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A review of the literature on intercultural understanding

In today's globalized world, intercultural understanding is a crucial skill that fosters respectful and productive interactions among diverse populations. The World Economic Forum highlights that intercultural skills are essential for individual and organizational success. Further, organizations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development argue that intercultural education in primary and secondary schools enhances students' social and emotional development and prepares them for a competitive global workforce.



What is intercultural understanding?

Intercultural understanding consists of the knowledge and appreciation of cultural similarities and differences, and the skill of reflecting on one's own culture in relation to others.

Is intercultural understanding domain general or domain specific?

Intercultural understanding encompasses both domain-general and domain-specific aspects. The knowledge and skills associated with intercultural understanding are applicable across content domains and contexts. However, the authentic application of intercultural understanding occurs within a particular context and often requires specialized knowledge and skills tailored to specific content domains.

How do students develop intercultural understanding over time?

Although substantial research and numerous theories exist on the development of intercultural understanding, no single model fully captures a nuanced theory of how intercultural understanding develops. However, three models together provide a comprehensive view of developmental principles: the intercultural communicative competence model, the process model of intercultural competence and the developmental model of intercultural sensitivity. Due to the theoretical nature of these models, further research is needed to validate their effectiveness in informing instructional decisions.

How is intercultural understanding influenced by culture?

Intercultural understanding is thought to be deeply influenced by cultural factors and contexts. However, academic work on intercultural understanding, especially formal models and instructional approaches, has overwhelmingly been generated from Western countries and may not be appropriate in non-Western settings. More research is needed to understand how these and other instructional approaches influence intercultural understanding in non-Western settings.

What does the research say about effective intercultural understanding instructional strategies?

Despite a plethora of research, the field's understanding about the effectiveness of instructional practices for improving intercultural understanding is extremely limited, likely due to two factors. First, there is no universally accepted definition of intercultural understanding. Second, the vast majority of studies on intercultural understanding are either theoretical or descriptive. However, recent research sheds some light on the promise of a few instructional approaches for improving intercultural understanding: service-learning, study abroad programmes, foreign language learning, and the use of information and communication technology tools.

How can intercultural understanding be measured and assessed?

Common methods for measuring and assessing intercultural understanding include capstone projects, performance tasks, standardized measures, critical reflection papers, self-report surveys and interviews. Given the construct's complexity, assessing intercultural understanding typically requires both direct and indirect evidence. Direct assessments involve tasks that allow students to demonstrate a specific achieved or desired outcome, usually evaluated by certified instructors or experts using objective criteria. Indirect assessments include proxy measures such as self-report surveys. The research literature describes over 100 standardized measures of intercultural understanding, with varying reliability and validity. Most of these focus on undergraduate and graduate student populations, indicating a need for valid and reliable assessments of younger students' intercultural understanding.

This summary was developed by the IB Research department. A copy of the full report is available at: www.ibo.org/en/research/. For more information on this study or other IB research, please email research@ibo.org.

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