

Book Review: Interculturality and the Political within Education

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Abstract

This review provides an evaluation of the book *Interculturality and the Political within Education* written by Dervin and Simpson. It first gives a brief introduction to the book, the authors, the organization, and the features of the book. After that, the review presents a description and evaluation of the book's content based on its themes. Through the five chapters, the authors discuss three main issues in interculturality, namely, the notion of interculturality, influences on interculturality, and current interculturality research based on ideologies and economic-political perspectives. The authors suggest that alongside a research trend of (re)defining or (re)negotiating the meaning of interculturality, intercultural practitioners need to be aware of reframing such concepts for use within their own social contexts, since most of the concepts and models that are widely quoted originate with Western scholars and theorists. They effectively frame this problem as the “admire role models” trap in interculturality research. It misleads teachers and researchers into thinking that successful intercultural interaction can be prepared by learning commonly accepted interaction norms and blindly employing Western models to assess students' intercultural competence. In fact, interculturality is often in the process of developing. Ultimately, working in the field of intercultural studies requires us to be skeptical about everything and to read widely.

Keywords: intercultural studies, conceptualizing interculturality, characterizing interculturality, postcolonial thoughts in education, hierarchical ideologies

Interculturality and the Political within Education,
Fred Dervin, Ashley Simpson, (1st ed.). Routledge, Oxon (2021).
138 pp., ISBN: 978-0-429-47115-5. US\$60.00/UK£45.00.

The publication of *Interculturality and the Political within Education* will be of particular interest to intercultural practitioners. This book is from the Routledge Research in Education series, which is under the general editorship of Emilie Coin. The series provides up-to-date developments of the latest research in education, and it covers a variety of topics, theories, and issues. The overall purpose of this particular book is to remind people to treat the notion of interculturality cautiously.

The book's first author, Fred Dervin, is a professor of Multicultural Education at the University of Helsinki, Finland. His publications can be found in international journals on identity, interculturality, and migration. He has teaching and research experience in intercultural communication education and holds several professorships in universities in Canada, Australia, Luxembourg, and China. The second author, Ashley Simpson, works as a lecturer in Language Education at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland. He is a specialist in Intercultural Education, Intercultural Communication, and Multilingualism. He has worked in higher education institutions in Finland, Russia, and China. Together, the authors' knowledge and experiences in intercultural studies make them more than capable of writing this book.

This book is organized into three topics: conceptualization of interculturality; influence on interculturality; and current research on interculturality. The topics run through the chapters continuously. In **Chapter 1**, the authors conceptualize interculturality by characterizing it. In **Chapters 2 and 3**, they recall several people who have influenced their understandings and experiences of intercultural studies, and discuss, in particular, how research and education influence experiences of interculturality. Continuing the focus of education, in **Chapter 4**, the authors point out a common practice, namely, preparing students for intercultural interactions. Here, Dervin and Simpson argue that teaching students how to behave and assessing their intercultural competence do not necessarily prepare them to be interculturally

competent. At the end of the book, in **Chapter 5**, the authors discuss the current state of intercultural research.

In each chapter, Dervin and Simpson take turns discussing their opinions. At the end of each chapter, they provide *synopsis* and *going further* sections, wherein readers are presented with chapter summaries and challenged to think more deeply. Throughout the book, the authors work systematically, which means they examine words used in intercultural studies for their exact meanings in English and other languages; thus, they attempt to make up the gap between the powerful voice (English) and powerless voices (other languages). In addition, they employ a novel approach that integrates interdisciplinary knowledge such as philosophy, sociology, anthropology, and arts into their discussion, which blurs the boundaries between disciplines. The third feature of this book is that they present many examples based on their teaching and research experiences in different parts of the world.

