

“Now I know I need to be very patient and open-minded to understand others”: Intercultural learning during an intensive study programme

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Keywords

Intensive study programmes, intercultural competencies, cultural disequilibrium

Abstract

This article reflects on aspects of the intercultural learning of a group of forty-one students, from seven European countries, engaged in an Intensive Study Programme as part of the Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership for Higher Education project “Teachers Competencies for Social Inclusion of Migrants and Refugees in Early Childhood Education (BE IN)”. In particular, it considers the factors that enabled the students to work together successfully, in transnational groups, during the two-week Intensive Study Programme (ISP.) Questionnaires were used to gather data about the students’ perceptions of their intercultural learning. Analysis of student feedback reveals their approaches to cultural disequilibrium and explores some of the factors that supported them to achieve group harmony and programme outcomes. The conclusion makes recommendations for those planning ISPs in the future.

The Context of the project

The rationale of the “Teachers Competencies for Social Inclusion of Migrants and Refugees in Early Childhood Education” (BE-IN) project is rooted in political statements such as the Europe

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2020 agenda regarding poverty and social exclusion, and especially on research-based evidence that shows that children with an immigration background tend to face more educational barriers compared to the indigenous population within Europe (Janta and Harte 2016; Hutchinson and Reader, 2021). It has been shown that children who have an immigration background in their family take up more disadvantaged positions within European educational systems (OECD, 2018). Bove and Shamahd (2020) highlight the continued barriers to accessing early childhood education faced by migrant and refugee children. In line with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the European Convention on Human Rights recognizes education as a human right. In her work on the right to education, Tomaszewski (2001), highlights the role that governments play in making education available, accessible, acceptable, and adaptable. Although all four must be the focus of governments it can be argued that the final aspect, of adaptability, lies in the hands of individual teachers. Parkhouse, Lu and Massaro (2019) note that when teachers are well equipped to foster inclusive and equitable classrooms, students from marginalized communities show higher rates of academic achievement, motivation, self-confidence, and self-efficacy. However, many teachers complete their preparation programs feeling underprepared to work in culturally diverse classrooms (ibid). Against this backdrop and within the context of migration across Europe and the current movement of refugees from Ukraine, the need for pre-service teachers to develop skills, competencies, and confidence in working within diverse classrooms has never been greater.

Building on long-term collaborative relationships between their universities the project involved staff and students from pre-service teacher education programmes in Belgium, Lithuania, Portugal, Spain, The Netherland, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. The project set out to explore the notion of unpreparedness in more detail, with the overall aims of developing an open access blended learning programme to support pre-service and in-service early childhood educators and primary teachers. Aiming to develop the understandings and competencies needed to meet the needs of migrant and refugee children (3 to 8 years old) in early childhood education and to address the risk of social exclusion those children face. In the design process of the Blended Learning course special attention was paid to the development of competences, including skills and attitudes, to enhance their ability to successfully promote equity, diversity and inclusion in their learning environments. The

project had four stages (1) research into the perceived gaps in teachers' knowledge, skills and competencies (2) creation of materials to support the development of these (3) test materials with pre-service teachers during 2 ISPs (4) refine materials and create the BE-IN Blended Learning course. Simoniukštytė et al (2020) highlight the process and outcomes of the research undertaken to establish the skills and competencies which would form the basis of the Blended Learning course. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic the initial two-week ISP was replaced with a virtual five-day programme. In May 2020 a two-week face to face ISP took place at the University of Girona.

Within the overall project, this experience was planned to serve two purposes: to validate, with students, the whole set of the BE-IN course material; and to trial important parts of the face-to-face part of the Blended learning strategy. To achieve these goals during ISP2 a diversity of approaches were adopted (see www.beinproject.eu for more details):

- Lectures by Catalan specialists (about interculturality, inclusive assessment, mentor programs, Erasmus+ projects on the topic, etc);
- Seven different workshop developed in international groups related to every single module of the course developed within the BE-IN Erasmus+ Project by teachers from the participating countries;
- School visits (to five different schools) and visits to special institutions in the area of Girona (SalTeduca, an association against school segregation, for instance);
- Explanation of the way of working, broad and deep observation of topics with small groups, discussion and reflection after the observation;
- Teach a group of migrant and refugee children;
- Work in transnational and national groups;
- A fantastic opportunity to meet people, to get to know yourself better, to develop intercultural competencies and to grow as a human being.

