies and appropriate curricula, and fostering a suitable environment conducive for ICC. Lebanon is a country whose history has been characterized by linguistic and cultural diversity.

It serves as the context under examination in the current study. A brief discussion of the historical context and education system and policy in Lebanon is provided below.

The Lebanese Context

Lebanon is one of the smallest countries in the Middle East, with an area of 10,452 square kilometers. It has been inhabited by different cultures and civilizations, from the ancient empire of the Akkadian to the Greek Alexander the Great, the Roman Empire, then the Crusaders, the Ottoman Empire and finally the French Mandate. All left their marks on the Lebanese culture and population.

These cultures also contributed to the language diversity in Lebanon. For example, during the French Mandate in Lebanon (1918–1942), French was the official language in education and public offices. After the Mandate, Standard Arabic reassumed its role as the primary linguistic medium in journalistic, educational, and official contexts, while colloquial Lebanese Arabic is used in daily conversations among the Lebanese. Besides the Arabic varieties, other languages are used in Lebanon, the most spoken of which are French and English, reflecting both cultural influences and the Lebanese educational system (See Saba ‘Ayon & Harb, 2023).

Since April 1975, when civil war broke out in Lebanon, a sense of sectarianism has emerged. Even though the civil war ended in October 1991, sectarianism did not diminish. On the contrary, it increased to the extent that now each sect in Lebanon looks at itself as having their own “culture” (Deeb et. al., 2023) although ethnically, the Lebanese are almost of the same ethnic group except for the Armenians who came to Lebanon back in 1920, after the Armenian genocide.

Since 2011, Middle Eastern unrest has led to Lebanon sheltering Syrian refugees, besides the Palestinians. These refugees number approximately 2.5 million, constituting half the Lebanese population (*Lebanon*, n.d.). Moreover, many European and American families reside and work in Lebanon. Western missionaries, whether secular or religious, have been present in Lebanon for more than 160 years. These missionaries have established several educational institutions such as the International College, Brummana High school, and The Grand Lycée at the K-12 school level in addition to the American University of Beirut and Saint Joseph University at the university level. These institutions have several international staff and students among their population. Moreover, a few international companies and embassies hire foreigners. All these factors render Lebanon fertile ground for intercultural communication and interaction.

Lebanese education operates on a K-12 system, culminating in high school graduation at approximately the age of 18. College-bound students start at the sophomore level, completing their bachelor’s in roughly three years. Post ninth grade, students opt for specialized tracks: mathematics, natural sciences, economics, or philosophy (Ayyash-Abdo et. al., 2009), which often determine their university majors. Lebanon's educational curriculum was initially fashioned after the French model during the French mandate (1920–1943) but integrated local subjects. While the 1968 revision retained the focus on knowledge acquisition, the 1997 update

prioritized hands-on experiences and critical thinking to better equip students in a post-civil war era (Frayha, 2003). This reform aimed to nurture unity, national pride, and values, like tolerance, democracy, and acceptance of others, among students (Center for Educational Research and Development¹ (CRDP)², 1997). The Lebanese Ministry of Education mandates this curriculum across all educational institutions, public and private.

According to Bahous and Nabahani (2008), Lebanon has three types of schools: public, run by the government; private run by independent institutions; and The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) schools that offer education to Palestinian refugees under the umbrella of the United Nations. While public state schools provide free education, the quality often lags behind that of private institutions (Bahous et al., 2022; Khafaja et al., 2020). Consequently, public schools predominantly serve students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Bahous et al., 2022; World Bank Group, 2022). Conversely, families with the financial means opt for private schooling due to its perceived superior quality, evidenced by higher student achievement on national and university admissions exams. However, there is a fourth type, namely the semi-private school, which is partly free. These schools get funding from the Ministry of Education and Higher Education to subsidize the tuition for its students (CRDP Lebanon, n.d.).

Advancements in Lebanese Curriculum: Standardized Action Plan and Operational Procedures

Since 2021, CRDP has been embarking on a new curriculum update. During 2020, interdisciplinary teams at the CRDP devised a comprehensive curriculum action plan, together with unified operational protocols. The update stemmed from the need to develop Lebanese citizens who are aware of the world around them and endowed with intercultural communication abilities (CRDP, 2023a).

