

## Intervention in international practicum in the Global South

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### **Abstract:**

Teacher education programmes need to be more internationally oriented, according to national education policy in Norway. Moreover, all teacher education institutions must develop a strategy to meet this aim. International practicum, which sends student teachers for practicum abroad, has become popular. The aim is to enhance students' intercultural competence. Until recently, it was commonly believed that immersing student teachers in an unfamiliar culture would develop students' intercultural competence. Our research findings are in accordance with those of many other studies: immersing students in another culture does not automatically mean that they become interculturally competent: Some of the students in our study have learned to appreciate the difference between cultures and have opened up their minds and increased their acceptance of differences. However, others have come back home more certain than ever of the superiority of their own culture. In this paper we discuss to what extent intercultural competence and global awareness were promoted during an international practicum programme.

Keywords: International practicum, intercultural competence, student teachers.

### **1. Introduction**

Teacher education programmes need to become more international according to national education policy in Norway. Moreover, all teacher education institutions must develop a strategy to meet this aim. International practicum, which sends student teachers for practicum abroad, has become popular. The aim is to enhance students' intercultural competence. In the literature, empirical studies have reported that participation in international work increases learners' intercultural competence, language skills, appreciation of cultural differences, tolerance for ambiguity, and experiential understanding of complex global problems (Cushner & Mahon, 2009). Until recently, it was commonly believed that immersing student teachers in an unfamiliar culture would develop the students' intercultural competence (Cushner, 2007; Stachowski & Sparks, 2007; Walters, Garii & Walters, 2009; Wiggins, Follo & Eberly, 2007). More recently, however, this belief has been challenged. Some researchers claim that being in another country does not automatically make a person

interculturally competent (Hammer, 2012; Engle & Engle, 2012; Zull, 2012). They argue that being exposed to other cultures is a necessary but not sufficient condition for students to become interculturally competent.

In this paper, we questioned to what extent student teachers become more interculturally competent when they attend international practicum programmes. We will furthermore, discuss how to improve the quality of international practicum programmes in the Global South in order to better ensure that students become intercultural competent. The discussion is based on the analyses of two international practicum programmes from two different teacher education institutions in Norway.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Theoretical discussion of intercultural competence**

In order to design and mentor development of intercultural competence it is necessary to understand what intercultural competence is and how we as educators might intervene to help the students to develop this competence. In this section, we will first discuss the concept before we continue with a discussion of crucial factors in the development of intercultural competence.

What is the nature of intercultural competence? We base our understanding on the definition from two of the most influential academics in the field – Bennet (2012) and Deardorff (2004). Bennet's definition refers to "the acquisition of generalizable intercultural competence: that is, competence that can be applied to dealing with cross-cultural contact in general, not just skills useful for dealing with a particular other culture" (Bennet, 2012). Deardorff (2004) highlights that most of the definitions of intercultural competence include more than knowledge of other cultures, since knowledge alone is not enough to constitute intercultural competence. Intercultural competence also involves the development of one's skills and attitudes in successfully interacting with persons of diverse backgrounds. Based on these two definitions and inspired by Hylland Eriksen (2015), we in the present paper will understand intercultural competence as the ability to communicate and collaborate with people whose attitudes, values, skills and knowledge are significantly different from their own.

International practicum programmes are potentially transformative in nature. By spending time in another culture, the students will gain first-hand knowledge and this is critical in developing intercultural competence (Cushner, 2007). Living and working in a different culture challenges the perception of oneself, of others and of the home culture and country (Walters et al., 2009). According to Stachowski & Sparks (2007), they develop "perspective consciousness" that might help them to understand other cultures and might push the students towards an ethnorelative perspective (Hammer et al., 2003). When student teachers are part of an international practicum, their perspectives might transform through confrontation with other people's perspectives or realities.

Theoretically, this is based on Mezirow's transformative learning theory (1981, 1997). According to his theory, adult learning is about changes in meaning perspectives, which include broad sets of psychocultural assumptions that form an individual's worldview. Meaning perspectives develop from earlier experiences and are socio-culturally specific. Mezirow defines transformative learning as a process of using an *a priori* interpretation to construct a revised interpretation of meaning of one's experience to guide future actions (Mezirow, 1998, 1997).