In this article we consider the impact of engagement in the Intensive Study Programme on the participants' intercultural competencies. Much has been written about the nature of intercultural competencies, many studies focus on identifying discrete knowledge and skills which come together to form the components of Intercultural Competence, which Bennett

(2011 page 3) would term the “set of cognitive, affective and behavioural skills and characteristics that supports effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural contexts.” Fantini (2009) (in Deardorff, 2009, p. 456) suggests that developing intercultural competencies may entail “learning new behaviours and interactional styles that go beyond those of their native culture’. Trede and Hill (2012) identify critical self-awareness, respect for diverse interpretations of practices and the use of inclusive dialogues as key principles of cultural competence. While others consider the importance of more ‘passive skills’ such as the development of general knowledge, linguistic skills, or political knowledge (McRae and Ramji (2011). Trede, Bowles, & Bridges (2013 p. 443) urge caution reflecting that “The term ‘competence’ can be misleading, if viewed from a narrow instrumental skills perspective because it omits the socio-cultural context and dispositions that inform abilities to engage with intercultural and global situations.” To counter this, others have focussed on the development perspective, with intercultural competency seen broadly as the ability to development relationships through working in diverse contexts (Deardorff, 2015). Holmes (2012) also draws attention to the importance of relationship building, the management of emotions and empathy in the development of intercultural competencies.

Within this study, and with a view to supporting pre-services teachers’ skills and confidence to work effectively with refugee and migrant children and their families, we adopt a view of intercultural competence as ‘... the ability to effectively and appropriately interact in an intercultural situation or context’ (Perry and Southwell, 2011, p. 453).

Methodology

Given our interest in the ability of the pre-service teachers to be able to ‘effectively and appropriately interact in an intercultural situation or context’ (Perry and Southwell, 2011, p. 453) we were keen to gather data which captured how the engagement with the programme content had enables participants to demonstrate intercultural competencies within the context of the Intensive Study Programme. An online questionnaire was developed and shared with participants at the end of the two-week ISP. The questionnaire was administered via the online survey platform Jisc (a United Kingdom not-for-profit company that provides digital resources in support of further and higher education institutions: jisc.ac.uk) and participants completed it on their mobile phones or laptops during a timetabled session on

the final day of the programme. Within the questionnaire participants were asked to respond to statements using a Likert (1932) type-scale. Originally designed to measure attitudes, the Likert scales consist of an ordinal scale of five points used by respondents to rate the degree to which they agree or disagree with a statement, usually in the form of 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'neither agree or disagree,' 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree'. In the questionnaire used in this study all questions started with the sentence stem "During the project I have been able to develop my cultural..." followed by an element of intercultural competence, for example self-knowledge, flexibility, communication. The rating scale used did not include the mid-point option of 'neither agree or disagree', the use of which has received criticism from a number of researchers as summarised by Chyung et al (2017). Examples include Van Vaerenbergh and Thomas (2013) who suggest that response to the mid-point category is often used regardless of content, while others suggest that rather than reflecting a mid-point or neutral opinion the 'neither agree or disagree option' can be used by participants to reflect ambiguity, ambivalence, or a reluctance to share their honest opinion (Truebner, 2021). Likert-type scales without a mid-point have been described by Chyung et al (2017) as forced-choice scales, as respondents are, by nature of the omission, forced to either agree or disagree. Within the context of the current study, where activities and experiences had been designed with the development of intercultural competencies in mind, we felt that the omission of the 'neither agree or disagree' option was justifiable on the grounds that we wanted to be able to evaluate our intentions. In this context the forced option would provide more useful data for us than data including expressions of neutrality or ambivalence.

