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# The relationship between the teachers' intercultural competence levels and the strategy of solving conflicts

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## Abstract

The aim of this study introduces the relationship between the intercultural competence levels and the strategy of solving conflict of the teachers who work in elementary schools. The universe of the research which is in the descriptonal quality, relationally scanning model consists of 1637 teachers who work in 63 public elementary schools in Kocaeli town of İzmit city. The twelve schools which are in the 63 schools were chosen randomly and the 680 teachers who work in these schools formed the sample of this research. The data of the research was collected by scale of intercultural competence and scale of conflict management strategies. In the analysis of data arithmetic mean, correlation coefficient, basic and multiple regression analysis were made. At the end of the research it was seen that intercultural competence was related to conflict solution strategies; intercultural personality features were efficient for explaining collaboration, compromise, enforcement, avoidance, adoption which are strategies of confliction solution meaningfully.

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*Keywords:* intercultural competence, intercultural personality, strategy of solving conflict, teachers

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## 1. Introduction

Nowadays, fast changes are observed in law, technology and transportation. These changes increase human mobility in the world and makes interaction easier, or even compulsory. Intercultural relations are essential both globally and locally (Kealey, 1989). Individuals in a society do not have the same qualities. People differ in their biological, psychological and socio-cultural qualities. When interpersonal differences are considered, common differences that comes to mind are their different identities, experiences, beliefs, age, gender, race, ethnic groups, nationality, religion, social class, work experience, physical competence, level of education, family, political and economic tendencies (Foxman ve Easterling 1999). According to Parekh (2000), societies which have two or more cultures are called multicultural society. The life gets harder in the multicultural societies where individuals with different personalities exist. (Doytcheva, 2009). Consequently differences create conflicts between people and societies.

Nowadays, various cultures exist all around the world. Individuals need to be competent in intercultural communication in order to handle intercultural problems (Dong, Day ve Collaço, 2008). According to Chen and Starosta (1996), it is necessary to be educated about intercultural awareness, intercultural sensitivity and

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intercultural competence. Therefore, schools must give individuals an intercultural point of view, intercultural sensitivity, intercultural communication competence and intercultural competence (Leeman, 2003). Disacknowledging cultural differences result in prejudice against other cultural groups and their members (Dong, Day ve Collaço, 2008). This prejudice may lead to cultural conflicts. To produce solutions to intercultural conflicts, such terms as interculturalism, intercultural sensitivity, intercultural communication competence, intercultural competence and intercultural education have emerged.

Intercultural differentiation with no doubt has created differences in the management area too (Uzunçarşılı, 2001). The increase of pluralism has caused the necessity of preparing the kids to the democratic process in the multicultural societies, the necessity of fastening upon the social justice implementations (Rapp, 2002). According to Yurdabakan (2002) teachers need to be the people who are able to solve the conflicts efficiently in order to fulfil the learning of the students coming from different cultures.

In order to provide social harmony, the conflicts need to be handled efficiently in the schools where individuals or groups with different cultural features need to live together. In this context, it is thought that the intercultural competence of the teachers has a significant effect on determining the strategies of conflict solution.

### *1.1. Intercultural Competence and Its Dimensions*

Insert Intercultural competence which is explained as recognizing the ideas and emotions of individuals coming from different cultural background, approaching without prejudices, being open to communication and keeping calm in the encountered situations will be possible with understanding differences, recognizing the counter party, putting yourself into their places by taking the values they give importance to into consideration (Alver, 2003).

Being capable of creating intercultural suitable thoughts and to behave accordingly is described as intercultural competence (Hammer, Bennett and Wiseman, 2003). Another ways of describing intercultural competence are ability of communicating in an intercultural way, multicultural ability, transcultural susceptibility, transcultural efficacy (Gibson & Zhong, 2005).

The transcultural communication competence was made functional with 6 competences: Language ability, getting used to, separation from the center socially, efficacy of communication, integrating socially and recognizing the culture of the host (Redmond, 2000). According to Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven (2000, 2002, 2003) the individuals with the intercultural competence need to have cultural empathy, to be open to different cultures, to be enterprising and flexible socially and to keep their emotional balance in the problems based on cultural differences. Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ) (Van der Zee & Oudenhoven, 2000; 2002, 2003) is an alternative way of determining the transcultural efficacy. Five basic assets which are beneficial for transcultural efficacy are examined in this questionnaire. These five factors are cultural empathy, open-mindedness, social initiative, emotional stability and flexibility.