What do the student teachers experience during the international practicum that might change their meaning perspective in a more ethnocultural direction? It is first and foremost the cultural shock that many students will experience that may catalyse a change in their frames of reference, which again might lead to increased cultural sensitivity. However, this will depend on the ability of the student to reflect and elaborate on an existing point of view and habit of mind, and transform them into a new frame of reference. Another outcome of cultural shock might be that one sticks to one's initial biases regarding groups and cultures and the conceived superiority of one's own cultural values and habits. Transforming one's perspective is less common than making the "new" fit in to existing frames of references (Mezirow, 1998). Thus, international experience alone does not necessarily make the students intercultural competent or give the participants new perspectives on their professional role and on pedagogical practices. Zull (2012) reminds us that transformation is a slow process; the full impact of an international practicum might not appear for years and, at best, such experiences might be the beginning of a transformation.

Vande Berg (2012) and others (Hudson, 2017; Hindrix, 2017) argue that it is possible to intervene and help the students to develop intercultural competence. It is possible to help the students to get new skills, knowledge and develop their attitudes and critical reflection capacity. Based on extensive studies of a number of international practicum programmes Hindrix (2017) finds the following aspects most important to focus on when designing an international practicum programme: 1. Cultural self-knowledge: The student knows and understands his own frame of reference and worldview and he is able to link these to other viewpoints. 2. Cultural flexibility: If necessary, the student adapts his behaviour and communication style in an intercultural context, and explores alternative behaviour patterns. 3. Cultural resilience: The student will deal with the difficulties and negative feelings that may arise in intercultural encounters in a constructive way. 4. Cultural knowledge: The student acquires knowledge about other cultures and employs this knowledge in an appropriate manner with respect for the uniqueness of each individual human being. 5. Cultural connectivity competence: In an intercultural context, the student develops a working relationship with colleagues, clients and other stakeholders and contributes to an atmosphere of trust. 6. Cultural communicative competence: The student examines the specific features of his own communication style, allows for a remedial approach if necessary and explores the communication style of the other. 7. Investigating other perspectives: The student is open to alternative ideas and opinions and will examine them and consider

the value of the alternatives. In addition, the students must show international orientation and social involvement.

## **2.2. International practicum programmes**

At our universities, the international practicum programme consists of 3 phases of which the stay abroad is one phase. The three interlinked phases are pre-departure, in country and re-entry. The programme is meant to help the students enhance their learning outcome by providing relevant knowledge as well as stimulating their reflection of their experiences. Vande Berg & Paige (2009) recommend this design from their analyses of several intercultural training programmes. During these programmes the students are tutored, mentored, challenged and supported to change their previous perspectives. The duration of our programme is 10 months during the third year of a 4-year general teacher education programme.

Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences (INN) offers international practicum in Namibia. The students participate in international practicum in combination with writing their international BA-thesis in Namibia. This includes a 12-week stay in Namibia where the students work as teachers in Namibian primary and lower secondary schools. Their work as teachers is recognized as equivalent to teaching practice in Norwegian schools/kindergartens.

The pre-departure constitutes of lectures, seminars and workshops. The course starts with general knowledge about the country. We find it important that they know as much as possible about the geography, history, economy, ethnicity, culture, school system etc. as possible. The other important part of the course is intercultural competence. We involve the students in discussions of their own culture, the other culture, cultural flexibility, the importance of being open-minded, and the importance of getting involved in the target society. Culture-general knowledge, is not only knowledge, it is more of a discussion of culture-specific versus universalisms of values, habits and beliefs. They are taught about global issues, development theory and issues of poverty and inequality. They will have the opportunity to meet students who have finished their international practicum and thereby gain much practical information.

The *in-country phase*, which is three months, starts with a week in the Namibian capital where they attend orientations and lectures by local professors and NGOs. Moreover, in this phase they are exposed to the local culture, schools and university. The lectures focus on the challenges in the education system, and of being a teacher in Namibia. After this week, they travel to their final destination, Tsumeb, and start their practicum in local schools. Students are placed in pairs so that they can more easily share experiences. The students share hostel lodgings, they do not live with local families. Halfway through the stay we arrange group discussions and individual tutoring. Topics such as culture shock, the students' feelings and behaviour, their frustrations, and the role of being a teacher in a very different context are raised. We furthermore raise questions about Norwegian values, habits and points of view. We specifically ask them to reflect upon how they can apply what they learned at the pre-departure course in the new setting. As part of their GTE education, they must write a BA-thesis. The

students attending the international practicum programme write the thesis with data they collect during their practicum in Tsumeb and focus on challenges in the local schools. We find that this strengthened their reflections on how local factors affect the learning process both on the individual and structural level. The *re-entry phase* starts when they are back in Norway at the university college. We have group discussions and individual discussions where we discuss their experiences on a professional and personal level.

