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Teachers as intercultural bridge-builders: Rethinking the metaphor of bridge-building

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Abstract

The idea that intercultural understanding should be based on in-depth knowledge about the other continues to capture the imagination of policy makers, practitioners, and researchers. According to this line of thinking, intercultural understanding is about creating a secure way of reducing cultural complexity, aiming to overcome what is perceived as the strangeness of the other. While this approach to intercultural understanding has been highly influential, a growing body of work has raised fundamental questions about its adequacy. This article contributes to this discussion by exploring the metaphorical expression, *bridge-building*, as a way to describe teachers' work with intercultural understanding. The article relates the bridge-building metaphor to the ability to develop and integrate targeted knowledge, skills, and attitudes. It also explores how the bridge-building metaphor allows us to use our cultural and social experiences to facilitate an understanding of others.

KEYWORDS

bridge-building metaphor, intercultural education, intercultural understanding, teachers' professional practice

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Within the field of education, building bridges has become a common metaphor to describe teachers' work with intercultural understanding, referring to the facilitation of communication that brings people in contact with one another and makes it possible to overcome cultural, linguistic, and religious barriers (Austin & Anderson, 2008; Skrefsrud, 2018; Strack, 2005). The bridge-building metaphor reflects how teachers can close the gap between differences, thus enabling an exchange of thoughts and ideas to support intercultural understanding.

Bridges are built for transportation, mobility, and passage. They expedite travel and communication, and they allow for freedom of movement for all who wish to cross them and who find the construction sufficiently stable and reliable. Bridges represent an opportunity to explore what lies on the other side of the expanse, and to journey into new areas. They create a safe connection to places that might have been unknown because they were inaccessible. Therefore, building a bridge is about accessibility and connectivity. It facilitates movement and exchange, and it makes it possible to overcome barriers to mobility, such as a river, a cliff, or a deep fjord.

Across the world, concerns about globalization and international migration have inspired calls for building bridges between people from diverse backgrounds. More than ever before, schools are faced with the challenge of increasing academic achievement for all students and enabling children and young people to live peacefully together. Schools need teachers who are able to bridge differences and build relationships across cultures. For me, working in teacher education, it is important to prepare pre-service teachers for work in a classroom that is culturally, linguistically, and religiously diverse. This entails helping students master the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes they need as future in-service teachers. It also entails supporting and helping them reflect upon the concepts and metaphors that we use to describe our teaching and our interactions with children and young people.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) have defined metaphors as "understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (p. 5). While metaphors typically have been viewed as a figure of speech associated with language, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) found that they are "pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. The concepts that govern our thoughts are not just matters of the intellect. They also govern our everyday functioning" (p. 3). According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), "every experience takes place within a vast background of cultural presuppositions" (p. 57). This means that metaphors allow us to use our cultural and social experiences to facilitate an understanding of other subjects. Metaphors create reality. They structure what we perceive, how we perceive it, and how we relate to other people (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 3). Therefore, it is necessary to critically discuss the concepts that govern our thoughts and understandings. A metaphor, such as bridge-building, needs to be continually discussed, reformulated, and critically restructured in relation to the empirical field it is meant to help us understand.

In this article, I discuss what the bridge-building metaphor may tell us about teachers' work of facilitating and establishing intercultural understanding. Drawing attention to the strengths and the shortcomings of the metaphor, the article interprets the ability to build intercultural bridges as being equivalent to developing specific knowledge, attitudes, and skills that should be an integral part of teachers' professional development. The strength of the bridge-building metaphor lies in its power to evoke intercultural understanding as an invitation to human interaction, communication, and the exchange of ideas and life views. However, I also critically explore the extent to which the identification with a stable, solid, and risk-free installation, such as a bridge, is a proper metaphor for intercultural understanding. As the article emphasizes, the evanescence and fundamental uncertainty of intercultural encounters can easily be overlooked by the stability expressed in that metaphor. The research question is: How can a reflective approach to the bridge-building metaphor help us develop, integrate, and maintain intercultural bridge-building in our teaching without reducing the other to a representative of a predefined understanding of a cultural community?