Participants were also invited to give a narrative response to each question, again a common format was used in the form of the question in the form of the prompt "Can you give an example of this?" An open text box with no word limit was included, providing participants the opportunity to use their own words to offer exemplifications, opinions and clarification (Chaudhary and Israel, 2016). The potential for open-ended questions to elicit high quality responses can be influenced by several factors in particular respondent characteristics (Zuell and Scholz, 2015). This is particularly pertinent with this survey as all participants were asked to make their narrative responses in English, the language medium of the programme, meaning that most would not be responding in their first language. We accept that this has the potential to limit some responses. Singer and Couper (2017) identify seven primarily

methodological uses of open-ended questions, in the case of this study, we hoped that the narrative responses would test our methodological theories and hypotheses in relation to the content of the programmes.

Data analysis

The initial quantitative data was produced by the Jisc Survey software and gave us an overview of the percentage of students who had responded to the Likert style questions (see Table 1). In relation to the narrative responses, we adopted a grounded theory approach of manually coding emerging themes as the data was read. The initial coding was undertaken by the project team, with each individual university team looking at a single question and identifying emergent themes. The early findings from each question were shared at a team meeting where emergent themes across all responses began to emerge. Further analysis and coding were undertaken by the staff from the UK university.

Findings and discussion

The aim of the research was to evaluate the effectiveness of the Intensive Study Programme in offering participating students the opportunity to develop intercultural competencies. The quantitative data indicates that the programme was successful in supporting participants to develop the five elements of intercultural competence explored and are presented in table 1 below.

		Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
During the project I have been able to develop my...	Cultural self- knowledge	69%	31%		
	Cultural flexibility	64%	36%		
	Cultural communication skills	62%	38%		
	Cultural open-mindedness	67%	33%		
	Ability to handle conflict	23%	54%	20%	3%

Table 1 Self reporting responses to Likert style questions

The qualitative data is presented question by question in the section below and an exploration of the emerging themes for each one before a consideration of overarching messages from the data.

Cultural self-knowledge, sometimes also known as cultural self-awareness refers to an individual's awareness of how their own cultural influences your behaviour, values and ways

of looking at the world (Pusch, 2009; Lu and Wan, 2018) Both Bennett (1993) and Deardorff (2006) stress the importance of this as the essential precursor for the development of intercultural competence. When asked the extent to which the project had enabled them to develop their *cultural self-knowledge*, 69% of the students strongly agreed and 31% agreed. Analysis of the narrative comments in response to the prompt, "Give an example of this" fell into three broad themes, the importance of spending time together, the development of self-knowledge and understanding and the importance of the cultural element of the programme. Deardorff (2009b) notes that "Often, teachers need impactful intercultural experiences in other cultures to be able to hone this cultural self-awareness." It was our hope that the ISP would be an impactful cultural experience. Many of the narrative comments highlighted that the programme had provided the opportunity for students to explicitly think about their own culture, one noted, "Learning that our culture is part of who we are and that we learn our culture by observing others." The data revealed that most students felt that the opportunity to spend extended periods of time with each other had been a powerful element in their ability to develop cultural self-knowledge and that this was achieved through the process of learning more about the culture of the other students, for example, "working with people who have different values and norms". The importance of "Getting to know other cultures just by chatting with others" was highlighted as well as the regular opportunity to work in trans-national groups, which was identified as a rich forum for exchanging ideas and perspectives, "I got to know the culture of everyone in my group." This naturally led to analysis, "In my trans-national group we talked a lot about the way it goes in our own countries and discussed the differences, which was really interesting." Which in turn led to reflection about their own culture, "Hearing others' perspectives has helped with this, I have the opportunity to think about our culture," and "Working in trans-national groups supported us (to) make comparisons against our own culture."

