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Notes on Intercultural Competencies in Higher Education: What Do the Students With the Highest Grades Think?

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ABSTRACT

Discussing intercultural competences in Brazilian higher education presupposes a look at the cultural aspects and the process of developing competences, as well as interlacing with discussions about other topics. The predominance of "archaic monocultural formats" that reproduce various forms of racism or even an environment based on a functional interculturality in this context instigates us to nurture reflections on its evolution. In addition, skills are a fundamental theme in the educational environment, since preparing students for the global world is already more than a reality. This research sought to analyze the perception of the students regarding the concept of intercultural competences and competences (CI) and their practices in a Brazilian public university. The way forward was a field research, qualitative, case study, using questionnaire and Discursive Textual Analysis (DAT). The main results brought theoretical confirmation of the predominance in Brazil of the concept of competences as input and the concept of intercultural competences (polysemic) as a branch of it. There emerged from the discourses, essential elements (context, social actors and practices) for the development of intercultural competences in higher education, as well as four categories that could influence the improvement of this process: Concept of competences and concept of intercultural competences; practices for the promotion of IC in university and university environment. Dealing with intercultural competences in Brazilian higher education is no longer elective for institutions. All the forces and tensions that operate in the "emerging" context already impel a rethink and act on the construct.

KEYWORDS

Intercultural competencies. Student performance. Interculturality. Competencies.

Apontamentos Sobre Competências Interculturais na Educação Superior: o Que Pensam os Discentes de Maior Rendimento?

RESUMO

Discutir competências interculturais na educação superior brasileira pressupõe um olhar para os aspectos culturais e ao processo de desenvolvimento de competências, bem como entrelaces com discussões acerca de outras temáticas. A predominância de “formatos monoculturais arcaicos” que reproduzem diversas formas de racismo ou ainda um ambiente que se fundamenta em uma interculturalidade funcional nesse contexto nos instiga a nutrir reflexões sobre sua evolução. Além disso, competências é um tema fundamental no ambiente educacional, visto que, preparar os discentes para o mundo global já é mais do que uma realidade. Essa pesquisa buscou analisar a percepção dos discentes quanto ao conceito de competências e competências interculturais (CI) e suas práticas em uma universidade pública brasileira. O caminho percorrido foi uma pesquisa de campo, qualitativa, estudo de caso, com uso de questionário e da Análise Textual Discursiva (ATD). Os principais resultados trouxeram confirmação teórica da predominância no Brasil do conceito de competências como *input* e o conceito de competências interculturais (polissêmico) visto como uma ramificação do mesmo. Emergiram dos discursos, elementos essenciais (contexto, atores sociais e práticas) para o desenvolvimento de competências interculturais na educação superior, bem como quatro categorias que possam influenciar o aperfeiçoamento desse processo: Conceito de competências e conceito de competências interculturais; práticas para a promoção de CI na universidade e ambiente universitário. Tratar de competências interculturais na educação superior brasileira já não é eletivo para as instituições. Todas as forças e tensões que operam no contexto “emergente” já impulsionam um repensar e agir sobre o construto.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Competências interculturais. Desempenho discente. Interculturalidade. Competências.

Apuntes Sobre Competencias Interculturales en la Educación Superior: ¿Qué Pensan los Discentes de Mayor Rendimiento?

RESUMEN

Discutir competencias interculturales en la educación superior brasileña presupone una mirada a los aspectos culturales y al proceso de desarrollo de competencias, así como entrelazamientos con discusiones acerca de otras temáticas. La predominancia de "formatos monocultura arcaicos" que reproducen diversas formas de racismo o aún un ambiente que se fundamenta en una interculturalidad funcional en ese contexto nos instiga a nutrir reflexiones sobre su evolución. Además, competencias es un tema fundamental en el ambiente educativo, ya que, preparar a los estudiantes para el mundo global ya es más que una realidad. Esta investigación buscó analizar la percepción de los discentes en cuanto al concepto de competencias y competencias interculturales (CI) y sus prácticas en una universidad pública brasileña. El camino recorrido fue una investigación de campo, cualitativa, estudio de caso, con uso de cuestionario y del Análisis textual Discursivo (ATD). Los principales resultados trajeron confirmación teórica de la predominancia en Brasil del concepto de competencias como *input* y el concepto de competencias interculturales (polisémico) visto como una ramificación del mismo. En el caso de la educación superior, cuatro categorías que influyen el perfeccionamiento de este proceso: Concepto de competencias y concepto de competencias interculturales, surgieron de los discursos, elementos esenciales (contexto, actores sociales y prácticas) para el desarrollo de competencias interculturales en la educación superior, así como cuatro categorías que pudieran influir en el perfeccionamiento de este proceso. prácticas para la promoción de CI en la universidad y el entorno universitario. Tratar de competencias interculturales en la educación superior brasileña ya no es electivo para las instituciones. Todas las fuerzas y tensiones que operan en el contexto "emergente" ya impulsan un repensar y actuar sobre el constructo.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Competencias interculturales. Rendimiento discente. Interculturalidad. Competencias.