The article is organized as follows. First, I discuss the tendency to think of intercultural understanding as the process of acquiring in-depth knowledge about the cultural characteristics of various groups and communities, which presupposes a conception of cultures as systems of fixed collective symbols. Against this background, I reflect on how the bridge-building metaphor may be understood in a way that does not overlook or overrule the dynamic

features of intercultural encounters. I end the article by critically assessing the possible shortcomings of the bridge-building metaphor as an imaginative way of describing teachers' work of enhancing cultural understanding in the classroom. It is worth noting that my critique is not a rejection of the bridge-building metaphor as an expression for teachers' work on intercultural understanding. Rather, in light of Lakoff and Johnson' (1980) work on metaphors, I critically ask what meanings metaphors produce when interpreted in light of specific cultural presuppositions, in this case, what the bridge-building metaphor may tell us about teachers' intercultural work interpreted in light of a conventional approach to intercultural understanding.

2 | INTERCULTURAL UNDERSTANDING: A CONVENTIONAL APPROACH AND ITS CRITIQUE

The concept of intercultural understanding is historically interdisciplinary, drawing models and theories from linguistics, communication, psychology, and sociology. One of the earliest contributions in this field is the work of Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961), which focused on the basic nature of humans, the relationships among people, and our relationship to nature. Another major contribution can be found in the work of Hall (1959), one of the founding fathers of the formal study of intercultural communication. Hall emphasized the importance of contrasting cultural values and nonverbal patterns of communication. A third influential example of research is Allport's (1954) classical formulation of the contact hypothesis, suggesting that intergroup interaction and interpersonal contact can effectively reduce the prejudice that may occur when people from different cultures and contexts interact.

While these early pioneers acknowledged both the cognitive and affective dimension of understanding as being equally important, other approaches to intercultural understanding have been associated with the cognitive process of getting to know new cultures and practices—often exotic and strange ones—to understand them better (Hofstede, 1989; Samovar, Porter, McDaniel, & Roy, 2017). Within such an understanding, in-depth knowledge about diverse cultures is seen as a precondition for developing the ability to recognize commonalities and differences in ways that create connections with others and cultivate mutual respect. In this sense, in-depth knowledge refers to the process of getting to know different cultures, developing advanced knowledge about habits, traditions, and local practices, and understanding the rationale behind cultural practices and world-views (May & Sleeter, 2010).

Historically, the field of intercultural understanding (as part of intercultural communication) has been associated with the increasing internationalization of societies, starting with the exploration and colonization of foreign territories by Western European countries. A number of scientific disciplines, such as anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies, became important tools for providing knowledge about the strange and foreign dark-skinned others to the white world (Said, 2003). Researchers went to foreign settings to observe and describe cultural patterns, habits, and practices, bringing back ethnographic studies that were incorporated into colonizing strategies and control (Skrefsrud et al., 2018). Thus, intercultural understanding was viewed as being equivalent to colonial knowledge, producing objective and true representations of the exotic other, legitimizing cultural imperialism and political and military colonial rule.

Another significant historical line has been the widespread need for international communication and interrelations across national borders, which emerged in the West in the years following World War II. Healthcare workers, business people, and immigrant workers asked for tools and guidelines to help them operate and work in new and foreign cultural contexts. In response, a number of programs were developed, aiming to enhance intercultural understanding by learning to manage and handle cultural diversity (Hall, 1959; Hofstede, 1989; Samovar et al., 2017). A common feature of this work has been the comparison of national cultures, emphasizing the ability to decipher cultural codes and identify the deep structures of different national cultures. Hence, acquiring in-depth knowledge about the essence of cultural beliefs and practices would facilitate effective communication and fruitful relations.

Today, this way of conceptualizing intercultural understanding seems persistent within a wide range of cross-cultural studies, such as intercultural communication, international management, and intercultural education. In the

field of intercultural communication, scholars have concentrated on developing practical strategies for more effective interactions, exploring how communication values and styles can vary across cultures and communities (see for example, Hall, 1959). Hofstede has been a leading scholar within this field; together with his team, he has developed an influential and widely-used national culture framework (Hofstede, 1989; Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). According to Hofstede et al. (2010), the values and cultures of different countries can be described and compared, plotting differences between countries along five dimensions: power distance, masculinity versus femininity, long-term orientation versus short-term thinking, individualism versus collectivism, and uncertainty avoidance. In 2010, Hofstede also added a sixth dimension: indulgence versus self-restraint. On this basis, Hofstede has argued that the national culture model offers a basis for predicting cultural differences between people, which has made this framework highly influential (and highly criticized) within the field of international management. Thus, to communicate internationally and to conduct businesses across national borders, a person needs to know the specific essence of the particular national culture.