Moreover, acknowledging the need for an intercultural citizen, the CRDP commenced the curriculum reform by developing the “Active Citizenship within Educational Curricula” which represents a paradigm shift from traditional pedagogical approaches employed in national education. This transformative initiative to entrench the beliefs of "active citizenship" into the modules and units of national education and civic socialization has given root for intercultural skills. Significantly, this pedagogical approach not only resonates with prevailing educational practices and student backgrounds but also mirrors the tangible cultural nuances present within the curriculum (CRDP, 2023b).

The study aimed to investigate intercultural communication in Lebanese high schools through the voices of Lebanese school directors as the above-mentioned curriculum reforms have not

¹ “A national institution concerned with educational modernization and development by setting educational plans and policies and directing educational curricula and requirements to build the citizen learner” (CRDP, n.d.).

² Acronym is in French and stands for “Centre de Recherche et de Développement Pédagogiques.” The older acronym in English (CERD) has recently been replaced by the French one.

been implemented yet. The overarching research question that this study set out to answer is the following: How do Lebanese directors in public and private high schools perceive intercultural communication (IC)? Three sub-questions followed:

1. To what extent does IC constitute a part of their school curricula?
2. How knowledgeable are the school directors about IC and its importance to Lebanese learners?
3. Are there any differences between the different types of schools in promoting IC?

Methodology and Methods

The researchers' emphasis was to examine and understand the problem under investigation and discern answers to the accompanying questions instead of focusing on methods per se (Creswell, 2007, p. 22). Both quantitative and qualitative approaches were utilized in the mixed-methods study to collect and analyze data (Creswell, 2007, p. 23). An online completion questionnaire was used to survey Lebanese school directors' perceptions of IC. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants in CRDP.

Selection of Participants

The researchers employed snowballing sampling, which is one type of convenience sample, to select their participants, who were Lebanese private and public high school directors (Bryman, 2008, p. 699). The researchers resorted to this sampling technique after several attempts to reach school directors through either emails or phone calls. Then, the researchers made initial contact with a small group of directors and/or teachers that helped the researchers establish contacts with the participating directors.

The researchers asked 55 Lebanese high school directors to take part in the study after explaining its purpose and promising them confidentiality and anonymity. That number constituted approximately 9% of all Lebanese high schools (614 high schools in total) according to the Head of the Educational System Evaluation Unit in CRDP.

Data-Collection Instruments

To ensure that the questionnaire could reach as many school directors as possible and that it could be easily completed, it was not only shared on Google Forms but also presented in three languages, namely English, French, and Arabic (reflecting the linguistic diversity in Lebanon). This gave the participating directors the choice of filling out the questionnaire in their preferred language.

The questionnaire, adopted from Deardorff's 2006 institutional questionnaire on intercultural competence and the self-assessment questionnaire on the intercultural dimension of the school (www.intercultural-learning.eu/Portfolio-Item/self-assessment-questionnaire/), was initially constructed in English and later translated into French and Arabic. The translated versions were

verified by professional translators (English to Arabic and English to French). In addition, the researchers emailed the questionnaires to three high school directors from the selected sample for piloting, and necessary revisions were made based on the given feedback.

The inquiry form consisted of four main sections. The first section (12 multiple-choice items) elicited information about the participating high schools. The second (9 multiple-choice items, 3 yes/no items, and 2 completion items), and the third (15 rating-scale items) elicited information about the directors' perceptions. As to the last section, it was an open-ended question that provided the participating directors an opportunity to express their opinions freely on the topic under investigation and/or to bring up ideas that were excluded from the questionnaire. The calculated Cronbach's alpha coefficient was above 0.8, which indicated a good internal consistency (Taber, 2017).

The researchers chose to conduct semi-structured interviews because they allowed a greater consideration of deep, rich data. To recruit the informants for the interviews, the researchers explained the purpose of the research to the Director of the CRDP, sent the interview questions for approval, and asked permission to mention the name of the center in the study. Next it was recommended that the Head of the English Department and the Coordinator of Joint Academic Departments be invited to take part in the research study. The interview with each respondent lasted 40-45 minutes. Afterwards, the transcriptions were sent to the participants for validation.

Data Analysis

The collected quantitative data from the three versions of the questionnaire were combined into one Excel file, and the French and Arabic data were translated into English. The translations were checked for accuracy by two professional translators. The excel file was then imported into SPSS (version 23), where descriptive analysis was run (Rahman & Muktadir, 2021). The researchers also conducted correlation and cross-tabulation analyses to determine whether there were differences between how schools promote and assess intercultural communication. The qualitative data were thematically analyzed. In addition, the derived conclusions from both analyses were crosschecked to ensure trustworthiness of the findings.