Introduction

Addressing intercultural competencies in Brazilian higher education is incipient. This is because discussions about "competencies" in Brazil and interculturality in education have been constructed since the last century, but publications on intercultural competencies (ICs) have only become more evident since the 2000s¹. In the United States, for example, IC studies initiated in the 1950s (DEARDORFF, 2015). Thus, intercultural skills (IC) are a construct in the conceptual and practical maturation phase in the context of Brazilian higher education.

When articulating IC or interculturality in the educational context, the literature has frequently mentioned the theme of internationalization (OLIVEIRA; FREITAS, 2017; MOROSINI, USTÁRROZ, 2016; LUCE; FAGUNDES; GONZÁLEZ MEDIEL, 2017). With a slightly different perspective from the applicant, we sought to discuss a part of the concept from the plurality of the Brazilian context, without disregarding contributions of the area. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that internationalization in the educational context is inevitable.

Brazilian higher education is an environment full of cultural diversity. Such institutions constitute spaces that instill global, multinational, and local cultural characteristics, with challenges arising from this perspective.

Increasingly, it has become essential to discuss, even in part, the complexity of the human learning process within the university environment. Therefore, the need to understand the integral formation (UNESCO, 2015) of humans as a premise that guides the entire educational system in a transversal way is known.

Student performance in higher education is increasingly related to discussions about their formation based on competencies that are constructed, including intercultural competencies (CI). This presupposes collaboration in student training, so they are equipped to "face the existing and emerging global challenges" (MOROSINI; USTÁRROZ, 2016, p.2).

Understanding the awareness of high performing students, based on their accumulated school performance coefficient (CR)² in Brazilian public universities, allows for a deeper understanding regarding the development process of competencies in this scope, as well as ICs.

¹ Documents from the Brazilian Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations of the Brazilian Institute of Information in Science and Technology (<http://bdtd.ibict.br>) were researched and accessed on 3/26/2018, using the keyword "Intercultural Competencies" in an advanced search. The search returned 32 works published since 2004, with a significant increase in published works as of 2010. It is considered incipient since the search for works with the term "Competencies" resulted in 9,242 works, with works produced since 1970.

² Cumulative school performance ratio (CR) calculated according to student manual available at: http://proeg.ufam.edu.br/attachments/187_GUIA%20DO%20ALUNO_2012_corrigeido%20em%2001_02_2012.pdf. Access in: 22 jan. 2019.

Furthermore, students are not only prepared to meet the labor demands, but are coupled with the development of knowledge that goes beyond their technical abilities. Thus, this research sought to analyze the perception of students regarding the concept of intercultural competencies and competencies and their practices in a Public Brazilian University.

Specific objectives were: a) to analyze student perceptions about the concepts of intercultural competencies and competencies; b) identify practices that develop intercultural competencies at the university researched; and, c) to analyze student perception of the aspects of interculturality in higher education.

Determining how to deal with IC in the context of Brazilian higher education has become more and more indispensable given the transformations that have been implemented in the higher education field. Herein, the context is considered "Emergent" (MOROSINI, 2014), where Brazilian higher education finds itself in a scenario of transformations and identifies itself as between paradigms (traditional models) and new 21st century models.

Method - Path Traveled

The course consisted of an applied qualitative research, involving case studies and field research following Moraes and Galiazzi's (2016) Textual Discourse Analysis (ATD).

The study was developed with a structured questionnaire composed of 9 questions, which was applied to students at a Federal University in the northern region of Brazil. The University offers 09 undergraduate courses and a *stricto sensu* course, and is an Institute of Exact Sciences and Technology. Table 1 shows the number of students registered per course in 2018 (second semester).

Table 1. Number of registered and not registered students in the Institute's undergraduate courses

| NAME OF COURSE | REGISTERED | NOT REGISTERED |
|---|-------------|----------------|
| Information Systems - SI | 152 | 132 |
| Pharmacy - F | 168 | 114 |
| Production Engineering - EP | 166 | 102 |
| Sciences - Mathematics and Physics - MF | 147 | 129 |
| Sciences - Chemistry and Biology - QB | 159 | 112 |
| Industrial Chemistry - IQ | 139 | 115 |
| Software Engineering - ESO | 165 | 91 |
| Sanitary Engineering - ESA | 123 | 115 |
| Agronomy - AGRO | 153 | 103 |
| TOTAL | 1372 | 1013 |

Source: [Research data, 2018]

The students were chosen according to performance criteria and the 10 students with the highest general coefficient (independent of the course) were selected based on the data received by the Undergraduate Pro-Rector (list of students enrolled and coefficients) in September 2018. Of all the students, the 10 students with the highest performance coefficients were invited to participate in the study, 7 of which were available to participate.

Students were contacted and those who offered to participate in the study received an e-mail with the research questions. Table 2 shows the coefficients and courses of the top ten students and those who were willing to participate.