Hofstede et al. (2010) described the process of intercultural understanding as the process of getting to know a person's "mental programming" (p. 5) or collective "software of the mind" (p. 5). As part of a community, individuals share a certain pattern of thinking, feeling, and acting that "distinguishes the member of one group or category of people from others" (Hofstede, 1989, p. 29). Hence, the process of understanding the other is perceived as developing a decoding filter that makes the message conveyed in the communication process intelligible (see also Samovar et al., 2017). Within this conceptualization, intercultural understanding means to gradually decrypt and translate differences. Accordingly, people will communicate more effectively. The decoding of differences helps people overcome the barriers to sustainable business cooperation.

Within the field of education, this way of conceptualizing intercultural understanding has been associated with practices of multicultural education, which emerged during the civil rights movement of the 1960s and which grew stronger throughout the subsequent decades (Banks & Banks, 2004; Gay, 2002, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1995). In this regard, a significant contribution is Gay's (2002) concept of "culturally responsive teaching" (p. 106), which aims at a pedagogy that is more sensitive to students' cultural identity and heritage. According to Gay (2002), "the intellectual thought of students from different ethnic groups is culturally encoded in that its expressive forms and substance are strongly influenced by cultural socialization" (p. 111). Therefore, schools may facilitate intercultural understanding when teachers are able to decipher the students' cultural codes and mental programming. Hence, we see that culturally responsive teaching builds on the same presumption as leading perspectives within intercultural communication and international management, which is that learning from other people that hold different views requires knowledge of the specific essence of the cultures that are involved.

This assumption has also resulted in practices of multicultural education that celebrate cultural differences at a school through isolated events, such as Multicultural Day, International Week, and International Understanding Day (Dewilde, Kjørven, Skaret, & Skrefsrud, 2018). Such events are often characterized as a festivalization of culture (Øzker, 2008), corresponding with Troyna and Carrington's (2012) well-known description of the three S's of multicultural education: saris, samosas, and steel bands; that is to say, clothing, food, and music. At these events, parents bring food from their home country and traditional folk costumes and cultural objects from different countries are put on display. When conceptualizing intercultural understanding in this way, the concept is primarily about making the stranger more familiar by acquiring cultural knowledge about stable and collective practices and worldviews.

The conventional approach to intercultural understanding has been critically questioned for several reasons. First, international migration and globalization have increased the diversity of societies, making communities highly differentiated and engaged in constant negotiation and transformation (Meissner & Vertovec, 2015; Vertovec, 2007). Therefore, drawing a clear boundary between national cultures is extremely difficult. In contrast, scholars have emphasized that a person's identity is rarely bound to one particular group or community; rather, it reflects a range of the communities of which the person is a part (Sen, 2006). Moreover, human beings are uniquely self-reflective and self-defining, producing and reproducing identity in transformative processes of cultural interaction and exchange (Nynäs, 2006). Hence, the conventional tendency to identify cultures as closed systems of

practices is built on the false premise that cultures can be seen as static entities. Cultural traditions and communities are much more interrelated, hybrid, and constantly evolving—far more than what is the case within the conventional approach. Therefore, through their focus on the exterior elements of a culture, multicultural events in education easily become exotic activities because they avoid a more critical engagement with deeper issues and they reflect a superficial way of advancing intercultural understanding in schools.

Second, scholars have emphasized that transformations in the relationship between the individual, culture, and society make it difficult to see people as representatives of certain cultures and communities (Cummins & Early, 2011; Vertovec, 2009). To claim the existence of “a mental programming” (Hofstede, 2010, p. 5) or specific cultural traits that define a set of cultural codes presupposes a problematic conception of culture and it risks trapping people within a narrow understanding of identity that shut off identity options for people (Skrefsrud, 2018). For students, culturally responsive teaching can paradoxically lead to the reinforcement of cultural borders. This may happen when students from different backgrounds are seen as a distinct group with certain characteristics, which, in turn, may isolate groups and create a division between the groups inside a country, as well as between the groups and the state (Goodhart, 2013). By reinforcing a specific type of difference, immigrant cultures may become even more isolated in school and society.