Many students touched on their increased awareness of the "Social behaviour and expectations" of other groups as well as the cultural norms they themselves take for granted, "Being with people from other countries and being in another country than my own made me think about certain habits that I have in my daily life that otherwise I wouldn't have thought about." A number of these related to communication skills, for example, "I've learned that we communicate in a different way. We are quite direct," and "My country is, for example, really

direct with saying what we mean and not subtle at all.” Several students also reflected on behavioural changes that resulted from their increased understanding, for example, “Now I know I need to be very patient and open-minded to understand others.” One student touched on their increased awareness of the prejudiced or stereotypical views they had of other cultures and how these had been challenged during the project, “I found out more about Turkey. Like the stereotype that it is a Muslim country, however it is opposite.”

Some of the responses to this question suggested the students defining cultural self-awareness as their increased awareness of the culture of others. For example, an increased knowledge of Catalan culture was the focus of many student responses. The programme enabled students to learn about the Catalan culture through guided walking tours of Girona, dancing lessons to learn the traditional Sardana dances and through eating traditional local cuisine. The programme also included visits to local schools and the opportunity to spend an afternoon leading activities with groups of primary aged migrant and refugee children. Several students also reflected on the cultural diversity in the schools and how this was reflected within the school environments as well as the inclusive culture of the schools themselves.

Cultural flexibility is described by Carter (2010, p. 1531) as the “ability to interact in, participate in, and navigate different social and cultural settings, to embrace multiple forms of cultural knowledge”. When asked the extent to which the project had enabled them to develop their *cultural flexibility*, 64% of the students strongly agreed and 36% agreed. Analysis of the narrative responses to the prompt, “Give an example of this” fell, again, into three broad categories; specific examples of occasions when students felt they had demonstrated cultural flexibility, insights into changes in attitude or competency and the opportunities the programme had offered to develop cultural flexibility. Many students equated cultural flexibility with respect for and acceptance of the norms and behaviours of other cultural groups. The following quotes from students illustrate this well, “I learnt that we should respect and accept other cultures even if we don’t agree with something,” “Trying to understand other opinions,” “I have learned about being more open-minded and less prejudice about other cultures,” “Respecting some behaviours that I may not have but some people do.” The importance of listening as the key to this was highlighted by many students, for example, “I need to hear and respect all opinions,” and “I learned to listen to each other.”

Some students related cultural flexibility to the broad insights they had gained and the impact of these, for example, "I understand why some cultures can feel rood (sic), this is only because they (are) not social with strangers and need more time to warm up." "With the knowledge I have gained I now have confidence to adapt strategies". While other students hinted at deeper levels of reflection, "Being exposed to other cultures and other situations that are not usual to me, made me question why some things are done in a way and not the other way."

The opportunity for embodying cultural flexibility, in the light of their increased cultural knowledge and understanding, was highlighted in relation to the cultural element of the programme. For example, "Ordinarily I would not participate in dancing or dinner parties. However, I recognised that this was important to others, so I went out of my comfort zone to suit them" or "I have become more aware and knowledgeable, I understand that to meet cultural needs adaptivity is needed. This can be as simple as being mindful of dress code or differing social norms." Cultural flexibility was also highlighted in relation to the smooth running of trans-national groups and the fulfilment of the programme assessment. The data indicated that students recognised the importance of being able to adapt "to each other's learning methods and opinions" and this was reflected in the need to "take more time for things". Again, changing behaviour and compromising was seen as an example of cultural flexibility, "I noticed different cultures have very different ideas about group work and creating presentations, so I was challenged to let go of some of my ideas and use their ways of working instead." Such examples represent the top of Deardorff's (2004) Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competencies: Desired External Outcomes, which she describes as "Behaving and communicating effectively and appropriately (based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes) to achieves one's goals to some degree" (in Deardorff and Hunter, 2006, p. 72).