*Cultural empathy:* This scale assesses the capacity to identify with the feelings, thoughts and behavior of individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Showing interest to others and being susceptible to emotions and faiths of others is called cultural empathy.

*Open-mindedness:* This scale assesses people's capacity to be open and unprejudiced when encountering people outside of their own cultural group and who may have different values and norms. Avoiding having prejudices about different cultural groups, their acts their cultural customs and being open to them is called as open-mindedness.

*Social Initiative:* Social initiative denotes people's tendency to approach social situations actively and to take initiative. The individual's being willingly active in the social conditions and enterprising means social initiative.

*Emotional stability:* This scale assesses the degree to which people tend to remain calm in stressful situations. Succeeding in remaining steady in stressful situations and acting in a efficient way under these circumstances is described as emotional stability.

*Flexibility:* This scale is associated with people's ability to adjust their behavior to new and unknown situations. Flexibility is explained as adopting fresh norms and processes which provides integration to the new cultural environment after long term habitual acts.

## 1.2. Organizational Conflict and Strategies of Conflict Solving.

Organizational conflict has been described as share of limited sources between two people or more people or group in the organization or allocation of facilities and again disagreement between these people and groups caused from understanding of aim, status, value judgement, perception differences (Stoner, 1978).

According to Cüceloğlu (2000) differences bring along problems such as not to be understood or misunderstandings in intercultural communication consequently they cause occurrence of mutual prejudices and events which result in offense and resent. It is inevitable to face conflicts as long as the individuals do not recognize the other party's acts because they prefer to interpret the attitudes and behaviours as per their cultures.

Protagonist of conflict literature (Blake & Mouton, 1964; Thomas, 1992; Rahim ve Magner, 1995; De Dreu, Evers, Beersma, Kluwer & Nauta, 2001; Karip, 2003) express that individuals use one or more of the strategies which are domination (enforcement), avoidance (staying away from conflicts), compromise (making concessions), conformity (obedience) and collaboration (problem solving). The researchers named the conflict strategies differently even though they have the same content. This research was conducted by basing the classing made by De Dreu et al. (2001) The strategies are covered under five levels as problem solving, compromising, avoiding, forcing and yielding.

*Problem Solving (Collaboration):* Once a mutual concordant resolution is obtained at the end of a cooperative assignment, problem solving results in. It is an approach where individuals get involved to obtain a common satisfaction by debating diversities. Cooperation provides winning to everyone. Both sides work cooperatively to reach a concordant solution which means both you and I win at the end as we were enthusiastic about working together.

*Compromising:* Sharing of sources means compromise. The basic compromise at bargain contains division of differences between two parties. Compromise does not create any winner however every individual is tempted to defend their own goals. This is result of a situation when parties are ready to win or lose something in order to reach an agreement. The main aim is to reach a common satisfaction and approach to build a middle ground. In order to solve the problem both parties, you and I, make sacrifices from what they demand and need. Consequently we both win as we both gave a little.

*Avoiding:* The ways of not getting involved in a conflict expresses avoiding. Some theorists defend that avoiding is not a positive asset as it means low interest to both own and others' benefits however some reasons prove avoiding conflicts. The person stays away from the conflict instead of tackling with the situation. It is generally a matter of between two or more people. I do not accept the presence of the conflict which results in mutual loss as there is nothing to do.

*Forcing:* Forcing is explained as trying maximally to reach the main goals or solve the problem even if the feelings and goals of other party are under risk. Although forcing is attributed as a negative way for cultures, businesses or relationships if the sources are limited and the other party is overly competitive it is the right choice. This is a result of a situation where both parts use force no matter how the feelings of other party are affected. There is no mutual winning, not both wins. It is a way of struggle. Consequently I or you lose because there is only one winner.

*Yielding (Accommodation):* Accommodation contains surrender of others' demands or soothing the negative effects of a conflict. In accommodation the person sacrifices their own aims for the other. You surrender to the other and give up your own goals in order to achieve service. I behave in a way where you achieve your demands and needs. Consequently you end up with winning and I end up with losing as I did not do what I wished and needed.