Findings and Discussion

The findings, which include the analyses of the collected quantitative and qualitative data, are presented in four sub-sections, description of the participants and their schools, status of IC in the schools, directors' perceptions of the importance of IC to students, and differences among schools in promoting IC. The headings of the last three sections were derived from the research questions.

Description of the Participants and their Schools

Twenty-nine of the participants were private school directors, one was a director of a semi-private school, and the remaining 25 were public high school directors. The number of the

participating directors reflected the proportion of high schools in Lebanon, where the private high schools outnumber the public high schools, and semi-private mainly exist as primary schools (Head of the Educational System Evaluation Unit in CRDP).

The participants were directors of schools in different regions in Lebanon: the capital (21.8%), cities (21.8%), suburbs (14.5%), and villages (41.8%). The students in these schools came almost entirely from the same regions: from the capital (18.2%), from the cities (25.5%), from the suburbs (14.5%), and villages (41.8%). These schools were of different sizes in terms of student body: small (fewer than 500) (50.9%), moderate (500-700) (16.4%), and large (more than 700) (32.7%). The population in these schools (teachers, students, and staff) as described by the directors ranged from slightly diverse (21.8%) to very diverse (21.8%) with a moderately diverse majority (56.4%).

The number of foreign languages taught in these schools differs, ranging from one FL to thirteen, with a majority (65.5%) of students receiving education in two languages, English and French. These languages were not only taught in the FL class. They were also the medium of instruction in several subjects as per the Lebanese curriculum. The majority of these schools used the FL in teaching four to five subjects, the most selected of which were math, biology, physics, and chemistry. Other subjects taught in the FL were geography, history, economics, philosophy, sociology, computer, and civic education among others. It is worth noting that Arabic as a FL, offered in few elite high schools, is taught only in the foreign language class.

Status of IC in the Schools

Terminologies for IC

Though different terminologies were used by these schools to refer to IC, the more frequently used ones were intercultural dialogue, cross-cultural communication, intercultural understanding, and global learning among others (see Table 1 below). From the terminologies used, none referred to cultural awareness as described in the national school curriculum. This could be explained by the mismatch between the cultural awareness objective of 1997 curriculum and the content of the school textbook that the Head of the Department of English in CRDP referred to. She said, “Though there is a reference to cultural awareness in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes, these were not translated into the detailed content. That is why cultural awareness objectives in the English Language curriculum are not taught deeply ...but mere exposure to the differences between cultures,” that is at the knowledge level.

Table 1
Different Terminologies for Intercultural Communication

Items	N	Percent	Percent of Cases
intercultural education	11	8.7%	20.4%
intercultural learning	8	6.3%	14.8%
intercultural dialogue	27	21.3%	50.0%
cross-cultural communication	20	15.7%	37.0%
international competence	6	4.7%	11.1%
global learning	16	12.6%	29.6%
global citizenship	11	8.7%	20.4%
intercultural competence	7	5.5%	13.0%
intercultural understanding	18	14.2%	33.3%
other	3	2.4%	5.6%

Importance of IC in Schools

In response to a query regarding the degree to which intercultural communication was considered a desired student outcome at school, the majority of the participants (69.1%) regarded it as important while 27.3% denied its presence in their schools. The qualitative data, reflected by one respondent, could possibly explain the absence of this learning outcome in other schools, “In Lebanon and in public schools specifically, intercultural communication is missing.” Conversely, IC was recognized as an important learning outcome by the majority of the respondents (80%) with very few (1.8%) rating it as not important. The qualitative data was in line with the quantitative figures as reflected by a respondent’s comment, “The subject of cultural exchange is considered one of the important topics that should be emphasized by introducing it as a basic subject within the educational curricula because of its positive impact on the future of learners.” These findings showed that the participants were aware of the importance of IC and acknowledged that the educational institutions should play an important role in developing these skills. (Al-Sumait et al., 2022; Byram, 2021; UNESCO, 2013).