When asked the extent to which the project had enabled them to develop their **cultural communication skills**, 62% of the students strongly agreed and 38% agreed. Responses to this question were initially categorised under three main themes: the development of spoken English language skills, the development of confidence in the use of spoken English and the importance of the peer group in this. The programme was delivered through the medium of

English language and for the vast majority of student this was not their first language. Several students reflected the challenges they faced in achieving this, for example “I feel it has been a challenge for me to speak and communicate with others because I get shy when I need to talk since, I did not have practice before.” “English is not my mother tongue, and I am best at understanding it by reading and writing.” This was usually coupled with reflections about the development of their confidence in using English, “I improved my English because I was not used to speak in the language before.” “I can communicate much more confidently with people from difference countries.” “I trained my English.” The use of “body language and gestures” was emphasised by some students as well the use of technologies to support communication and meaning making: “It was nice to help each other find a word.”

Some students reflected on their personal growth within this area in terms of adaptations they were aware that they had made when working with others. English speaking students reflected on the adaptations they had to make to support other students, this included being “very patient” and trying to “help them along the way” and most importantly “talking slower”. Another noted broader communication skills development, “I know new ways of telling my point / story with respect.” Here the students are reflecting on what Earley and Ang (2003, p. 164) describe as a “practical understanding of how one's behaviour and physical presence are received in cross-cultural settings.” This was also further evidenced by the student who had reflected “I've learned that we communicate in a different way. We are quite direct,” in response to Question 1, about Cultural Self-knowledge, who added this response in relation to cultural communication skills, “I feel I have learned to speak in a more polite way.” Similarly, the student who commented and “My country is, for example, really direct with saying what we mean and not subtle at all,” in Question 1, reflected here “But here I learnt to be a little less so.”

There were many examples within the narrative responses that reflected the importance of the supportive ethos of the trans-national working group. For example, “I have grown in my language. I was very insecure, but the group made me confident because they gave me time and did not compromise.” and “Right now I don't feel so shy, at least with the people from the project.” From the data there emerged a picture of a supportive communication community within the trans-national groups, this was summarised by one student, “There is

some people that don't understand lot(s) of things in English, but we find our way to communicate and it's very nice."

Verbal and non-verbal communication is undertaken on an almost unconscious level during our day-to-day interactions with others within our shared cultural and linguistic context. When working in trans-national groups the students lost this shared contextual understanding and consequently had to navigate a space where misunderstandings and conflict can occur because of differences in language and culture. Mark and Steiner's (2022) exploration of intercultural conversation highlights that "The additional labor [sic] and discomfort placed on less advantaged conversants [sic] can manifest as physical tension and less participation, preventing the development of a mutually engaged rhythm" (Page 1). This discomfort can be seen in the responses of several participants, but what is also clear is the awareness of many participants of the needs of others, what Denhardt and Denhardt (2006, p. 13) call "a healthy concern for the people we are working with." Mark and Steiner's (2022, p. 5) conclusions effectively mirror the picture of a supportive communication culture within the Trans-national groups, "This exploration of difficulty together with a partner helped lessen resistance to the cognitive burden that comes with facing difficulty and lessen potential self-judgment. Engaging in self-awareness when confronting difficult feelings freed up more resources for students to engage conscientiously with others, such as by anticipating others' needs."

When asked the extent to which the project had enabled them to develop their **cultural open-mindedness**, 67% of the students strongly agreed and 33% agreed. Open-mindedness is the ability and the willingness to learn from others and see other perspectives. Kayes et al (2005) suggest that this becomes a cultural competence when focussed on valuing diversity and difference. This is about being curious, and Bennett (2011) suggests that curiosity and seeking to understand are key affective skills relating to the development of intercultural competence. Only twenty five of the thirty-nine participants made a narrative response to this question and many of them stated that they were already open-minded in relation to other cultures, for example "I always stand open to other cultures," and "I was very open to learn new things." This is perhaps unsurprising as students choosing to engage in programmes such as a two-week ISP are more likely to demonstrate characteristics of open-mindedness such as wanting

to “make connections accept behaviours and approaches that are different to their own anda willingness to question the norm” (Hudson 2016, p. 56).