## 1.3. Intercultural Competence - Conflict Solving Strategies Relationship

It is expressed that one of the main reasons of the conflict between the members of the organization is value differences (Turgut, 1998; Şişman, 2002). In the organizations where the workers' differences are not handled effectively, integration and communication problems are faced in the organizations and conflicts occur (Adler, 1986;

Hambrick et al. 1998; Early and Gibson, 1998; Watson et al. 1993; Dalyan, 2004; Asunakutlu ve Safran, 2004). The potential problems between the workers with different features in the organization result in an increase of tension and conflicts. Therefore conflict strategy gains a more important role gradually in terms of management discipline. Interpersonal conflict is affected by the cultural and personal structures the individuals are in. (Goldstein, 1999, cited in Basım, Çetin and Meydan, 2009). According to Holt and Devore (2005) culture is not only one of the main reasons of the conflict but also has a significant impact on the acts the individuals will display in case of conflict. Interindividual interaction contains power gaps even if they are to a certain level. The level of this power and how it reflects itself changes according to each culture it doesn't only determine the nature of the conflict process but also the nature of the adopted conflict solving strategies. When Deutsch (1973) explains the reasons of the conflicts, he has emphasized that the values and the beliefs of the individual play an important role too. Likewise Agarual (1982) defends that due to the fact that the individuals come from different environments and cultures, personal differences always are reasons of conflict (cited in Ozkalp and Kirel, 1996). Recognizing the cultural values of the individual gives an opportunity to be aware of the reactions they will give in case of a conflict (Yalçın and Erçen, 2004).

Van der Zee, Zaal, and Piekstra (2003) explains cultural empathy as the competence of developing empathy towards the emotions, thoughts and acts of individuals from different cultural groups. It is referred to outgoingness, compromise and mental autonomy (Van de Vliert & Euwema, 1994). Compromise is also among the main factors of collaborative acts and mental autonomy with inventive problem solving. Consequently cultural empathy is thought to be related to collaborative attempts in handling conflicts. Open mindedness is described as being open and unprejudiced to the members who are out of the group and also to the cultural standards and merits (Van der Zee et al., 2003). This way can be associated with investigator attitude in conflict management which is common for problem solving integrative and compromising acts in conflict. Consequently open mindedness is believed to have a positive relationship with cooperative conflict acts.

Partially travelling satisfaction, feelings in different cultural situations, experiences in terms of new environments, getting to know new people and unfamiliar social situations are paid little attention. Van der Zee and Oudenhoven (1998), based on McCall (1994) explains adventurism as the desire for looking for new situations and perceiving them as challenging instead of frightening. Van der Zee and Oudenhoven (1998) came up with a measurement for adventurism in a preliminary version of the MPQ. Adventurism correlated with outgoingness and need of change and especially firmness, action orientation, social initiative and ambitious act. Deterministic and ambitious act is generally associated to interest for your own in the dual concern model which is seen in forcing or problem solving acts (Van de Vliert, 1997).

## **2. Aim**

The aim of this research is to determine the relationship between the teachers' intercultural competence and conflict solving strategies.

## **3. Methodology**

As this study is aimed at determining the relationship between elementary school teachers' intercultural competence and conflict solving strategies, it is in the descriptive relational scanning model.

### *3.1. Scales*

The data was collected by intercultural competence scale and conflict management scale.

*Intercultural Competence Scale:* The perception of teachers' intercultural competence was measured by intercultural competence scale which was developed by Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven (2000, 2002, 2003) and translated into Turkish by Polat by making validity reliability analyse. Scale, It consists of five sub levels which are cultural empathy, openness, social initiative, emotional balance and flexibility. The items were scored on a five-

point Likert scale (1=completely disagree, 5=completely agree). At the end of the application in the analyse of reliability implemented to intercultural competence scale, reliability Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was found as .72 for the whole scale. Reliability coefficients for intercultural competence sub levels were calculated as : Cultural Empathy: .83, social initiative: .72, openness: .74 emotional balance: .78 flexibility: .81.

