Can International Practicum Foster Intercultural Competence Among Teacher Students?

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Abstract
International practicum is potentially effective in preparing student teachers for work in a diverse classroom. The cultural shock they experience may catalyse a change in frames of reference, which in turn could 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. The aim of this study is to investigate how the students’ intercultural competence develops during a three-month practicum placement in Namibia. We present findings from a study of Norwegian student teachers before, during and after their international practicum. The main findings indicate that the international experience alone does not necessarily result in intercultural competence. In order to reach that goal emphasis should be put on student self-reflection in the preparation, implementation and debriefing of the program.

Key words: International practicum, intercultural competence, teacher students

Introduction
Norwegian classrooms have become more diverse due to immigration from both European and non-European countries. This implies new challenges for teachers and teacher education. Most teachers and student teachers are majority culture Norwegians with little experience or knowledge of other cultures. They are therefore unprepared to work with pupils from diverse backgrounds. The disparity between teachers’ “culture and experience and those of their pupils creates classrooms where teachers are unable to adequately address the needs of pupils with diverse backgrounds” (Walters et al., 2009). Building positive relations across cultures, breaking down prejudice and racism and fostering international goodwill are critical goals for schools as well as teacher education institutions. Many institutions meet this challenge by offering international education programmes. However, for international education programmes to reach these goals, it is imperative that they focus on intercultural competence. Intercultural competence “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” (Bennett, 2012, p. 91).

Norwegian teacher education institutions respond to the diverse classroom reality by including multicultural dimensions in all subjects. In addition, they typically offer an international term. Most commonly, this is an international study abroad programme. At Hedmark University of Applied Sciences (HUAS), the multicultural perspective is a focal point in teacher education. Students attend classes on various social, multicultural and multilingual issues. Specified learning objectives are knowledge about children’s education, development and education in different social, multicultural and multilingual
contexts, and globalisation and sustainable development. However, most students are exposed to these issues at a theoretical level and few students take part in international exchange programmes. Theoretical courses are important, but it is questionable how effective they are in changing the values and perspectives of the students. It is also questionable how well such courses prepare students for work in the diverse classroom. An international practicum is perceived by some scholars as more effective in developing cultural competence and global awareness than theoretical lectures (Merryfield, 2000).

HUAS offers an international practicum programme that includes placement in Namibian schools. The students that participate in the international practicum programme also do fieldwork for their international BA thesis during their stay in Namibia. The stated goals of the international practicum programme are to increase the students’ understanding of cultural differences, and to enable them to acquire new perspectives on education and schooling and experience living in another country in order to enhance global awareness and reduce prejudice.

The research question of this paper is; how do Norwegian teacher students’ intercultural competence develop during a three-month practicum placement in Namibia?

**International practicum**

One of the most influential frameworks for conceptualising dimensions of intercultural competence is Bennett’s developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (DMIS). The DMIS constitutes a development of orientations toward cultural difference from an ethnocentric to an ethnorelative stage (Hammer et al., 2003; Bennett, 2012). Three ethnocentric orientations, where one’s culture is experienced as central to reality (Denial, Defence, Minimisation), and three ethnorelative orientations, where one’s culture is experienced in the context of other cultures (Acceptance, Adaptation, Integration), are identified. Denial is typically the tendency to avoid noticing cultural differences. Defence is when one’s own culture is experienced as the only viable one, the only good way to live. Minimisation is when one’s own culture is perceived as universal; the assumption that, for instance, learning styles and behaviour apply equally well in all cultures, implying a lack of understanding of the cultural context. Acceptance is when other cultures are experienced as different, but equally human. Often this will imply that the ability to reorganise one’s own perspectives to be more like the worldview of the target culture. Adaptation is the ability to perceive and behave in culturally different ways, and integration is the process of easily moving in and out of different cultures. Bennett’s model is embedded in a constructivist paradigm, which means that perspectives transform through confrontation with other people’s perspectives or realities (Lou, 2012).

Although the model captures some of the most fundamental stages in such a transformation, it has been criticised for not being clear about how the stages can be intertwined or leaped depending on the personal development of intercultural sensitivity (Zimmermann, 2010). Mezirow’s transformative learning theory explains how this transformation can take place. According to Mezirow (1981; 1997), adult learning differs from childhood learning. Within 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 leaning as a process of using
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an *a priori* interpretation to construct a revised interpretation of meaning of one’s experience to guide future actions (Mezirow 1998; 1997). This is in essence what Mezirow (1981) call perspective transformation: “The new frame of reference would be considered more functional when it is more inclusive, differentiating, critically reflective, open to other points of view, and integrative of experience” (1998:3). Transformative learning is the process of change in one’s frame of reference.