Third, within the conventional approach to intercultural understanding, cultural differences are seen primarily as barriers to effective communication and interrelations. Thus, diversity is conceptualized within a deficit discourse (Sharma & Lazar, 2014), meaning that cultural variation is constructed as a problem—as something that hinders communication and understanding—and not as a possibility for new knowledge and enhanced learning. While this is a legitimate point of view, it places those who represent a difference to the cultural majority in a difficult position. They are the ones that are preventing interactions from taking place. Therefore, cultural differences—our strangeness—should be removed by gradually making the unknown more familiar. Thus, the conventional approach to intercultural learning not only runs the risk of missing a deeper conception of diversity, but it also seems to treat cultural differences superficially, waiting for them to pass as the process of intercultural interaction proceeds.

Summing up the critique, Nynäs (2006, p. 24) asked if a conventional notion of intercultural understanding “aims at dismantling human interpersonal interactions into a mechanistic set of laws.” If so, the process of intercultural understanding seems to be reduced to an act of controlling and predicting cultural encounters. However, attempts to remove the risk from intercultural interactions reinforce a mechanistic model that is too simplified. This presents the risk that the potentially creative and unpredictable aspects of the process of understanding will be ignored; it also traps the other within a conceptualization of cultural representation that is too narrow.

3 | BRIDGE BUILDING: CREATING KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS, AND ATTITUDES

How does the bridge-building metaphor relate to the conceptualization of intercultural understanding the way it has been outlined above? The bridge-building metaphor can be very useful, and it may contribute to enhancing our understanding of the responsibility that every teacher has for creating a learning environment that recognizes differences and prevents cultural stereotypes from developing. Because the bridge-building metaphor is not only a visual metaphor but also a verbal metaphor, we are reminded that bridges do not build themselves. Rather, they are products of our learning activities, and they collapse when we do not pay attention and maintain their foundations. How, then, can we develop, integrate, and maintain intercultural bridge-building in our teaching without reducing the other to a representative of a predefined understanding of a cultural community?

I interpret the ability to build intercultural bridges to be equivalent to developing particular knowledge, attitudes, and skills that should be an integral part of teachers' professional development. This interpretation is theoretically informed by various educational theorists who have raised a critical voice against approaches to intercultural and cross-cultural understanding that aim to control and predict the intercultural encounter (Cummins & Early, 2011;

Meissner & Vertovec, 2015; Sen, 2006). Moreover, I draw on my own experiences as a teacher educator working with pre-service teachers in a diverse university located at the edge of urban landscapes in the northern part of the Oslo area in Norway. In this way, I argue for the need to investigate and expose metaphors in education, such as bridge-building. Because metaphors are essential for the creation of social realities, the bridge-building metaphor may be a guide for future action (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). This makes it necessary to discuss the limitations as well as the possible strengths of the metaphor.

4 | KNOWLEDGE: UNDERSTANDING CULTURAL COMPLEXITY

With regard to knowledge, I consider it an important aim to challenge what we have seen is a common approach to intercultural understanding: believing that better understanding grows from the acquisition of information about different cultures. While it is wonderful if this happens, Hannam and Biesta (2019) have noted that knowing more about someone's background "does not automatically translate into emphatic action" (p. 58). Moreover, by concentrating on what is believed to be the essence of a particular culture, we face the danger of thinking of cultures as delimited spheres of lifestyles and practices, which is not only out of touch with reality but also runs the risk of entrapping people within schematic formulations about categories of identities. Modern societies are characterized by cultural exchange, hybridization, and transformation processes that make them hyper-complex (Meissner & Vertovec, 2015). Therefore, it is highly problematic to make claims for a particular culture for a particular group of people.

Sen (2006) has reminded us that modern identities are rarely bound to one particular community. Rather, they reflect the diversity of the community. Depending on the situation and context, it is sometimes important to signal one's belonging to a particular group, while other times it is important to identify one's belonging to a different group:

In our normal lives, we see ourselves as members of a variety of groups—we belong to all of them. The same person can be, without any contradiction, an American citizen, of Caribbean origin, with African ancestry, a Christian, a liberal, a woman ... Each of these collectivities, to all of which this person simultaneously belongs, gives her a particular identity. None of them can be taken to be the person's only identity or singular membership category (Sen, 2006, p. xii).