However, several students did reflect on the impact of the programme for example “Spending time with colleagues from seven different countries has been a huge opportunity to do this.” Other comments included, “I feel that I was already open minded culturally but being in another country for two weeks is already challenging and I feel that I am even more open minded right now” and “I was already open minded but after this project even more so.” Some student reflected on opportunities to grow in knowledge and understanding, “Learning of different cultures it has broadened my knowledge”, “I have asked questions when I do not understand their behaviours or ideologies.” One student reflected, “[I] have learned to have a growth mind (so to keep learning and exploring) instead of having a fixed mind” and another noted “I better understand the impact cultures can have on your actions and personality.”

When asked the extent to which the project had enabled them to develop their **ability to handle conflicts**, we see the first use of the full range of response options by the participants. 23% of the students strongly agreed, 54% agreed 20% disagreed and 3% strongly disagreed. Thirty of the thirty-nine participants made a narrative response to this question, and it is interesting to begin by exploring whether the students perceived there were conflicts. A small number of the narrative responses indicated that some students felt there had been no conflicts during the ISP, “I don’t had [sic] any conflicts” and “There has not been conflicts to deal with.” It was noted by the staff team that they had not been asked to intervene in any of the Trans-national groups throughout the programme. Wilmot & Hocker (2010) define conflict “an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving their goals” (p. 11). While Ting-Toomey (2012 p. 280) describes Intercultural Conflict as “the perceived or actual incompatibility of cultural values, situational norms, goals, face orientations, scarce resources, styles/processes, and/or outcomes in a face-to-face (or mediated) context.” Both definitions position the conflict as the struggle to regain compatibility rather than as the consequence of that struggle, for example disagreement, falling out or divisions between the group. The narrative responses indicated that there had been elements of ‘expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties’ and ‘perceived *and* actual incompatibility of

cultural values, situational norms, and goals', however the participants didn't consider these to be 'conflicts.' For example, one participant noted "We didn't have conflicts, just some different opinions, but we could find the compromise and worked as a team." Within the definitions of both Wilmot & Hocker (2010) and Ting-Toomey (2012) the existence of 'differences of opinion' which required team work to find a compromise would be defined as conflict in the broadest sense. Many of the narrative comments focussed on active conflict management skills for example, "We all let each other finish talking and at the end we made a plan that we all agreed on." For these participants the day-to-day disagreements or differences of opinion were not considered to be conflicts but rather part and parcel of the complexities of group work. For example, one response noted that "I have had many situations where it has been important to be diplomatic to achieve a successful outcome," while another noted "[I have demonstrated the ability to handle conflict] When sharing and listening to opinions of others and coming to a conclusion for our presentation."

The different contexts where opportunities to handle conflict were required varied, the examples above all pertain to the formal learning aspect of the programme where students were working in their trans-national groups. Some responses indicated conflict within the national groups, "There were some disagreements inside my national group, however I manage to sort it out", and "I managed the process well, especially with my own group mates (national)." The students were living at close quarters in national groups and some noted challenges linked to coexistence.

Further analysis of the student responses shows, perhaps unexpectedly in relation to the development of handling conflict, that many of the sources of conflict were routed in differences between the cultural expectations of the participants and the challenges these created. Taylor (1994) describes the experiences of dissonance between the cultures of self and others and the subsequent struggle to regain balance as 'cultural disequilibrium.' Noting that this occurs during daily life experiences and may cause intense emotions which push participants to seek was to overcome challenges. Much of the research into cultural disequilibrium has focussed on international exchange programmes with a significant internship element, for example Hamel, Chikamori, Ono, & Williams (2010) and Yeo and Yoo (2019). Consequently, many sources of disequilibrium identified by the participants in these

studies related directly to their internship placements. Examples include classroom management, relationships with students, the desire for challenge versus the fear of teaching (Yeo and Yoo, 2019) as well as language inability versus a desire to teach effectively, difficulties with student misunderstandings and not meeting teacher behavioural norms (Hamel, Chikamori, Ono, & Williams, 2010). Student participants in this study only had a limited opportunity to work alongside children in schools so there are few direct parallels between their sources of cultural disequilibrium and these studies. However, overcoming concerns about the effective use of spoken English, in formal and informal learning contexts, were featured in the responses. For example, "Completely I feel shy to verbalize, so this is also a big step for me," and "Now I can communicate more and with less fear and I even socialize with other people" and "I have grown in my language. I was very insecure, but the group made me confident because they gave me time." These comments reflect the success of challenging inner conflict and disequilibrium which for many led to significant personal growth.