Table 2. ATD label - Ten students with the highest coefficient index at the Institute

| LABEL | COURSE | COEFICIENT | RESEARCH PARTICIPANT |
|--------|-----------------------------------|------------|----------------------|
| DISC01 | Science - Mathematics and Physics | 9,222 | YES |
| DISC02 | Software Engineering | 9,105 | YES |
| DISC03 | Software Engineering | 9,050 | YES |
| DISC04 | Industrial chemistry | 8,977 | NO |
| DISC05 | Software Engineering | 8,828 | NO |
| DISC06 | Software Engineering | 8,793 | YES |
| DISC07 | Science - Mathematics and Physics | 8,744 | YES |
| DISC08 | Software Engineering | 8,735 | NO |
| DISC09 | Production Engineering | 8,731 | YES |
| DISC10 | Software Engineering | 8,690 | YES |

Source: [Research data, 2018]

After contacting the 10 students several times, 03 were not available to participate in the research. Based on the saturation criterion of the qualitative research (FONTANELLA *et al*, 2011), the research was not extended to the students with the 11th to 15th highest coefficients. Given the area of the students (02 students of Computing, 01 of Production Engineering and 01 of Mathematics and Physics), the speeches of the 07 participants (involving 04 of the 09 courses in the Institute) tended to have homogeneous answers.

One factor identified in the research is based on the predominance of the concept of competencies as "input", which was already highlighted in the literature as the widely accepted perspective in Brazil. Another factor is the polysemy of the concept of intercultural competencies corroborating with the theoretical discussions used in speeches also sufficiently supports analysis to reach the objectives and provide other outlooks.

The steps of the analysis were followed and recorded in detail to remain consistent with the chosen method. The corpus constituted of the transcriptions of participants' answers. At this stage, the intention was to describe and interpret the feelings and meanings of the students' voices.

Questions were sent by e-mail to students as they were more willing to respond to written questions and send the answers to the researcher's e-mail. Due to the geographic locations of respondents and the researcher (respondents in the North and researcher in the South), students were allowed to answer the questions in the questionnaire by phone, Skype or in writing. Each student was contacted individually by telephone.

The questions were: 1) What do you mean by intercultural skills and competencies?; 2) Do you believe that the University prepares students for the job market ?; 3) How do you analyze the university environment for intercultural issues? Do you think there is diversity? How do you see this on a daily basis?; 4) Do you believe that at university, teachers are encouraged to develop intercultural skills along with students? If yes, how? If not, how could they be?; 5) Have you ever seen or experienced any exclusion or racism within the university? Tell us your experience; 6) In your opinion, what are the main factors that influence students with the highest grades (higher coefficient) at your university? Do you relate this in any way to the concept of competencies? 7) Do you feel you are prepared to work in another region of the country or in another country after your education? Explain; 8) What are the strengths and weaknesses of your university's formation process?; 9) Provide any comments you deem interesting.

From there, each subject received a label of DISC01, DISC02, ... and so on. The students who answered the questions were: DISC01, DISC02, DISC03, DISC06, DISC07, DISC09, DISC10. Emails were answered in October and November 2018.

Therefore, the first stage was to disassemble texts: deconstruct and unitarize. The units of meaning were elaborated from the corpus. Below, one example of the unitarization process adopted from the discourses is shown:

Painting 1. ATD unitarization process (students)

| Objective: To understand the students' perception about the concept of intercultural competencies and their practices at the university | | |
|--|---|--|
| Subject | Corpus | Meaning unit |
| DISC06 | I understand competence as an attribute correlated to assertiveness in activities, knowing how to do them and doing them correctly. | Skills such as know-how and correct form Competencies as attribute referring to assertiveness Skills as input, as a set of characteristics that lead an individual to perform a given activity |

Source: [Research data, 2018]

The second step in the ATC data analysis process involves categorization. This step came from the discourses, allied with the knowledge of the theory. No *a priori* categories were defined (emerged from the discourses), which is a plausible alternative in the method. The *a posteriori* categorization adopted here provided a deep look at the speeches and fidelity to the subjects' voices. In this stage, the following properties of the categorization process defended by Moraes and Galiazzi (2016) were rigorously observed: a) validity or pertinence; b) homogeneity and, c) non-exclusion.

In the categorization process, 04 categories were identified, two associated with the concepts (Concept of Competencies and Concept of Intercultural Competencies): one with the practices adopted or that could be adopted in the university environment to develop IC (Practices to promote IC at the university) and another about the context (university environment to improve IC), which refers to the university space and elements that can improve intercultural competencies in superior education.

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After careful analysis, the 04 categories identified in the initial process were chosen, and kept as the final categories. From then on, the researchers created a metatext, appropriating the description and interpretation of data from the speeches using an analysis from the literature discussed.

Understanding Student Perception About Concepts of Intercultural Competencies and Competencies

In order to understand the student's perception about the concepts of competencies and IC, we examined the discourses of the corpus and metatext. Regarding the concept of competencies, students' understanding corroborated with the theoretical positions used in this research. Of the 07 respondents, 06 see competencies as inputs, or a set of characteristics that lead an individual to perform a given activity, citing competencies as attributes, which agrees with the literature. According to Fernandes and Fleury (2007), since the 1980s in Brazil there has been a conceptual predominance of competencies as a set of characteristics that lead an individual to perform a certain activity, influenced by the North American theoretical current.

Studies have differentiated the constructs of individual competencies, professional competencies, organizational competencies, managerial competencies, besides unfolding as matrices and management of competence and management by competencies. Such scenario is initially based on competence as input (FERNANDES; FLEURY, 2007).

One of the students discussed the term competencies as an output, which supports the concept of competencies as an effective and efficient³ result and, from this, it is understood that the individual possesses attributes that lead to such.