To go beyond the conventional understanding, I let my students reflect upon and discuss the pedagogical implications of a more complex and nuanced cultural diversity, using Sen's (2006) reminder as a source of inspiration. The pre-service teachers have worked with an example to discuss how they could pedagogically approach the complexity of the cultural realities with which many immigrant children live, such as the following example:

You are a teacher in a mainstream primary school class of 12-year-old children. Assim from Iran is a new arrival in your class. He was born in Iran, but had moved with his family to Turkey at the age of 6 and to Norway at 11. He speaks Farsi at home, but is more familiar with Turkish, which he learned in his years in transit. He has very little English, and you speak no Farsi or Turkish. What first steps will you take to ensure Assim's inclusion in your class? How could you use Assim's background to enhance your curriculum delivery?

Many newly-arrived migrant children have a tangled story. As travel routes often pass through various states and territories, with long and formative stays in the countries of transit, the country of affiliation may not necessarily be the country of birth, and the mother tongue is not necessarily the language that the student learned as a child at home. For pre-service teachers, working with these examples may enhance their understanding of what it means to

connect the curriculum to the everyday life of the students and to acknowledge and recognize children's and young people's complex backgrounds without relying on stereotypes. Teachers who aim to build a bridge to better understand the students' complex backgrounds need to create a space where differences are valued. This can be done by paying positive attention to the students' linguistic competencies and acknowledging their skills and knowledge as part of the class's learning. Thus, for teachers aiming to provide intercultural understanding in the classroom, it is important to be aware of children's wide variety of life experiences, recognizing the complexity of the students' histories, life-worlds, and legacies. In the case of Assim in the example above, it would be important for the teacher to acknowledge the student's understanding of the situation and his transnational experiences. This could imply asking the student questions such as: "How did you do this when you went to school in Turkey? How do you say this in Turkish? What did your teacher in Turkey tell you about this?" This could also be an opportunity for the other students to learn about Assim's unique experience in a positive light, as well as a chance to draw a comparison between the different learning contexts. Hence, for the teacher, Assim's complex background should be the starting point for the lesson. The intercultural bridge does not only go from one shore to the other, it is a two-way connector that provides an opportunity to interact and walk both ways.

5 | SKILLS: LEARNING TO ACT IN CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS

Building bridges is also about having the skills to understand and act in a variety of cultural encounters. For teachers, this involves incorporating routines for affirming the students' backgrounds. It includes the ability to make connections between the students' diverse life-worlds and their school life and to create meaningful academic and social encounters for them (Bartolo & Smyth, 2009). For example, making such connections can be done by applying what Cummins and Early (2011) have framed as the method of identity texts. Identity texts are written, spoken, visual, musical, or multimodal sociocultural artifacts produced by the students. By allowing all students to describe their background, interests, languages, and cultural histories, identity texts may create a narrative space, that builds a bridge of understanding between the student and the school. Another example is the use of reading material. When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, we need to reconsider our classroom library, providing books that reflect the immigrant and refugee experience. Thus, school libraries can be a key welcoming space, connecting the students' diverse experiences with the school (see for example Phil & van der Kooij, 2016).

Moreover, it is important to be able to communicate with the students' parents and to use parental meetings in a way that increases participation and interaction. An example of how pre-service teachers are prepared for home/school cooperation is the project, Active Professional Development in a Virtual World, which I run in collaboration with colleagues at our university. As part of the preparation, we use virtual-reality (VR) technology and let our pre-service teachers use VR headsets to engage in and try out various scenarios and situations that in-service teachers encounter in connection with parents and the students' home. The project aimed to explore flipped classroom practices, using advanced VR simulations, which place pre-service teachers in different work-related situations, such as home-school collaboration. By using VR, the pre-service teachers have the opportunity to encounter the same situations repeatedly and get to know their own reactions to various situations. They are given the opportunity to explore various approaches to the situations that arise and to reflect upon them together with the other pre-service teachers as well as the professors involved.