Written Policies of IC in Schools

The quantitative data showed that most of the participating schools (36.4%) had no written policy on intercultural issues, 25.5% had policies related to international projects; 20% retained a policy related to providing assistance for speakers of other languages; and 14.5% held a policy about valuing minority languages. The qualitative data was consistent with the quantitative numbers as some respondents denied having written policies about IC while a few directors talked about a language policy and an inclusion policy. A small number referred to academic honesty and integrity policies as the only written policies they had in this regard. The absence of written policies in a curriculum that includes IC is a challenge and an impediment for educational institutions and teachers to systematically and meaningfully practice and develop these skills. In fact, the literature emphasizes the importance of these policies to support

teachers in helping their students develop their ICC (Byram, 2021; Ousaili et al., 2023). Models such as Byram's (2021), manuals such as Deardoff's (2020), and frameworks such as *Key competences for lifelong learning, European reference framework (2007)* can serve as an anchor for schools to seriously and consistently target IC as learning outcomes.

Ways to promote IC

Though quite a number of the participating schools had the majority (23.6%) to half of their students (30.9%) experience difficulty in the FL, most intercultural learning or communication happened in the FL courses (67.3%). Extra-curricular activities (63.6%), classroom projects (61.8%), international projects (32.7%), and field trips or travels (29.1%) among others were also named as ways to promote IC (see Table 2 for more details).

Table 2
Ways Schools Promote Intercultural Learning

Items	Responses		Percent of cases
	N	Percent	
Foreign language courses	37	20.2%	67.3%
Courses (other than foreign language)	6	3.3%	10.9%
Classroom projects	34	18.6%	61.8%
Extracurricular activities	35	19.1%	63.6%
International projects	18	9.8%	32.7%
Study opportunities abroad	11	6.0%	20.0%
Class exchange programs	10	5.5%	18.2%
E-twinning programs	11	6.0%	20.0%
Field trips/travels	16	8.7%	29.1%
Other	5	2.7%	9.1%

The Head of the English Department in CRDP stated that cultural awareness was promoted in the EFL curriculum through themes such as “means of transport, food habits, holidays and celebration.” She added that schools were also trying to include them through projects in the FL classes “like the Italian Language Project and Cultural Exchange Program by the British Council.” This made the researchers wonder to what extent the students' difficulty in the FL could impede their understanding of the cultural concepts embedded in the FL class.

According to the coordinator of Joint Academic Departments in CRDP, promoting IC in the classroom depended greatly on individual efforts of motivated teachers. She gave an example of a success story of herself as a science teacher in a public high school in South Lebanon before joining the CRDP. She described her participation in an online project by UNESCO, entitled *Water for life*: “I partnered with schools in Egypt and Sweden to find solutions for the

problem of water worldwide. I implemented this project in grades 7 till 12, and we (teachers) used to share our students' experiences and learning. That's how we and our students in different countries learned from each other about finding solutions to water problems and more importantly about our countries and hence cultures." To her, "this illustrates how the motivation of the teacher in the public sector plays a role in seeking professional development and carrying out that training in the classroom."

Another respondent talked about her experience collaborating with a different educator in the UK, stating, "Working on the ISA (International School Award) Program (the joint classroom), which entailed carrying out 7 activities in Lebanon and at the same time in the UK was a life-changing experience for me as I played the role of the international coordinator. Through this program, our students learned many traditions pertinent to the British people and vice versa!" She added, "I am forever grateful for having the chance to communicate with British educators and for giving equal opportunity for my students to become global citizens. It helped me to develop professionally and widened my students' knowledge."

An additional participant raised an important issue related to the promotion of IC in schools. That participant openly talked about religion in Lebanon as a possible impediment to intercultural learning and addressed the role parents could play in complementing the learning that happens in schools, asserting, "sometimes religion is a barrier to intercultural learning, so the role of parents at home is very important to encourage this intercultural learning not only at school."

Assessment of IC

Though IC is promoted in most schools, only 25.5% of the participating schools assess students' intercultural communication skills. The results supported by the interview data showed that while IC was considered a learning outcome in most of the participating schools, it was not assessed by these schools as other learning outcomes were. This raises the question concerning the reason for the absence of systematic and objective assessment tasks. The Coordinator of the Joint Academic Departments clarified the lack of assessment of IC in most schools. She stated, "Unfortunately, there is no reference to formal assessment of intercultural learning in the national school curriculum; there are no rubrics to measure this outcome. Teachers, even in the FL classes, teach for the official exams. Hence, assessment is limited to sentence structure and language competencies." In addition, the quantitative data showed that schools used different assessment methods, but the most common were evaluations conducted by teachers in their specific courses (25.5%), interviews with students (23.6%), students' papers or presentations (18.2%), and teachers' observation of students (18.2%) among others (more information is presented in Table 3).