Parry (1996) points out that in Europe the predominant current of discussions about competence is based on the perspective of output, that is, the individual demonstrates competence from the moment he can assimilate and surpass the results of his actions. Corroborating with the two paradigmatic chains of competence of an individual, knowledge, skills and attitudes are basic aspects that underpin most of the discussions.

Another objective of this research was to analyze the perception of the students regarding the concept of intercultural competencies. There is no way to make important observations about this construct: first, that refer to an idea in constant transformation (DEARDORFF, 2012) and studies have been carried out discussing models, components, processes, concepts, among others. In recent years, the construct has been enriched by valuing the perspective of development, as well as in the field of higher education (DEARDORFF, 2012).

³ It is considered here that there are several conceptual perspectives on effectiveness and efficiency in education. Efficiency refers to the means and effectiveness related to the ends (achieving a certain goal). "[...] Efficiency is a more limited concept that concerns the internal workings of the organization [...] is the degree to which the organization accomplishes its objectives" (DAFT, 1999, p.39)

Schmidmeier and Takahashi (2018) synthesized a chart with the main concepts of IC defined in the literature, and we added some other concepts from the literature to help understand this polysemy:

Painting 2. Conceptual Framework on Intercultural Competence

| Concept | Authors |
|---|--|
| Set of capabilities necessary for a proper relationship with those who are different from us. These capacities are fundamentally communicative in nature, but they also comprise the reconfiguration of views and conceptions of the world, since, less than cultures, people (individuals and groups with their complexities and multiple expressions) participate in the process of dialogue. | UNESCO (2009) UNESCO, R. M. Investir na diversidade cultural e no diálogo intercultural. <i>Direito Humano à Educação</i> . 2009. Disponível em: http://www.dhescbrasil.org.br/index.php . |
| The development of intercultural competence is a dynamic, continuous, interactive process of self-reflective learning that transforms attitudes, skills and knowledge into effective communication and interaction in cultures and contexts ... represented as a continuous cycle new challenges that must be constantly overcome. | FREEMAN <i>et al</i> (2009) FREEMAN, M., TRELEAVEN, L., SIMPSON, L., RIDINGS, S., RAMBURUTH, P., LEASK, B., SYKES, C. Embedding the development of intercultural competence in business education. Sydney: Australian Learning and Teaching Council, 2009. |
| The process of acquiring knowledge, skills and general knowledge specific to culture and culture required attitudes towards effective communication and interaction with individuals from other cultures. It is a dynamic, developmental and ongoing process that engages the student cognitively, behaviorally, and affectively. | PAIGE <i>et al</i> (1999) Paige, R., Jorstad, H., Siaya, L., Klein, F., & Colby, J. (1999). Culture learning in language education: A review of the literature. In R. Paige, D. Lange & Y. Yeshova (Eds.), <i>Culture as the Core: Integrating Culture into the Language Curriculum</i> . Minneapolis: University of Minnesota. |
| Ability to work with their own and others' languages and cultures, to recognize knowledge in their cultural context, to examine the intercultural dimension of knowledge applications, and to communicate and interact effectively in languages and cultures | CRICHTON E SCARINO (2007) Crichton, J., & Scarino, A. (2007). How are we to understand the 'intercultural dimension'? Na examination of the intercultural dimension of internationalization in the context of higher education in Australia. <i>Australian Review of Applied Linguistics</i> , 30(1), 1-21. |
| In the teaching-learning process, it is a self-reflexive process that leads students and teachers to confront their own beliefs and prejudices | BODYCOTT E WALKER (2000) Bodycott, P., & Walker, A. (2000). Teaching Abroad: Lessons learned about inter-cultural understanding for teachers in higher education. <i>Teaching in Higher Education</i> , 5(1), 79-95. |
| It means going beyond a static approach to learning isolated facts about an individual culture and engaging the learner in a process of self-transformation in his ability to communicate and understand communication and his skills for continuous learning | LIDDICOAT <i>ET AL.</i> (2003) Liddicoat, A. J., Papademetre, L., Scarino, A., & Kohler, M. (2003). Report on intercultural language learning. Canberra: Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training. |

Source: [The Author(s), 2018]

It is important to demonstrate that the construct "Intercultural Competencies" in its structure already brings a complexity of perspectives. First, because "competencies" and "interculturality" already individually carry various epistemological ramifications. Second, because in Brazil it is still an embryonic construct in the context of education, especially in higher education.

Deardorff (2006) sought the definition most strongly endorsed by scholars in his research: the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes.

As for the understanding of IC in this research, this was distinguished by all the subjects when compared to the concept of competencies. Thus, as in the literature, IC is a polysemic and not yet consensual term, but basically encompasses the observance of cultural diversity and its interaction.

It is observed that intercultural competencies associate two important constructs: "competencies", understood here as a term that includes a set of elements, "knowledge, skills and attitudes" and their results (input and output) and "intercultural" of interacting cultures.

It is noticed that in one of the discourses, the term communication describes intercultural competencies as a set of characteristics of an individual that allows better communication between different groups. As emphasized by Walsh (2009, 2009a), interculturality should be developed in the school environment from a critical perspective. One of the respondents believes that, IC should be an understanding beyond knowledge about diversity, i.e. it cannot only be functional. Candau (2012) reaffirms that the school environment, transposed herein as a university environment, tends to be functional and that in Brazil this is the predominant scenario.