In our experience, digital simulation provides pre-service teachers with an opportunity to practice and develop their bridge-building skills as part of their professional expertise in home/school collaboration. Take, for example, pre-service teachers' encounter with the virtual student Emily and her father. Emily is a student who never talks in class. The pre-service teacher then has to determine the possible reasons for Emily's silence, as well as how to respond properly to her needs. The student may be shy, reserved or introverted; the classroom climate may make her feel excluded or uneasy; she may feel uncomfortable expressing herself in English; the home-culture of Emily's family may frown on children who speak out publicly; or there may be other reasons.

The outcome pertaining to intercultural understanding is the practical training the pre-service teachers receive, encountering and responding to different situations. Moreover, the pre-service teachers are given the opportunity to reflect upon key questions with regard to enhancing the educational experiences of the schools' diverse student population: How can teachers facilitate parental involvement and engagement with families from diverse communities? How do educational praxis and school climate impact parental involvement and school achievement for minority students? What can teachers do to acknowledge the competence of the families, without reducing differences to a cultural barrier? Using digital simulation to work with such questions may help pre-service teacher foster their ability to enter into relationships with others, to communicate and interact with them, enhancing their intercultural bridge-building skills.

6 | ATTITUDES: CHALLENGING POWER STRUCTURES AND DISCRIMINATION

Finally, building bridges is about attitudes, resistance, and critical/ethical thinking. This includes the teachers' ability to challenge power structures in society, schools, and within themselves that prevent students from succeeding academically and socially (Cummins & Early, 2011).

We know from many countries that ethnic minority students still underachieve academically (Cummins & Early, 2011; Huber & Reynolds, 2014; Sharma & Lazar, 2014). Therefore, educators (and governments) are required to seriously evaluate the impact of policies and practices within schools and in the wider educational system, and to rethink and explore new strategies and structures that increase achievement among students with an immigrant background as well as among mainstream students. Furthermore, as classrooms and societies are changing and the stranger is now a member of one's community, the ability to understand and interact with the other across and beyond cultural barriers is a prerequisite for making our diverse democratic societies work (Huber & Reynolds, 2014). Thus, schools and educators need to recognize and counter stereotypes, prejudices, and racism in their various forms. In this context, it is crucial that teachers are able to build intercultural bridges by responding appropriately to a variety of needs and experiences in a diverse group of students.

An important part of this competence is to challenge the view that minority children and their families are culturally-, socially-, and linguistically-deprived and in need of repair. As we have seen, according to this logic, pedagogy should repair the errors and deficiencies represented in the minority children and their families and compensate for their lack of cognitive and academic knowledge. Within this concept, the role of education is to remove the barriers that the student's home culture represents in the encounter with the majority culture. However, teachers have the opportunity to challenge and overcome the deficit model of education. Cummins (2001) has reminded us that teachers may institute what he calls collaborative relations of power in contrast with coercive power-relations. The relationship between the teacher and the student may counteract and actively challenge oppressive patterns on the macro level. This can happen when teachers empower their students by recognizing and affirming their cultural and linguistic background as being relevant for the school community and, therefore, also relevant for the society in which the school exists (for a detailed discussion, see Skrefsrud, 2016). Hence, bridge building is also about raising the awareness that matters of diversity should not be treated separately; rather, it affects all subjects and have ramifications for all facets of teachers' professional work.

Lastly, an important part of teachers' critical awareness is that their self-reflective understanding is an essential part of their professional development. As intercultural bridge-builders, teachers must situate their position and examine their biases and misunderstandings. This includes a reflection on what they know, understand, accept, and even grapple with in terms of their own cultural identity. Therefore, self-reflection and cultural critical consciousness are imperative to improving the educational opportunities and outcomes for students (see also Gay & Kirkland, 2003). Similarly, as teacher educators and researchers, we are challenged to look carefully at how we construct knowledge with our pre-service teachers, in-service teachers, and colleagues in our teaching and research.

7 | BUILDING BRIDGES OF UNDERSTANDING: SHORTCOMINGS OF THE METAPHOR

The bridge-building metaphor furthers our understanding of how teachers can work effectively and appropriately with a diverse student population. However, when interpreted in light of a conventional approach to intercultural understanding, this metaphor also has some weaknesses. Thinking of intercultural understanding in terms of bridging cultural barriers is not a neutral concept, even though it may appear to be. Rather, it needs to be critically assessed, as, paradoxically, it may frame the intercultural work of teachers in ways that counteract their ability to understand and interact with the other beyond cultural differences.