*Conflict Solving Strategies Scale:* In order to measure the conflict solving strategies teachers use "The Dutch Test for Conflict Handling" which was developed by De Dreu et al., (2001) and used by Van de Vliert, Euvema and Huismans (1995) was used. These 20-items survey measures five styles (problem solving, compromising, accommodating, avoiding and forcing). The scale's translation into Turkish, validity and reliability analysis were made by researchers. All items respond to the question to what extend did you act in this conflict situation in the following way, on a five-point Likert scale (1= not at all, 5= very frequent). In the factor analyse, componenets were collected in five levels like in the real scale and like in the real scale the sub levels were named as , cooperation, compromising, avoiding, forcing, accommodating. In the reliability analyse, while Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was calculated as .78 for whole scale, for cooperation it was calculated as .81, for compromising it was calculated as .77, for avoiding it was calculated as .74, for forcing it was calculated as .75 and for accommodating it was calculated as .71

### 3.2. Universe and Sample

The universe of the research composes of the teachers of elementary schools in Kocaeli town of Izmit city between 2009 and 2010. According to the statistical data of Kocaeli City National Education Directorate between 2008 and 2009, there are 1637 teachers in 63 elementary schools. The 750 teachers of these which were chosen randomly forms the universe of the research.

### 3.3. Data Analysis

From data collecting instruments 685 (% 91.33) out of 750 scales which were sent as a form returned. From 685 scales, 5 of them were not analyzed due to some reasons. The rest was analyzed. In the reserach in order to determine the teachers' intercultural competence and conflict solving strategies and their perception level related to their sub levels, arithmetic average was examined. When the arithmetic means are interpreted, the gaps have been valued as: 1.00 – 1.79 "very low", 1.80 – 2.59 "low", 2,60 – 3,39 "medium", 3.40 – 4.19 "high", 4.20 – 5.00 "very high". To examine the relation between dimension of intercultural competence and the strategy of solving conflicts correlation analysis has been made. When the correlation coefficients are assessed, if the correlation coefficient is between 0.70 and 1.00, it has been interpreted as "high", between 0.69 and 0.30 it has been interpreted as "medium", and if it is 0.29 and below it has been interpreted as related to "low" level (Büyüköztürk, 2005) and when it gets closer to 0.00, it has been interpreted as irrelevant.

## 4. Findings and Comments

### 4.1. The teachers' intercultural competence and their perception level related to its sub dimensions.

When the intercultural competence and the arithmetic averages related to it and standart deviation were examined, it was seen that the teachers' cultural competence was on a high level ( $\bar{x}$ =3.56; ss=0.33). When the teachers' perception level of possessing the sub levels of cultural, it was seen that their perception related to cultural empathy ( $\bar{x}$ =4.00; ss=0.57), social initiative ( $\bar{x}$  = 3.54; ss=0.58) and openness ( $\bar{x}$  = 3.81; ss=0.60) dimensions was on a high level and their perception related to emotional balance ( $\bar{x}$  = 3.20 ss=0.41) and flexibility ( $\bar{x}$  = 3.01; ss=0.76) dimensions were on a medium level. While the intercultural competence to which the teachers are the most susceptible is cultural empathy, openness, social initiative, flexibility and emotional balance follows this in turns.

During the conflict it is seen that the teachers utilize cooperation ( $\bar{x} = 3.94$ ;  $ss=0.75$ ) and compromising ( $\bar{x} = 3.87$ ;  $ss=0.58$ ) strategies on a high level and they use avoiding ( $\bar{x} = 3.14$ ;  $ss=0.66$ ), forcing ( $\bar{x} = 3.05$ ;  $ss=0.83$ ) and accommodating ( $\bar{x} = 3.01$ ;  $ss=0.93$ ) strategies on a medium level.

#### 4.2. *The effects of intercultural competence and its sub dimensions on conflict solving strategies*

When the correlation coefficients between intercultural competence and conflict solving strategies were examined, while a medium level, positive relationship was observed between cooperation ( $r=0.56$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and compromising ( $r=0.44$ ,  $p < .01$ ), a low level negative relationship was found between forcing ( $r=-0.27$ ,  $p < .01$ ), avoiding ( $r=-0.18$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and accommodating ( $r=-0.18$ ,  $p < .01$ ) which means when intercultural competence increases, preference rate of cooperation and compromising increases, preference rate of avoiding, forcing and accommodating decreases.

Intercultural competence explains compromising, forcing, avoiding and accommodating which are conflict solving strategies meaningfully. Intercultural competence explains cooperation ( $\beta=.556$ ;  $p < .01$ ) the most meaningfully and then explains compromising ( $\beta=.437$ ;  $p < .01$ ), forcing ( $\beta=-.264$ ;  $p < .01$ ), accommodating ( $\beta=-.182$ ;  $p < .01$ ), avoiding ( $\beta=-.174$ ;  $p < .01$ ) in turns meaningfully.