The students from Oslo and Akershus University of Applied Sciences (HiOA) follow the same phases of preparation, in –and post-service follow-up focusing on the same topics as that of INN for their placement and studies in and around Cape Town, South Africa. The only differing elements are: 1. The students are in particular exposed to theories of whole school development approach (Davidoff & Lazarus, 2002; Fullan, 2004) with a focus on the well-being and resilience of teachers in challenging contexts (Olsen & Collett, 2012; Olsen, 2017) both pre-phase and during the in-country phase. 2. Twice through their stay the students get together from the three placement schools for joint reflection on their experiences, frustrations etc. as described for the INN students above. The first reflection session is organised after two to three weeks in the placement schools to deal with feelings related to culture shock - and for some students it involves how to manage traumatic experiences of teachers using different forms of harsh disciplinary methods. The second joint session takes place after 2/3 of their stay is completed. The purpose of the sessions is firstly to enable the students to take agency to address the impact that the contextual challenges have on their own and peer students well-being. Secondly the aim is to enhance the students' level of reflection and therefore understanding of how contextual issues such as poverty impact on the school and what takes place in the classroom, the teacher (stress levels and teaching style) and the learner. Furthermore, twice through their stay the students are supervised in their class practice performance. Local lecturers from HiOA's partner, the University of the Western Cape (UWC), Cape Town, conduct the supervision. In addition, the students placed in South Africa are accommodated differently from the INN students in Namibia. The HiOA students all live with a teacher family while the INN students live as a group together in one house. The accommodation with teacher families provides the students with an additional arena for daily reflection on their experiences in the placement schools. The students' interpretations of their experiences are in this way exposed to corrections or nuances from their host teacher, which in return may encourage students to deal with and understand the issues involved at a deeper level.

### **3. Methodology**

In order to gain insight into how the students' intercultural competence develops during their three-month practicum in Namibia and South Africa, we conducted a qualitative study. The nature of the qualitative data was of pivotal importance during the process of interpreting the meanings, that the respondents themselves presents,

and how they linked these to the social reality of the local communities. Within a qualitative methodology, the focus is on the meanings, values, intentions and emotions of the informants, and the main goal is to obtain an understanding of their perspectives (Kitchin & Tate, 2000). Drawing on the methodology of Willard-Holt (2001), developed for pre-service teachers in international programmes, we developed two open-response questionnaires to be answered pre- and post-practicum. The semi-structured questionnaires were designed to provide insight into the characteristics and outcomes of a perspective transformation. The pre-practicum questionnaire (Q1) and the post-practicum questionnaire (Q2) are very similar in order to allow a direct comparison to show how the three-month practicum has affected the students in terms of issues related to intercultural competence. The questionnaires are numbered in such a way as to ensure that the pre-practicum and post-practicum answers from the same student can be compared, as well as securing the anonymity of the students. The questionnaires consist of a mix of fixed questions where the respondents mark their perceived level of, for instance, tolerance or knowledge on a given scale, and open-ended questions where the respondents explain and elaborate in their own words. In addition, we conducted one focus group interview halfway through the students' practicum and one after their return. The same themes were raised in these group interviews as in the questionnaires. Individual tutoring, a written student reflection note and informal conversations with the students during and after their stay abroad also contributed valuable knowledge to the study.

We had students in schools in Namibia and in South Africa. The data was collected from 6 groups of students: In Namibia we collected data from 16 students in 2014, 20 students in 2015 and 7 students 2016. In South Africa, we gathered data from 8 students in 2014, 10 students in 2015 and 18 students in 2016. With a few exceptions, most of the students were white, Norwegian born young adults in their twenties.

The group interviews and reflection texts were analysed using inductive open coding. We did not use a coding mechanism for the data, but through continuous reading of the interview transcripts, discussing interpretations with the research team, and developing a consciousness with regard to our own assumptions in a reflective process, we gradually developed a deeper understanding of the material. In this way, interpretations of meanings were made. We organised the interview transcripts and the open questionnaire data into meaningful categories, within the framework of the research aims and questions of this research. This is in line with the arguments of researchers supporting a phenomenological approach in order to understand the meaning of others (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Miller & Crabtree point to making meaning out of experience and write: "Phenomenology answers the question, 'What is it like to have a certain experience?'" (1992:24).