Intercultural skills are resources put into practice during intercultural dialogue. Furthermore, the presentation of an IC tree increases the complexity of understanding the concept of competencies, which should be considered during analysis. The basis of IC discussions is born out of communication and culture, where the two concepts are the roots of the construct. The leaves represent the various ways in which ICs can be understood or articulated in concrete contexts (UNESCO, 2013).

In higher education, student training should involve the responsibility of a global education. For Morosini and Ustároz (2016), there are two vectors that guide institutions to this end and that are linked to university teaching: an internationalized curriculum and the development of IC. This research, however, focused on the second vector: intercultural competencies in Higher Education.

It is important to emphasize that when dealing with intercultural competencies in higher education, we can see the interlocation of this construct with several others. Even though they are not exhaustively discussed in the depth that they require here, it is worth highlighting that they are relevant and include Global Citizenship, Diversity in Higher Education, Education for Citizenship and Values, Multicultural Competence, Intercultural or Cultural Competence, Racism and Endoracism, as well as several other concepts and their derivations.

The complexity of these conceptual and practical interlocations, such as the term "Global Citizen", is undeniable. The expression is not conceptually consensual, since the very notion of citizenship already consists multiple perspectives, which opens up possibilities for interpretations and theoretical currents of discussion (UNESCO, 2015). For example, in an attempt to conceptualize global citizenship UNESCO (2015, p.14) emphasizes that "it does

not imply a legal situation". Another important point is that it "refers more to a sense of belonging to a broader community and to the common humanity, as well as to promoting a "global outlook", which links the local to the global and the national to the international." Speaking of intercultural skills is also considered polysemy. As Freeman *et al.* (2009) argue, intercultural understanding and culture are broad and allow for a variety of discussions, whether from a cultural understanding and cultural differences⁴ perspective, a cross-cultural communication and communication perspective⁵, or in language studies for shared understanding of language and its meaning (s) in use⁶, among others.

By associating the construct "global citizenship" with "intercultural competencies", it presupposes that a deepening of conceptual and practical reflections with an initial definition of epistemology is necessary, without disregarding that other perspectives are discussed and present in academic publications, therefore it is the central objective of this research.

One does not have the pretense here to ignore this interlocution or to even give a superficial connotation. Contrarily, given the importance of the concepts and the different currents of study, we understand that when talking about intercultural competencies in higher education, it is also possible to deal with the globally competent individual.

One of the views for this discussion is the definition of the American Council on Intercultural Education (1996), not restricted to this conceptual association. Within this perspective, competence is ability, a skill, a knowledge, or an attitude that can be demonstrated, observed, or measured. Along with the concept, we discuss four stages for the formation of competencies, such as: 1) Recognition of global systems and their connectivity, including personal awareness and openness to other cultures, values and attitudes at home and abroad; 2) Intercultural skills and direct experiences; 3) General knowledge of history and world events - politics, economics, and geography; 4) Specialization in detailed studies of the area, i.e. another language, culture, country.

Thus, in addition to conceptual discussions, the context also includes several discussions about intercultural competencies in Brazilian higher education. "In Brazil, in addition to many specificities mentioned above, the transition context in higher education is being marked by accelerated expansion, diversification policies, privatization and democratizing tendencies, driven by state centralization. Innovation is sought, in parallel" (MOROSINI, 2014, p. 387).

Another important point about the concept of competencies is that the student's performance and commitment is a factor that influences effective and efficient results. From the students' perception, students who achieve higher grades in higher education tend to be more competent.

⁴ Access for example: Clifford; Marcus (1986)

⁵ Access for example: Crichton; Scarino (2007)

⁶ Access for example: Kramsch (2005)

Yes, it does have a vital connection. The students with the highest coefficient are active, have a goal to achieve and know that this depends on their academic behavior. In general, they have a certain ability to perform certain activities (DISC02, 2018).

In a way, people with higher grades tend to be more competent, since academic performance is determined by some established factors, so in order to have good academic performance one has to be good at these factors, which requires some kind of competence, which is not easy (DISC03, 2018).

I believe that student performance is mainly related to the effort applied to studies combined with factors such as predisposition to the learning process and content absorption. So I think that such characteristics are linked to the concept of competencies (DISC10, 2018).

I believe that the greatest support of every student in a university is his determination and willingness to learn, but of course if you know how to do something, it is much easier to acquire knowledge. Besides students who do not care about anything, it is clear that a little effort would bring great results (DISC06 2018) The continuous search for knowledge. [...] as they are advancing, the greater their intellectual skills (DISC07 2018).

An interesting discourse about performance that deserves attention states that being competent may be associated with a human being's ability to devote himself to something, and to learn it, as well as to his natural abilities (gift). This demonstrates that in discourses, both innate competencies and competencies appear in their learning capacity.