A regression analysis which was related to that sub dimensions of intercultural competence estimate cooperation was made. It was seen that while cultural empathy ( $\beta=.634$ ;  $p < .01$ ), flexibility ( $\beta=-.132$ ;  $p < .01$ ) and emotional balance ( $\beta=.101$ ;  $p < .01$ ) which are the sub dimensions of cultural ability which is one of the conflict solving strategies affected cooperation meaningfully, social initiative ( $\beta=-.010$ ;  $p > .01$ ) and openness ( $\beta=-.030$ ;  $p > .01$ ) didn't affect it meaningfully. While cultural empathy ( $\beta=.380$ ;  $p < .01$ ), social initiative ( $\beta=.196$ ;  $p < .01$ ) and flexibility ( $\beta=-.128$ ;  $p < .01$ ) which are sub dimensions of cultural ability explain compromising, one of the strategies of conflict management, meaningfully, openness ( $\beta=-.025$ ;  $p > .01$ ) and emotional balance ( $\beta=.064$ ;  $p > .01$ ) do not explain it meaningfully. While it was determined that cultural empathy ( $\beta=-.228$ ;  $p < .01$ ), emotional balance ( $\beta=-.138$ ;  $p < .01$ ), and openness ( $\beta=.095$ ;  $p < .01$ ) which were the sub dimensions of intercultural competence affected forcing which was one of the conflict management strategies meaningfully, it was seen that social initiative ( $\beta=-.046$ ;  $p > .01$ ) and flexibility ( $\beta=-.041$ ;  $p > .01$ ) didn't affect it meaningfully.

It was found out that 5 sub dimensions of intercultural competence which were flexibility ( $\beta=-.269$ ;  $p < .01$ ), openness ( $\beta=-.203$ ;  $p < .01$ ), cultural empathy ( $\beta=-.142$ ;  $p < .01$ ), social initiative ( $\beta=-.139$ ;  $p < .01$ ) and emotional balance ( $\beta=-.104$ ;  $p < .01$ ) explained avoiding which was one of the conflict strategies meaningfully. It was discovered that while flexibility ( $\beta=-.288$ ;  $p < .01$ ), cultural empathy ( $\beta=-.242$ ;  $p < .01$ ), openness ( $\beta=-.142$ ;  $p < .01$ ) and emotional balance ( $\beta=-.080$ ;  $p < .05$ ) which were the sub dimensions of intercultural competence explained the accommodating which was one of the conflict strategies meaningfully, social initiative ( $\beta=-0.009$ ;  $p > .01$ ) dimension didn't affect it meaningfully.

## 5. Conclusions and Implications

It is seen that while the teachers use cooperation and compromising strategies on a high level, they use avoiding, forcing and accommodating strategies on a medium level during conflict process. It can be said that the teachers manage the conflicts effectively thanks to the evidence that they prefer cooperation and compromising strategies which express mutual satisfaction and acts of finding a common solution way more.

At the end of the research it was found out that intercultural competence had an important effect on cooperation and compromising which are conflict management strategies and require mutual understanding and communication and had a negative effect on forcing, avoiding and accommodating. In other words, the teachers with high intercultural competence prefer cooperation and compromising during conflict management process, they avoid forcing, avoiding and accommodating.

It was seen that the teachers with cultural empathy ability which was described as recognizing the thoughts, feelings, behaviours of individuals from different cultures used cooperation and compromising strategies, on the other hand they avoided avoiding, forcing and accommodating. It was observed that the teachers with openness

ability which was described as being open to communication and unprejudiced used forcing, avoiding and accommodating. It was determined that the teachers with social initiative ability which was described as the ability of communicating with individuals from different cultures easily preferred compromising and avoided using avoiding. It was seen that the teachers with high emotional balance which was expressed as the individual's emotional calmness in conflicts which result from cultural differences and stressful situations preferred cooperation more however they avoided forcing, avoiding and accommodating. While the teachers with flexibility which was explained as being tolerant open to the situations, thoughts which are culturally different preferred cooperation and compromising, they stayed away from accommodating and avoiding.

As it is seen, teachers with high intercultural competence prefer cooperation and compromising strategies more in conflicts. The reason for this can be based on desire for displaying stable behaviour based on equality instead of power relationships in the relationships which are based on intercultural competence. The research has pointed out that there is a meaningful relationship between intercultural competence abilities and conflict management strategies. It is necessary for individuals to develop their intercultural competences in terms of managing the conflict more effectively during conflict process.

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