In the analytical process we were assisted by the theories and studies reviewed for this research. According to Holmarsdottir (2005), theories can help researchers understand and organise the data of experience. "They permit the researcher to summarise relatively large amounts of information via a relatively short list of propositions, and therefore bringing meaning to what is otherwise chaotic and inscrutable"

(Holmarsdottir, 2005:256). An important challenge for analysing the data of this thesis was therefore to look underneath what the respondents were saying and not only *why*, but also *how* people say what they say.

The investigation does not provide a basis for statistical generalisation based on empirical data from a sample of a population considered representative of the whole population. We find, however, inspiration in the concept of analytical generalisation introduced by Yin (1993). Yin argues that context-related units of study can be used to compare with previously developed theory and thus provide a basis for analytical generalisation.

#### **4. Results**

Our findings are in accordance with those of many other studies in the sense that immersing students in another culture does not automatically mean that they become interculturally competent. Some of the students in our study have learned to appreciate differences between cultures and have opened up their minds and increased their acceptance of differences. However, others have returned to the home country more certain than ever of the superiority of their own culture. Whiteness theory helps us to understand why it is so easy for our students stick to their initial perspectives, as it is natural for them to interpret the other culture through their own cultural lenses. The main findings from the present study from INN seem to support the contention that it is easier to stick to one's initial perspectives on one's own and other cultures. Moreover, our preparation and follow-up of the students have not been able to counteract this.

However, some of the students had become more open and tolerant towards other cultures and developed their communication skills with people with a different cultural background. After their stay, most the students said that they felt at ease when engaging with people from other cultures. Only one student had become more negative after the practicum than before. In general, they had become more relaxed and curious about cultures different from the Norwegian. The warmth of the people, the openheartedness and the friendly atmosphere they experienced contributed to a positive view of other cultures.

The students also reported that some aspects of Namibian culture were problematic, especially those related to gender issues and child rearing. Students find corporal punishment of children stressful. For some students, the difference in culture gave them a negative impression of Namibian society and culture. For these students, their stay seems to have reinforced a neo-colonial attitude. They experienced their own culture as the only viable one and as superior to Namibian culture.

Minimization, i.e. seeing one's own culture as universal, was also typical, especially in student discussions about the professional aspects of their stay. The students assumed that the teaching style, teacher-student relationship and other aspects of being a teacher that they had learned in Norway were applicable in Namibia. They did not reflect upon the fact that teaching is embedded in ideologies and context (Kabilan,

2013). Most students criticised the teacher's classroom praxis without looking for reasons. Few students questioned the reasons behind Namibian and South African classroom praxis and the teachers' behaviour. More typically, many students developed a negative understanding of the local school culture that strengthened their belief in the superiority of Norwegian school culture. We saw little reflection upon how the local culture, values and customs influence classroom practices and teacher-student relationships

The findings specific to the students' experiences in South Africa reveal that the students found that even if some issues were difficult to raise with their cooperating teachers, the teachers were very helpful in the process of interpreting and contextualising their experiences. As mentioned above the students live in pairs with host families, usually a teacher (not the cooperating class teacher) or parent linked to the placement school with the intention to provide an additional arena for reflection and learning. Where there were difficult issues to raise with their cooperating class teacher, such as harsh disciplinary methods and dominant teacher-led style of teaching, the students felt more at ease discussing these with their host teacher at the supper table at night.

The students do, however, report frequent misunderstandings in their general communication with teachers in the school due to language and cultural codes and how these could be clarified and corrected in these discussions at their home stay. Knowledge of how culture affects communication is important and highlighted by, amongst others, Hindrix (2017). The South African schools in our study have learners from impoverished and crime-infested urban and semi-urban townships in and outside the city of Cape Town and Paarl. The learners are exclusively from the "Black" isi-Xhosa and "Coloured" Afrikaans speaking population groups.