Table 3
Methods used in IC Assessment

Items	Responses		Percent of Cases
	N	Percent	
Evaluation conducted by teachers' individual courses	14	15.4%	25.5%
Interviews with students	13	14.3%	23.6%
Student paper and/or presentation	10	11.0%	18.2%
Student journal/blogs/reflections	6	6.6%	10.9%
Custom-designed/adapted self-report instrument	1	1.1%	1.8%
Pre/post test	5	5.5%	9.1%
Ongoing assessment (specify)	3	3.3%	5.5%
Written test	3	3.3%	5.5%
E-portfolios	5	5.5%	9.1%
Observation of students in specific situations	10	11.0%	18.2%
Other (Please specify)	21	23.1%	38.2%

The interview data revealed that the effort to target this particular learning outcome relied heavily on an individual teacher's efforts. The Coordinator of the Joint Academic Departments stated that "Some motivated and enthusiastic teachers go beyond the required assessment and assign projects to their students about different cultures' food, costume, traditions and habits, through which they try to assess their students' knowledge about other cultures." This example not only illustrates the individual effort of the teacher but also reinforces the idea that cultural learning as well as assessment happens only at the knowledge level. A curriculum that clearly incorporates IC should ensure proper implementation of it in the classroom, consistency in assessment, and well-designed resources to support teacher's endeavors (Byram, 2021 and Deardoff, 2020).

Ways to Promote IC among Staff and Faculty

According to the participating directors, the most adopted methods schools use to help their staff and teachers develop IC are workshops (36.4%), courses (20%), and in-service training (16.4%). It is noteworthy that numerous schools (27.3%) did nothing in this regard. The Head of the English Department in CRDP clarified that "training is not currently provided to programs that seek to compensate for learning loss due to several factors that affected the coursework in public schools such as COVID, port explosion, the economic crisis and its consequences." When questioned how training and follow-up were conducted, she said that CRDP was responsible for training the teachers in schools, whereas the follow-up was the responsibility of the DOBS³ [Pedagogical and Scholastic Guidance Office]. Upon probing about whether these DOBS received the same training or were aware of the training on which

³ Acronym is in French. DOPS stands for Direction d'Orientation Pe'dagogique et Scolaire

they needed to follow-up, the Head of the Department replied, “Not necessarily” and added that this issue had caused some problems between the center and the DOBS, which they were trying to resolve. The Coordinator of the Joint Academic Departments also said, “There should be more coordination between the two processes, namely training and coaching. The trainers in the center should collaborate with the coaches in schools to ensure proper follow-up. Currently, when teachers receive training, there is no system to follow-up on what they do in class. Hence, it depends on the teacher’s motivation to implement that training in the classroom”. In fact, this idea was confirmed by one participant who recommended that “staff, teachers, and students be given monetary and moral incentives to motivate them to participate in educational workshops”.

This raises many questions about the kind of training and the type of development the teachers receive, how consistent the training and the follow-up are, and how helpful they are to the teachers. As presented in the literature, though teacher training is important, supervision of teacher practice is a must to ensure effective implementation of IC in class, and therefore helping students develop their ICC (Gün, 2023; Ishida, 2023; Mardešić, 2023; Nafiseh et al., 2024; Tiurikova & Haukås; 2022).

Directors’ Perceptions of the Importance of IC to Students

Most of the participating directors seemed knowledgeable about the importance of intercultural communication to Lebanese learners. In fact, most of these respondents were aware of the most common advantages of having IC in the school curriculum, namely helping students communicate with diverse people (81.8%) and enabling students to work in a multicultural workplace (80%). However, fewer directors were aware of the importance of IC in developing tolerance and understanding of others (58.2%) and in ensuring equity, peace, and inclusion (52.7%). The qualitative data added insights to the quantitative data. One of the participants stated that “No matter how hard we work on promoting intercultural education among youth, no peace and equity will be maintained as long as corrupt rulers are ruining the bridges built or using these bridges for bad goals.” These findings reveal the importance of a proper education on ICC in terms of developing critical awareness (Byram, 2021) and approaching ICC as a skill to be practiced in real life (Dervin & Yuan, 2022).