Regarding grades at the university, I believe they depend on e factors which are not always the same for everyone. In my case, my coefficient is above 9, but I am not a student who usually studies a lot, I believe that I study only 25% of the time required compared to someone who is actually studying. Of course, many of the students study the wrong way, because I have friends who study a considerable time in comparison to me, and still do not improve their grades, and in the end they lose time. Getting high grades depends on their skills, those who do not have these skills have to double their efforts to keep up with someone who has this competence. Another important aspect for me is that some people are already born with the ability to acquire certain skills, while others have difficulties in acquiring them. The learning process requires a lot of the environment in which it is inserted. In my childhood I spent time studying alone, I did not have the internet for help, which helped develop my logical and cognitive reasoning. Today the internet has taken away people's ability to interpret, people seek automatic responses, and forget to work their minds, causing them to become unproductive in self-thinking (DISC01 2018).

These points show the perspective of each student's personal characteristics and their pre-disposition to activities within the context of higher education. Therefore, this encompasses what each student brings with him, his/her previous experiences, life history, and goals. According to the subject, these aspects are linked to success in the labor market, as well as to the development of intercultural competencies, since students must be both prepared technically and as citizens.

Practices That Develop Intercultural Competencies in the University Context

The university context is fraught with latent opportunities to develop intercultural competencies. Alongside, the barriers are also perceptible by the research participants, as the lack of institutionalized projects for such development, the individual dependence of the teacher's will to develop such skills, lack of incentive from the university to improve IC, teachers who are not actively promoting IC in students, and intercultural issues at the university are not a priority. There have also been reports that intercultural issues are seen in more "developed" universities from other regions, in the sense of having cultural reception and actions starting from the academic community itself and the institution.

Given the context of the researched university, an interesting point that deserves to be highlighted is that the institution is located in the State of Amazonas. The State of Amazonas has several indigenous ethnic groups in its territory and the majority of the students who participated in this study are from this state. One of the subjects does not perceive cultural diversification in the university environment and perceives this in institutions that receive students from other regions and even from other countries. The participant states "this is because there are few cultural differences when compared to institutions that frequently receive people from outside the state or even from other countries, at least this is the vision that I have within my current institution" (DISC06, 2018).

The other participants report cultural diversity and that, despite having many students from the State of Amazonas, the researched university is already full of cultural diversity.

Although most students and teachers are from the Amazon, interculturality is present at the university. It is visible in different customs among students from different cities within the Amazon and among some teachers and students who are from outside the Amazon. I see this in everyday life in the form of speech, in the foods usually consumed, and in the way of thinking (DISC09, 2018)

The subjects highlight the need for institutionalization of actions and use of new didactic and methodological resources in the teaching process to stimulate the development of intercultural competencies in students. Participants did not identify practices with specific activities in their discourses.

There is also the vision that it should be something individual for the teacher to be aware of this necessity and that the institution should be more comprehensive, as well as the understanding of the meaning of these actions for the formation of the students for both the job market and for the society. There is a lack of awareness among teachers about the existence of diversity in the university environment, which is a space with an opportunity to integrate all the differences.

From the analysis, it is understood that it is necessary to develop the concept of intercultural competencies in the academic environment, as well as to create actions that stimulate teaching practices and students that develop Walsh's critical perspective of interculturality (2009). It is also important to emphasize that, although effective practices developed in context are not mentioned, it does not mean that they do not exist.

Student Perception About Aspects of Interculturality in Higher Education

From the discourses of respondents about the analyzed context and the aspects of interculturality, it can be inferred that there are different environments in the universities. These differences are natural, since each management, each normalization, and each local aspect incorporated into the university environment will reflect on the process of interaction between people, among other aspects.

The subjects perceive that the Brazilian university environment still needs to evolve, since several elements promote technical training for the labor market in detriment to elements such as interculturality.

Well, in my view, these intercultural issues are left to the side, their focus is always more dedicated on the disciplinary areas of each course, of course, given the region this may be a bit different (DISC06, 2018).

Considering the technical aspects inherent to each study area, I believe that the university does not fulfill its preparatory role. However, when it comes to aspects related to the interpersonal relations present in the labor market, I believe that the university still leaves a lot to be desired, not exposing a more realistic view of what the formed professional will find in a real work environment (DISC10, 2018)

The university, in general, is only in charge of presenting situations referring to the institution itself, it never aims at exemplifying everyday situations, situations that we will face in the future, those referred to as "real world" situations (DISC02, 2018)

Realizing this, the respondents affirm the need to rethink the knowledge of universities. In their view, the labor market does not only require great "technicians", but the knowledge of peoples also needs to be highlighted. As Mato (2008) affirms, it is not only a matter of recognizing cultural differences within the university, but integrating knowledge and practices, as well as visions of peoples' worlds into institutional projects and curricula.

The formation of students regarding interculturality is related to the formation of their technical, human and conceptual skills⁷. It is therefore necessary that the professional be prepared to act technically, but also as a citizen who will contribute to the global society.

I believe that the development of intercultural competencies should be encouraged within the academic environment, as I believe that they help train professionals who are better prepared for the interpersonal relations present not only in the labor market, but in society in general (DISC10,2018).

Freeman *et al.* (2009) points out that higher education institutions are relevant in providing students with the opportunity to anticipate market requirements before they are inserted into it, and globalization and intercultural dynamics are fundamental aspects in this training.

⁷ Chiavenato (2000) does not use the word culture in a specific skill and interculturality is understood as a cross-cutting theme. The technical skills are related to the specific, technical domain of the work. Conceptual skills allow the integral view of the organization, and human skills become interpersonal relationships.