With regard to individual chapter's contents, at the start of the book, the authors first discuss the inequality caused by political and economic powers in interculturality. This is noteworthy for teachers and researchers as it is a reflection of postcolonial thoughts in transnational educational communities. The concepts and models of Western “gurus” (notably, Byram, 1997 & Deardorff, 2006) are positioned as being widely cited in intercultural studies. While communicating “effectively” and “appropriately” have become the standards in and goals of intercultural research, teaching, and practice, for the authors, the notion of interculturality is not only about cultural interactions and cultural differences. Thus, in **Chapter 1**, they discuss how they perceive and understand the modern-day notion of “intercultural”. However, instead of giving a definition of what interculturality is, Dervin explains what interculturality is not from six aspects. He argues that the current notion is dominated by Western-centric ideologies and symbolic power (e.g., English as being equated primarily with white people). Fundamentally, he argues that people usually blindly support privileged Western ideologies without thinking about their application, especially when it comes to their applications in unprivileged contexts. Building on Dervin’s discussion, Simpson then further discusses interculturality from the micro-level perspective

of interpersonal dialogue. At this point in the book, the authors argue that a detrimental “shortcut” is often taken in intercultural studies, whereby researchers and teachers safely quote the concepts, models, and measurements proposed by the “gurus”, in their assessment of students’ intercultural competence, as well as when evaluating the improvement of intercultural competence brought about by a project (e.g., study abroad programs), a course (e.g., intercultural citizenship), or a means (e.g., virtual exchanges).

Following the in-depth discussion of definitional issues, **Chapters 2** and **Chapter 3** serve as a memoir, in which Dervin and Simpson recall those people and experiences that have influenced their understandings of interculturality. They list several influential historians, philosophers, intercultural scholars, and colleagues who come from different countries, such as France, Malaysia, China, and Sweden. The authors give credit to these individuals for their academic influences. In addition, Dervin and Simpson use their experience in Finland as examples to illustrate how intercultural experiences influence beliefs and research. What they discuss in these two chapters remind us that intercultural knowledge is based on the influences of other scholars, institutions, and political systems. However, because not all people have equal access to voicing their opinions, we need to be aware of a tendency to admire role models who are the embodiment of powerful voices. In other words, when working in the field of intercultural studies, we need to be skeptical about everything and read widely.

The authors then propose an additional issue of importance in **Chapter 4**: Can we, as scholars, teachers, students, and the general public, prepare or get prepared for interculturality? They point out that teachers often inculcate their students to such opinions as “we need to be tolerant/show respect”. It seems that only if students know these “regulations” beforehand, can they be successful in intercultural interactions. However, this chapter argues that these are often “invisible” orders and are achieved through intercultural intimidation. Dervin argues that the research on preparing students’ intercultural competence rarely examines how students perceive and criticize the ideologies imposed on them.

Instead, preparing students to be interculturally competent is just repeated to verify how students are able to “parrot” others’ communicative behaviors. In addition, intercultural education becomes a kind of student self-help guide, which misleads them into thinking that intercultural experiences should be nice, happy, and problem-free, but the education seldom mentions ideologies, power, or inequity in intercultural interactions. In fact, as the two authors argue, the real world is an embodiment of conflicting ideologies. Thus, for me, as for the authors, interculturality is often in the making—it cannot be controlled or determined a priori.

In **Chapter 5**, the authors move on to discuss the state of intercultural research in general, which they argue typically reflects hierarchical ideologies in education. Such research contributes to ordering and structuring bio-political forces in the world. It is always ideological and political, and it is a kind of product that is sold to educators, businessmen, and governments. Thus, in this discussion at the end of the book, the authors illustrate how economic-political ideologies and intercultural practices are entangled in the educational field. Here, the authors emphasize again the viewpoint that emerged during the COVID-19 crisis, wherein “we” (mostly composed of developed nations) care about individuals but they (everyone else) do not, which might already verify the failure of many intercultural ideologies in the world. Thus, the first and foremost issue that interculturality should address is the inequality in economic-political status, which leads to a hierarchy in intercultural ideologies.

Overall, this book aims to foster dialogue among intercultural researchers, teachers, and students. Its contents are delivered in a logical organization with critical viewpoints. A minor shortcoming is that the examples used in the book are taken from literature, philosophy, and mythology from different countries, which may confuse readers who are not familiar with the background of such examples. Nevertheless, as a teacher and researcher of intercultural studies, I thoroughly recommend this book. Though the issue of Western-centric ideologies in intercultural studies has been voiced by many scholars, Dervin and Simpson provide readers with further examples to think about and draw on their wealth of experience and

shared knowledge base to bring real-world issues to bare. Thus, the book will clearly broaden readers' previous knowledge of the notion, research state, and practice of interculturality. No doubt, this book will be of interest to scholars, teachers, and students in the field of intercultural studies—for both theoretical and empirical reasons—yet it might also be of interest to people in language education, migrant studies, and business fields.

References

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