One of the reasons why some participating directors were more informed than others could be related to their participation in international projects that promote intercultural communication or learning. In more details, approximately one third of the directors (30.9%) participated in such an experience. Some of the named projects as reflected in the qualitative data were UNESCO Peace Education Program, UNESCO Conflict Resolution between countries, British Council International School Award, Compassion Summit, E-twinning, and International Youth Days. Another reason is the school’s contact with external providers. In fact, only 27.3% of the participating schools had contacts with external providers of intercultural services, among which were Jesuite France, American Montessori Society, British Council, USAID Program.

The qualitative data was in line with the quantitative data. In fact, one respondent stated that “some high schools are kept away from collaborating with important and effective associations.” However, one respondent who seemed to have contacts with international organizations talked about the positive impact of external providers on their school, “Despite the barriers in the Lebanese society, our school is a key player in promoting communication and cultural exchange. We are committed to being open, valuing diversity, and contributing to a peaceful global community, which aligns with the goals of global organizations that work to overcome human-made barriers.”

Differences Among Schools in Promoting IC

Though there was no significant correlation between the type of school and the importance of IC as a desired learning outcome, cross-tabulations showed some differences between the private and public schools. In detail, the cross-tabulation between the type of school and the advantages of including IC in the school curriculum showed that the directors of the private schools were more aware of these advantages than those of the public ones as seen in Table 4 below. This could be related to the directors’ taking part in international projects and/or having contacts with external providers.

Table 4

Cross-Tabulation between Type of School and Advantages of IC in the School Curriculum

			School			Total
			Private	Semi-private	Public	
Advantages of including IC in your school ^a	Help students communicate with diverse people	Count % within Q1	25 86.2%	1 100.0%	19 76.0%	45
	Enable students to work in a multicultural workplace	Count % within Q1	24 82.8%	1 100.0%	19 76.0%	44
	Help students develop tolerance and understanding	Count % within Q1	20 69.0%	0 0.0%	12 48.0%	32
	Ensure equity, peace, and inclusion	Count % within Q	16 55.2%	1 100.0%	12 48.0%	29
Total		Count	29	1	25	55

Percentages and totals are based on respondents
(Dichotomy group tabulated at value 1)

The cross-tabulation between the type of school and the ways schools actively promote intercultural learning showed higher percentages for the private than the public schools as seen in Table 5. This could be related to the absence of IC as a learning outcome in public schools.

Table 5

Cross-Tabulation between Type of School and Ways Schools Use to Promote IC

		School			Total	
		Private	Semi-private	Public		
In what ways does your school actively promote intercultural learning? ^a	Foreign language course	Count % within Q1	23 79.3%	1 100.0%	13 52.0%	37
	Courses (other than foreign language)	Count % within Q1	4 13.8%	0 0.0%	2 8.0%	6
	Classroom projects	Count % within Q1	22 75.9%	0 0.0%	12 48.0%	34
	Extracurricular activities	Count % within Q1	19 65.5%	1 100.0%	5 60.0%	35
	International projects	Count % within Q1	12 41.4%	1 100.0%	5 20.0%	18
	Study opportunities abroad	Count % within Q1	6 20.7%	1 100.0%	4 16.0%	11
	Class exchange programs	Count % within Q1	6 20.7%	1 100.0%	3 12.0%	10
	E-twinning programs	Count % within Q1	6 20.7%	1 100.0%	4 16.0%	11
	Field trips/travel	Count % within Q1	10 34.5%	1 100.0%	5 20.0%	16
	Other (please specify)	Count % within Q1	1 3.4%	0 0.0%	1 4.0%	2
	Not applicable	Count % within Q1	3 10.3%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	3
Total	Count	29	1	25	55	

Percentages and totals are based on respondents
(Dichotomy group tabulated at value 1)

The cross-tabulation between the type of school and assessment methods showed that the private sector was higher in some tools. More specifically, evaluation conducted by teachers in individual courses, interviews with students, student paper and/or presentation, student journal/blogs/reflections, written test, e-portfolios and observation of students in specific situations by teachers and supervisors appeared to provide significant support. Alternatively, the public schools were only slightly higher in pre/post-test and on-going assessment (see Table 6 below).