For the context of intercultural education, it is important to emphasize that there is an assumption that proximity automatically results in intercultural contact, which in turn leads to learning and intercultural competence formation, however, it has not yet been proven (FREEMAN *et al.*, 2009). As Paige (1993) notes, intercultural professional educators know that communicating and interacting with culturally different people is psychologically intense and has several risk factors associated with it.

It is undeniable that the market is increasingly demanding graduates, not only from higher education, but from various levels, who are capable of dealing with changes, proactive, accompany technological changes, and improve their knowledge, skills and attitudes.

Regarding interculturality from a "positive" perspective, how much the university environment should develop intercultural competencies from the perspective of students or others (teachers, managers, community, etc.) cannot be the only bias of discussions of interculturality in higher education. For Deardorff (2009), developing IC requires a transformation that goes beyond the classroom.

The representation of human diversity in races is one of these productions. By itself, it would not be a problem, it was not often accompanied by hierarchies of races, insecurity and fear of the other. Racism and prejudice based on representations of races become harmful from the moment they determine attitudes and behaviors, leading to situations of discrimination in the interaction between people of different racial groups (OSORIO, 2013, p.84)

In this direction, questions such as racism, discrimination and prejudice appeared in the Brazilian University environment, which are issues that cannot be ignored when discussing IC. Universities are spaces that must develop the subjects' abilities to go beyond understanding different cultures and not just insert them into a given environment. Developing intercultural competencies in higher education transcends the fact that they are in different cultures in a certain space and one of the challenges is to overcome the barriers of "archaic monocultural formats", as Mato (2008).

Universities and other types of HEIs have an ethical, social, legal, political and epistemological obligation to effectively honor the rights of indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples established in national constitutions and in various international instruments in force. They, universities, fight against racism and all forms of racial discrimination and related forms of intolerance, and particularly invest in the citizenship training of their own teachers, researchers, students, staff and managers (MATO, 2018, np).

One of discourses of the respondents confirms and reflects on this Brazilian university context. "Subtle" racism runs through various points: sex, color, race, origin, among others. Moreira and Candau (2003) discuss the issue of racism in the school environment, which also includes the university environment. Discrimination and prejudice are key points in intercultural discussions. So, considering that they are present in the university environment, it is also assumed that there is a tendency towards a monocultural environment (MOREIRA, CANDAU, 2003). This is subtly confirmed in the participants' discourses, where racist actions are not treated seriously or addressed within the institution, but are seen as "trivial"

with little importance given. Therefore, it is understood that formal education environments at any level of schooling should treat prejudices and different forms of discrimination to be "problematized, unveiled, denaturalized." "Otherwise, the school will be at the service of the reproduction of patterns of behavior that reinforce the discriminatory processes present in society "(MOREIRA, CANDAU, 2003, p.164).

For example, even though it is a campus in the interior of Amazonas, there is no representation of indigenous people and those who do not identify themselves as such, thus, we see the total devaluation of the local culture. As much as the different social groups are inserted in the university, there is no representativeness of blacks, LGBTs, natives, among others (DISC03, 2018).

For starters, many do not know the importance of having relationships with people who possess diverse types of behavior, which enriches relationships. In analyzing this context, many people feel excluded because they cannot get into a particular group because of the possible jokes that will arise, due to differences (DISC02, 2018)

Interculturality in education must be seen as a wealth and not a problem (CANDAU, 2016). For universities, the challenge is even greater given their role in society as fighters against all forms of racism, especially those forming part of the "common feeling" (MATO, 2016; 2017).

What is apparent is that perceived reality opposes current debates on interculturality in education. "We need to promote cultural diversity and interculturality on fair and mutually respectful conditions." Therefore, the challenge is not only to include cultural diversity (CRES, 2018).

Deardorff (2006), in his studies, discussed the components of intercultural competence and its development. They are associated with empathy, tolerance, adaptability, flexibility, respect, among others. All this, related to the subject's ability to recognize and go beyond in a multicultural space. Faced with this, omitting and/or reaffirming controversial actions to these aspects tend to undermine the development of IC in this environment.

Another aspect that appears in this context is the teacher and his/her preparation in promoting IC in the university environment. From the interviewee's perspective, the teacher, who is understood as fundamental in the process, is not prepared for this action in many cases. Teachers do not actively stimulate the development of intercultural competencies in students and isolated actions occur in the university environment due to individual initiatives that are not very comprehensive.

It would be feasible for the various courses to participate in a monthly meeting, not just between people from a specific group. I believe that this would significantly help to start developing intercultural competencies within the institution (DISC02, 2018).

A good start is to make teachers aware that not everyone thinks and acts like them, that the differences in the world are not bad, but opportunities to learn. Opportunity

to bring everyone together and create a new environment that integrates and welcomes all (DISC03, 2018).

Many, if not all, teachers teach their classes without really getting to know their students, their customs, beliefs, etc. I believe that a greater interaction between student and teacher would help both of their performances in class (DISC09, 2018).