Where we can see more synergy between the work of Hamel, Chikamori, Ono, & Williams (2010) and Yeo and Yoo (2019) and the experiences of the participants in this study is in their reactions to cultural disequilibrium. Yeo and Yoo (2019, p. 108) note that "a cognitive process of reflection enables the exchange teachers to make a conscious connection between their experiences of cultural disequilibrium and potential strategies available to adopt." Analysis of our data has highlighted a range response to situations where cultural disequilibrium was experienced and participants were required to address resulting conflict. Re-analysis reveals the emergence of a picture of 'self-positioning' in relation to the notion of conflict. Inherent in positioning theory is the understanding that individuals are active agents in their social interactions as they can choose and shape their own positions (Harré and Davies, 1990). Positioning itself is described as "the assignment of fluid 'parts' or 'roles' to speakers in the discursive construction of personal stories that make a person's actions intelligible and relatively determinate as social acts" (Harré and Langenhove, 2010, p. 218).

In several responses, it was clear that students had taken an active decision not to express a position or take any action to address the cultural disequilibrium which occurred. For example, "I had a problem with a group of people, and I just made myself really sad about it and didn't change anything / didn't talk to them in any way. Just acted like there was no problem." In

this instance acting as if the problem did not exist, despite the significant personal cost, was the preferred option. For whatever reason this student felt unable or unwilling to take action to handle the disequilibrium and conflict within the group. In another example a student reflected, “My group members have strong opinions about some topics in order to avoid conflict I choose to avoid the topics,” and finally “I couldn’t speak well, sometimes I feel like nobody understand me in English. So, I couldn’t handle argument.” Other responses indicated that when students were faced with cultural disequilibrium, they were able to present their position even if this was likely to generate cultural disequilibrium in others and addition conflict in the short term. One student noted “A person in our group didn’t speak English and therefore didn’t really participate in the project. But [after we discussed it] we worked it out together” and “I thought somebody in my group did not do anything. And I said something about it, because I felt the need. I was happy that I felt safe enough to say something about it.”

Interestingly, analysis of responses from this question and others revealed that in terms of positionality most students adopted a *pre-emptive* positionality in the conscious adoption of strategies to lessen cultural disequilibrium and ensure the smooth running of their transnational groups. For example, embracing new ways of working, “I noticed other cultures have very different ideas on group work and creating presentations, so I was challenged to let go of some of my ideologies and use their ways of working instead,” and “Adapting to each other’s learning methods and opinions when working in the transnational group.” When reflecting on the importance of compromise, one student noted that “Working in a [transnational] group of 6 different people, I have had to compromise a great deal to achieve the best outcome.” These and many other comments reflect an implicit approach of flexibility and adapting ones’ own behaviours, in other words, *enacting* active conflict managements, this is a form of pre-emptive positionality in relation to conflict management and akin to ‘Prepositioning’ which highlights the attributes, character traits and assumptions about rights and duties which people hold before they enter into a dialogue (Harré et al, 2009). Similarly, respect and understanding emerged as key factors that facilitated effective formal and informal learning, “We are all different [sic] persons, but we have to be respectful to each other,” and “We can argue, we can have different approaches and opinions, but all the time we should respect each other,” and “As a group it is important to listen to and respect others,”

“I learn that we should respect and accept other cultures even if we don't agree with something.” The importance of the students’ growing awareness of understanding cultural differences and the impact of these on individuals’ behaviours was highlighted. For example, “I have more knowledge of other cultures, I better understand where the differences in behaviour come from.” One student reflected “I understand why some cultures can feel rude” and another, “I have learned about being more openminded and less prejudice about other cultures.”