Table 6*Cross-Tabulation between Type of School and Assessment Method*

		School			Total	
		Private	Semi-private	Public		
If your school is assessing intercultural communication, what specific tools does it utilize in measuring it? ^a	Evaluation conducted by teachers in individual courses	Count % within Q1	9 31.0%	0 0.0%	5 20.0%	14
	Interviews with students	Count % within Q1	7 24.1%	0 0.0%	6 24.0%	13
	Student paper and/or presentation	Count % within Q1	6 20.7%	0 0.0%	4 16.0%	10
	Student journal/blog/reflections	Count % within Q1	4 13.8%	0 0.0%	2 8.0%	6
	Custom-designed/adapted self-report instrument	Count % within Q1	1 3.4%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	1
	Pre/post test	Count % within Q1	2 6.9%	0 0.0%	3 12.0%	5
	Ongoing assessment (specify)	Count % within Q1	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	3 12.0%	3
	Written test	Count % within Q1	2 6.9%	0 0.0%	1 4.0%	3
	E-portfolios	Count % within Q1	4 13.8%	0 0.0%	1 4.0%	5
	Observation of students in specific situations (by teachers, supervisors, etc.)	Count % within Q1	7 24.1%	0 0.0%	3 12.0%	10
	Other (please specify)	Count % within Q1	10 34.5%	1 100.0%	10 40.0%	21
Total	Count	29	1	25	55	

Percentages and totals are based on respondents
(Dichotomy group tabulated at value 1)

As presented earlier, the assessment of students' IC is neither systematic nor formal in almost all schools and much dependent on the individual teacher's motivation. As teachers in the private sector receive more training and are expected to use student-centered approaches, this could explain why teachers in the private sector use more creative assessment methods than traditional written exams.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study investigated Lebanese high school directors' perceptions of intercultural communication (IC) in their schools. Specifically, it examined how knowledgeable they are about IC and its importance to the students, as well as how grounded this skill is in their curriculum, teaching practices, and campus culture. The data included questionnaires completed by 55 participants and two semi-structured interviews with the Head of the English Department and the Coordinator of Joint Academic Departments. The findings have shown that almost all the participating schools are aware of IC though they use various terms to refer to it. Although the participants recognize the importance of teaching IC, its components are not clearly defined and incorporated into the curriculum. In fact, intercultural learning, mostly happening in the FL classroom, is restricted to similarities and/or differences between cultures at the knowledge level and is not systematically assessed. This is not conducive enough for students to develop IC effectively and consistently because there is more than knowledge to IC; learners need to develop the right attitude and skills (Byram, 2021). That's why Porto and Byram (2015) contend that teachers of foreign languages have a responsibility to support learners in developing the right attitude and criticality as part of their journey to developing their IC.

Though the directors of the private schools have shown themselves to be more knowledgeable about these skills, their awareness about the importance of critical cultural awareness in ensuring a just, equal, and plural society still needs to be raised. The findings have also shown that private schools promote and assess IC more than the public ones, and that individual teachers, guided by their enthusiasm and interest in IC, are more proactive in this sense. Such efforts are not sufficient for graduating interculturally competent individuals to build a peaceful, tolerant society and serve as global citizens.

Due to the non-probability sample and the self-reporting instruments, the researchers do not attempt to generalize the findings, but data crosschecking contributed to their trustworthiness. Based on the derived conclusions, the researchers recommend that a more systematic approach to teaching IC be incorporated in the Lebanese curriculum. Moreover, they suggest that there be a guiding framework of reference that caters to IC and that is suitable for the unique Lebanese context, which has suffered a long history of political, economic, and social instability. This framework should include not only knowledge, which has been insufficient, but also other dimensions, namely attitude, skills to discover and relate, as well as proper education that are crucial to successfully develop these competencies (Byram, 1997; 2021). In addition, the gaps found in the current curriculum should be closed by translating the objectives into concrete learning outcomes, promoting IC beyond the FL classes to other subjects, encouraging multidisciplinary projects, creating appropriate instructional materials, and mandating systematic assessment of these outcomes. Lebanese educators should also receive enough training on incorporating IC in their classrooms, and there should be a close coordination between the trainers and coaches in schools to ensure proper follow-up of the new strategies implemented in the classrooms. Similar to the private sector, public schools should be provided with opportunities to collaborate with external providers of intercultural services.

Finally, future research should investigate the perceptions of more diverse populations, most important of whom are teachers in the public and private sectors due to the significant role they play in the teaching/ learning process.

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