In general, the student teacher in South Africa seems to be more able to reflect critically on the teaching and living conditions in South Africa than the students in Namibia did. This observation has led us to look at the differences between the two programmes. The major difference is that the students in South Africa live in private homes, which will give them a closer understanding of how the life is for families in South Africa and an opportunity to get feedback on a daily basis on their observations and challenge their cultural flexibility and cultural resilience in addition to giving them cultural knowledge. The students in Namibia live in hostels and they do not mix with locals who could challenge their views and interpretations on a daily basis. Contrary, being left alone might lead to strengthening of stereotype interpretations of Namibian customs. Likewise, being given a local supervisor might also be helpful. A local supervisor will help them to develop a working relationship with colleagues and open up to alternative ideas and perspectives. Thus, the students in South Africa are exposed to local colleagues and families during their practicum and this might be the reason that they seem to develop a stronger intercultural competence than the students in Namibia. The focus on teacher well-being and the introduction to self- and peer supportive well-being techniques in the pre-phase and in-country phase seem to have helped reduce students' anxiety and frustrations linked to teaching and



communicating in multicultural and language complex contexts. The pre-phase training in school development and teacher well-being seem to have assisted the students in acquiring a deeper understanding of how an impoverished home environment can impact on learners' school attendance and active participation. The findings indicate that the systemic reflection built into the practicum enables the students to move towards greater self-knowledge, cultural sensitivity and flexibility. The students in South Africa demonstrate empathy with their learners through a stronger acknowledgement of how the socio-economic environment of the school must be conducive to what happens in school in order to make learning meaningful and relevant (Meerkotter, 2001). The students learned ways of providing social and emotional support to learners struggling, which in turn seem to have helped reduce the students' own frustrations when dealing with emotionally disturbing situations.

## **5. Conclusion**

Our research findings are in accordance with those of many other studies: immersing students in another culture does not automatically mean that they become interculturally competent. Some of the students in our study have learned to appreciate the difference between cultures and have opened up their minds and increased their acceptance of differences. However, others have come back home more certain than ever of the superiority of their own culture. The results vary between our two HEIs with the one having a somewhat better outcome when it comes to achieving the main aim of the international practicum programme. As described above, students from both institutions went through an extensive international practicum programme. The aim of the programme is to help the students develop intercultural competence. The two programmes had many similarities, the main differences are that the HIOA programme put more emphasis on local supervisions, had more regular supervised reflection sessions, and the students lived with local families. These factors seem to have a positive effect on the student teachers' ability to become more intercultural competent during their international practicum period. The students' home-stay with a teacher family have a particularly strong bearing on how the students interpret and make immediate meaning out of their daily experiences. They develop a deeper understanding of the interrelationships between the school's context, what happens in the classroom and how this impacts on the well-being of both teachers and learners. In situations of challenging communication with their cooperative class teachers and with learners, we find that the students have the ability to show cultural responsiveness and flexibility and shift the perspective towards the local context – key factors in building intercultural /competence instead of fitting the "new" into existing frames of references as pointed out by Mezirow (1997).

In order to help the student teachers taking part in an international practicum programme to become intercultural competent we must improve the preparation and follow up of students. We see that there are improvements in all phases, especially during the in-country phase and after the students come back home. During the in-

country phase, we need to work harder to challenge the students' reflection on a daily basis. The HIOA model should be implemented for all students. We think that it is important to help the students to adapt their behaviour and communication style in an intercultural context, and explore alternative behaviour patterns. It is also important to help the student to deal with the difficulties and negative feelings that may arise in intercultural encounters in a constructive way. Living with local families and having a local supervisor will be a good intervention in these respects. During the pre-departure phase, it is important to continue to work on cultural self-knowledge. It is important that the student knows and understands his or her own frame of reference and worldview and is able to link these to other viewpoints. The weakest point in our programme is the post-phase. In the present programme we meet the student one day for a reflection on their stay in Africa. This is too short a time. We need to extend this and work on their experiences through a longer period of time. Our argument is supported by Leeman & Ledoux (2003, 2005), who maintain that conscious intercultural competence can only be developed when experience is coupled with knowledge and reflection. They show that one of the biggest problems in intercultural communication is the tendency to believe the "others" are like "us" in spite of knowing that people are bearers of different world views and values and traditions. Therefore, in line with Vande Berg (2012), we conclude that the key to making the students international practicum more effective is to support students to intentional mentoring and guiding that is designed to help them reflect upon themselves as cultural beings and to become aware of the ways they respond to and make meaning within different cultural context. Immersion is a necessary but not a sufficient condition to develop intercultural competence.

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