Looking back at the responses to the question “*The project has enabled me to develop my ability to handle conflicts*”, we were initially surprised by the finding that 20% of the participating students disagreed and 3% strongly disagreed with this statement. It is interesting to speculate as to the relationship between this finding and the high level of prepositioning towards conflict management reflected in the students’ narrative responses. Is this suggesting that the project didn’t enable students to develop conflict management skills because I already had an awareness to the pre-cursors of conflict and were able to pro-actively exhibit behaviours which would prevent conflict situation occurring. Alternatively looking at these figures in the context of those students who actively chose not to take a position, even when the conflict was having a negative impact on their well-being, can be seen in a very different light. If these students are suggesting the project didn’t enable them to develop their ability to handle conflicts because they did not have the foundational skills or confidence to challenge the source of conflict, this raises questions about how to support such students in future ISP experiences.

Conclusions

As we have demonstrated the data and the narrative comments confirm that the ISP did enable most of the students to develop or enhance their intercultural competencies. As indicated earlier the feeling of the staff involved in this ISP was that the students had managed their working and learning in trans-national groups in a far more positive way than those in previous six ISPs they had collaborated on. The student narrative responses reveal that most students adopted a pro-active approach to handling conflict and experiences of cultural disequilibrium. Our reflections focussed on what was different in this ISP and whether these features supported their approach. The team identified four major differences:

1. The students had met and worked together in a virtual ISP before they met in the face-to-face ISP;
2. In line with Spanish culture, the daily programme included a two-hour lunch break;
3. The trans-national groups were working toward a practical outcome, in the form of planning and delivering an afternoon of activities for a group of migrant and refugee children in a school setting;
4. The programme included a session which specifically focussed on intercultural competencies.

Cumulatively these changes appear to have had a positive impact on the ability of the students to cope with the challenges inherent in the ISP and resulting cultural disequilibrium. Having met in transnational groups online, the students had the advantage of some formal and informal opportunities to meet and work together prior to the face-to-face ISP. This had a positive effect on the initial days of the ISP with tentative group formation replaced by reconnection and rapid group formation.

The two-hour lunch break also had a positive impact on the programme in that it provided a sustained period during each day for the students to spend time with their national group. This was important as it relieved the students of the additional cognitive and emotional demands that speaking in English and working in Trans-national groups placed on them. Yoe and Yoo (2019 p. 109) assert that during such immersive experiences, “it is vital that participants have frequent opportunities, in a safe environment, to comfortably share their experiences and dilemmas that they confront.” According to Bennett (1993), intercultural learning should not intend to initially overwhelm the learners, so that they become discouraged and put off by further learning, becoming hesitant in engaging in intercultural interactions. Hence, experiences of cultural disequilibrium must be addressed carefully with constructive interventions, to avoid the results of adverse effects on learners.

The end goal of collectively working as a trans-national group in school with a group of children was a huge motivating factor and all students were excited about this prospect and keen that this should be a positive experience for them and the children. Their enthusiasm for this

opportunity and their motivation for its success can be argued to have added to their resilience in the face of cultural disequilibrium and to their efforts to work pro-actively to overcome this.

Final, as suggested by Hudson (2016) if we want students to develop intercultural competencies, we need to explicitly explore aspects of these with them. The fact that one of the workshops was dedicated to this raised the profile of these as an equally important aspect of the programme. The fact that these were explored within the context of working with migrant and refugee children and therefore their trans-national group teaching in school highlighted their relevance to them as pre-service teachers. Again, we reflect that this was an added incentive to their development. Together they had a powerful impact on student resilience and ability to cope with cultural disequilibrium. Consequently, we would make the following recommendations to those planning an ISP in relation to the promotion of intercultural competencies:

1. Enable the students to meet and work together virtual before the ISP;
2. Do not overestimate the value of longer than normal break times in enabling students to work and live together collaboratively;
3. Include programme content which specifically focusses on intercultural competencies;
4. If possible, include an element of working with children rather than only visiting educational settings.

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The project has a website www.beinproject.eu where you can find more information about the project including access to the Blended Learning Modules mentioned in the article.

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