First, when interpreting bridge-building in light of a conventional approach to intercultural understanding, the metaphor signals that differences are primarily seen as barriers to acquiring a better understanding. The other's strangeness may be seen as an obstacle to effective communication that should gradually be removed by increasing the familiarity of what is unknown. By increasingly accessing more knowledge about the other, it becomes possible to overcome the other's strangeness. Therefore, intercultural understanding is understood as a bridge over troubled waters. The differences between people due to diverse worldviews, values, or inhabited practices are interpreted as troubled waters, while intercultural understanding is supposed to bridge what is impassable and problematic—which, in this case, is cultural diversity. Consequently, interpreting the bridge-building metaphor in light of a conventional way of approaching intercultural understanding runs the risk of repeating the view that customs, views, or traditions that differ from the majority represent a problem to overcome and not an opportunity for enhanced knowledge or better understanding.

Rethinking this way of interpreting the metaphor requires one to critically question the presuppositions that form such an understanding. As emphasized by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), metaphors structure what we perceive with regard to knowledge, how we perceive the knowledge, and how the students and teachers can relate to that knowledge. From this perspective, one could argue that increased cultural knowledge does not necessarily lead to greater understanding. Rather, it can actually perpetuate more division and misunderstanding (see Hannam & Biesta, 2019). Moreover, there are different ways of perceiving cultural diversity other than seeing it primarily as a problem to overcome. In contrast, when cultural differences are seen as a possibility for learning, and they are not reduced to hindrances that should be removed, building bridges of understanding may open new paths for both parties to interact in ways that enhance communication and relationships.

Metaphors are ontological in that they create entities (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). According to Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 26), "understanding our experiences in terms of objects and substances allows us to pick out parts of our experience and treat them as entities or substances of a uniform kind." Thus, "once we can identify our experiences as entities or substances, we can refer to them, categorize them, group them, and quantify them—and, by this means, reason about them" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 26). Therefore, recognizing the ontological dimension may help us critically challenge what we identify with intercultural understanding. Becoming aware of the cultural assumptions that guide our understanding of the bridge-building metaphor can initiate a reflexive approach to how it may help us develop, integrate, and maintain intercultural bridge-building in our teaching.

Additionally, metaphors—such as the bridge-building metaphor—can be orientational in that they organize a system of concepts in a spatial relationship with each other (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Lakoff and Johnson, (1980, p. 15) used this relational example: "happy is up", while "bad is down." Hence, one could say that the bridge-building metaphor gives the concepts a spatial orientation forward, helping someone move into new areas. From this perspective, intercultural bridge-building improves interrelations and interactions, having a positive impact on communication between people. However, when interpreted in light of a conventional approach to intercultural understanding, the metaphor signals that the bridge links one shore to the other, only providing access to increased understanding for one of the two parts. Thus, reframing the metaphor will challenge the understanding of it as an analogical way of thinking, and instead, see it as a dialogue between two parts. Hence, emphasizing that the bridge allows both parts to cross, to become acquainted, and to interact, facilitates another way of understanding the metaphor.

Second—and this is closely related to the first point—within a conventional approach to intercultural understanding, differences are reduced to something that explains actions and that can be grasped and comprehended through cultural knowledge. Within such a framework, students' mind-sets and actions can be explained and predicted based on their cultural backgrounds; thus, they are regarded as representatives of specific cultural collectives or groups. Again, this points to the limitations of the metaphor when interpreted in light of for example Hofstede's (1989) conventional approach. Using the image of bridge-building, we run the risk of trapping people in schematic formulations of cultural beliefs and practices. Differences may be reinforced in ways that cut off identity options for students, delimiting their background to a specific community (Cummins & Early, 2011).

Again, this is not a limitation of the bridge-building metaphor, in itself; it is a limitation of the application of the framework used to understand the metaphor (see Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Therefore, while focusing on differences may lead to further biases and implicit stereotyping, the metaphorical construct of bridge-building can also facilitate understanding, communication, and connection. Hence, a reframing of the bridge-building metaphor enables one to understand differences in a more dynamic way. As Sen (2006) emphasized, individuals live within multiple identities that share existence, a view that challenges us to rethink the cultural experiences that form our understanding of the bridge-building metaphor.