I do not believe that teachers at the university are stimulated along with the students to develop these intercultural activities, but all the teachers I have had the opportunity to meet have shown that they have this competence as part of their professional life. I believe that the institution itself could promote activities involving students and teachers such as: extra-curricular activities and opportunities to meet with other universities (DISC01, 2018).

One of the items identified that corroborates this is the lack of articulated actions and projects that are institutionalized or not at the institution. The involvement and preparation of teachers in this process is fundamental. The commitment of university management and government members is also essential.

The discourses highlight competencies as a general concept and intercultural skills as a ramification to the general concept. The aspects that make up the development of such competencies, therefore, are associated with the context (the regional, municipal, national, as well as institutional spaces in which students are inserted), practices (the management and standardization in which they are inserted), projects (students, teachers, community, managers, the state), and the involvement and participation of the members (students, teachers, community, managers).

According to the respondents, some cultural artifacts were identified. Forms of communication (language), cooking, clothing, social behavior are identified as artifacts that differ within the state of Amazonas, given its territorial extension as well as its influences from each region. This diversity is perceived and corroborates with the research that already places the locus (Amazonas and Brazil) with a singularity of cultural miscellany. "I see this day to day in the form of speech, in the foods people usually consume, in their way of thinking..." (DISC09, 2018).

Although there are distinctions in cultural artifacts, the perspective of a monocultural environment is also confirmed. This is clear in the discourses in which cultural diversity is not very visible in the researched context. Thus, two distinct visions are presented.

Given the primordially of seeking practices that develop IC in Brazilian higher education, deepening IC studies in Brazilian higher education is essential.

Therefore, it can be inferred that the triad for the development of intercultural competencies in universities brings with it:

of education and so that the individual can perform several degrees of each phase, not necessarily only achieving linear progress (AMERICAN COUNCIL ON INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION, 1996).

This proposal complements the discussions by Deardorff (2012), which states the 05 elements that teachers can adopt when developing their curriculum and participants can use to guide their own development of intercultural competence are attitudes, knowledge, competence, internal results and external results.

The author emphasizes that intercultural competence does not develop in a vacuum, so it is important to be aware of the context in which this competence is occurring, and, in particular, in the interaction itself (DEARDORFF, 2012). It is understood here that it appears and is called as context that provides not only the perspective of where it is occurring, but also the general spaces in which the students are inserted and originate from.

The attitudes, knowledge and skills produced by the author are related to the social actors and individually in the way of understanding the world of the perspectives of others, cultural self-knowledge, respect, openness, curiosity and discovery (DEARDORFF, 2012). In this research, this involves all social actors that trigger external and internal results within the university environment.

Final Considerations

The general objective of this research was to analyze the perception of the students about the concept of intercultural competencies and competencies and their practices in a Brazilian public university. From the subjects' discourses, it was possible to make some inferences that contribute to the construction of "Intercultural Competencies".

A contribution of this research is related to the categories identified in the discourses. In the categorization process, a total of 04 categories were identified, two are associated with the concepts (Concept of Competencies and Concept of Intercultural Competencies), one is associated with the practices adopted or that could be adopted in the university environment for the development of IC (Practices to promote IC at the university) and another is associated with the context (University Environment for the improvement of IC) that refers to the university space and what appears in it that can influence the improvement of intercultural competencies in superior education.

These categories emerged in this research and were used to understand the perception of students enrolled in a Brazilian public university about intercultural competencies in higher education. Therefore, these categories can be adopted as initial guidelines, either in future research or as a beacon in diagnoses for Brazilian higher education institutions to understand the environment in which to develop IC in this scope.

This indicator, as defended by Deardorff (2012), could be a trigger for the actions of Brazilian higher education institutions, since intercultural competencies are not developed in most institutions and must be intentionally addressed. Planning, preliminary diagnosis, and coordinated actions are essential, so that the process of intercultural competencies development in higher education is cyclical, continuous and effective. The author argues that intercultural competence does not happen in a vacuum, so it is important to be aware of the context in which this competence is occurring, and in particular, in the interaction itself.

It has been realized that the concept of intercultural competencies and competencies are related but not equal. From this research, the students considered competencies as both the "input" and the "output", however, they overwhelmingly viewed competencies as "input". Intercultural competencies were highlighted as a concept with competencies being a branch of this.

As for the aspects of interculturality in higher education, the students mentioned three different ones: context, practices and social actors, which are referred to here as the triad for the development of intercultural competencies at universities. These components are essential for the improvement of IC in higher education, as they include individual and collective aspects and broadly consider what interferes in this process.

In order to identify the actions that promote intercultural competencies in the context of the researched university, a difficulty to effectively evaluate individual practices was noted, and that isolated actions exist (in the participants' perception). The need to establish broader university actions and projects, the training of teachers and consideration of aspects that undermine the development of higher education in IC (i.e. discrimination and racism) cannot be disregarded.

Dealing with intercultural competencies in Brazilian higher education is no longer an elective issue for higher education institutions. All the forces and tensions that operate in the context denominated as "emergent" already urge that the construct be rethought.

This research allowed us to provide some suggestions for future research. Firstly, the university contexts need to be analyzed in order to compare the findings. Secondly, regarding the evaluation practices related to the development of intercultural competencies in the university context (formal and informal), the theoretical framework of the singular environment of the Brazilian "continent" should be added.

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