Third, it is important to also ask how the bridge-building metaphor positions the student and the teacher. If the metaphor is interpreted as an intercultural learning process of accessing extensive and in-depth knowledge about beliefs, customs, practices, and moral codes, one could say that children and young people are positioned as passive interpreters of things that others put before them, and that teachers are reduced to facilitators who enable students to understand. The teacher becomes a technician who should be trained to find the right methods to deliver a curriculum that promotes intercultural understanding (Hannam & Biesta, 2019). If so, the metaphor runs the risk of objectifying culture and worldviews, having a negative impact on both the teacher and the student.

Thus, the metaphor can be reframed by drawing on Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) framework. In particular, the orientational aspect of the metaphor helps us see that a conventional way of interpreting intercultural understanding perceives the bridging of cultural differences as a one-way effort. Remembering that the bridge allows all parts to meet, learn, and discover, reframes the metaphor. From this perspective, both the students and teachers become engaged in the process and interact with one another to fully participate in the learning session, a perspective that may be easily overlooked within a conventional way of interpreting intercultural understanding.

Fourth, interpreting the image of building a bridge with concepts from a conventional approach, intercultural understanding is primarily about establishing a direct, solid, and risk-free pathway to the other. Accordingly, the intercultural encounter is made predictable in the sense that it is possible to anticipate where and when the communication might face difficulty, where there is potential for finding common ground and agreement, and what the various outcomes of the encounter may be. However, by removing the risk from the encounter there is a danger that one may lose sight of the potentially innovative, unpredictable, and creative aspects of meeting the other.

Metaphorical orientations are not arbitrary. They are grounded in our physical and cultural experiences (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Therefore, critically reflecting upon the cultural and social presumptions that form the understanding of the bridge-building metaphor may help us reframe the metaphor. Moreover, such a reflection may help us identify how metaphors create new meaning that otherwise is not possible to express, understand that they offer a new way of seeing the world, and realize that they are always open to several interpretations.

8 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

The research question for this paper was: How can a reflective approach to the bridge-building metaphor help us develop, integrate, and maintain intercultural bridge-building in our teaching without reducing the other to a representative of a predefined understanding of a cultural community? While a good metaphor furthers our understanding of a concept or issue, it may have some limitations. Therefore, metaphors, such as the bridge-building metaphor,

need to be continually assessed and revised. As highlighted in this paper, using the bridge-building metaphor to speak about intercultural understanding can be an invitation to human interaction, communication, and the exchange of ideas and life views. However, interpreted in light of a conventional approach to intercultural understanding, the metaphor may also reduce intercultural understanding to a question of how to overcome cultural differences as a mechanism to highlight differences that create more barriers.

Strack (2005) called attention to an interesting perspective in this regard. He reminded us that Buddhists often compare salvation to the process of crossing a river. Metaphorically speaking, crossing a river represents a means to enlightenment that takes place on a raft or a boat, not on a bridge. Thus, identifying intercultural understanding with the crossing of a river by raft or boat may say something about the evanescence and fundamental uncertainty of the established connection. Interpreting an intercultural relationship in light of a boat or raft metaphor has a different connotation than the stability expressed in the bridge-building metaphor. As Strack (2005, p. 12) pointed out, in many local cultures around the world, both religious and non-religious, people often view a river as a journey in itself and something that makes the transport and exchange of products and services possible rather than being a barrier to what lies beyond.

In a similar vein, differences should not be construed as obstacles to communication. Intercultural understanding is not about removing strangeness by making the unfamiliar more familiar. Its purpose is not to overcome what seems strange and peculiar; rather, it aims to explore it, discuss it, engage in dialogues with the unfamiliar, and even learn from it. For teachers, it is important to create a safe, supportive, and encouraging learning environment in which students can explore the thoughts of others and engage in dialogues about experiences of otherness, power, and marginalization. Rather than building bridges over troubled waters, we must cultivate teachers who can include and build on student's cultural and linguistic resources. This implies seeing differences not as barriers but as opportunities for better understanding. In this perspective, building intercultural bridges has a new meaning.

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