International practicum programmes are potentially transformative in nature. First-hand knowledge is critical in developing intercultural competence (Cushner, 2007). It is reported that participation in international work increases learners’ intercultural competence (Cushner and Mahon, 2002). Living and working in a different culture challenges the perception of oneself, of others and of the home culture. According to Stachowski and Sparks (2007), the students develop “perspective consciousness” that helps them to understand other cultures and conflicting viewpoints. Both Cushner (2007) and Walters et al. (2009) find that students that experience international practicum during their pre-service education develop a better understanding of other cultures—competence that they find useful in their teaching in diverse classrooms (Chiefio and Griffiths, 2004; Wiggins et al. 2007).

However, some scholars question the transformative power of international practicum (Lou and Bosley, 2012; Bathurst and La Brack, 2012; Hammer, 2012). These researchers have observed that being in another country does not automatically make a person interculturally competent. Being exposed to other cultures is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for students to become interculturally competent.

The cultural shock that many students will experience 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 interculturally 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.

It is only when the stay abroad is combined with interventions such as cultural mentoring that some students develop intercultural competence (Vande Berg, Paige and Lou, 2012). The students need help to learn to reflect on themselves as cultural beings and to become aware of the ways that they respond to and make meaning within different cultural contexts. Thus, becoming interculturally competent is a developmental process that can be helped by an interventionist approach prior to, during and after the study abroad period.

**The international practicum programme at HUAS**

The international practicum programme at HUAS consists of three phases: pre-departure, in-country and re-entry. Based on the understanding that “students learn more effectively
abroad when we intervene in their learning” (Vande Berg and Paige 2009, p. 433) the programme is designed to help the students to become more interculturally competent.

The Pre-departure phase consists of region- and context-specific knowledge and understanding. It is important that students know as much as possible about the geography, history, economy, ethnicity, culture and school system of Namibia. Furthermore, we give lectures on global issues, development theory and issues of poverty and inequality. An important aspect is to work with the students to help them attain cultural self-awareness. A meeting with students who have finished their international practicum is also part of the preparation process. In addition, the students develop a problem statement for their BA thesis that they will investigate during their stay in Namibia.

The in-country phase, which lasts three months, starts with a week in the Namibian capital where the students receive general information and attend lectures by local professors and NGOs. Moreover, in this phase they are exposed to the local culture, schools and the university. The lectures focus on the challenges in the education system and on being a teacher in Namibia. After this week, they travel to their final destination, and start their practicum placement in local schools. Students have placements in pairs, so that they can share their experiences. Halfway through their stay, we arrange group discussions and individual tutoring with staff form HUAS. Topics such as culture shock, the students’ feelings and behaviour, their frustrations, and the teacher role in a very different context are discussed. We also raise questions about Norwegian values, habits and points of view. We specifically ask the students to reflect upon how they can apply what they learned at the pre-departure course in the new setting.

As part of their teacher education programme, they must write their BA thesis on a subject related to their placement in Namibia, often focusing on challenges in the local schools. Our aim is that this will strengthen their reflection on how local factors affect the learning process both on the individual and the structural level. During their stay, they deliver three written assignments.

The re-entry phase starts when the students are back in Norway. We have group discussions and individual discussions where we discuss their experiences on a professional and personal level and challenge them to reflect on different intercultural experiences and cultural differences. They also receive individual tutoring on their BA thesis, that are handed in at the end of the semester.

Research methodology

In order to gain insight into how the students’ intercultural competence develops during their three-month practicum placement in Namibia, we conducted a qualitative study. 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 and Tate 2000). The choice of this methodology is mainly to do with the explorative nature of the study. 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 for a direct comparison to show how the 3-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 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 focus 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. The focus group interviews and reflection texts were analysed using inductive open coding. The data was collected from 3 cohorts of students, 16 students in 2014 and 20 students in 2015 and 8 in 2016.

In addition, we have conducted follow-up interviews with 8 former students who attended the programme during the period 2007 – 2013 to see if their practicum experiences have had any long-lasting effect on their role as teachers.

Students attending international practicum in Namibia – some observations

Bennett’s (2012) DMIS model and his concept of predominant experience was used as analytical guidance when analysing the data. Furthermore, following Hammer (2012), we view the stages as a continuum, starting with the most ethnocentric level of denial to the most complete level of intercultural competence, which is adaptation. That said, we recognise that a student’s perspective of culture might be complex to understand.

Before they left Norway, the students were more concerned with practical problems such as transport, housing and food, than cultural issues. Nevertheless, they expected to find a culture different from their own and expressed that they were looking forward to “experiencing cultural shock” and to “learning from other cultures”.

After three months in Namibia, many of the students had become more open and tolerant towards other cultures and developed their communication skills with people with a different cultural background. We asked the students if they felt at ease with people from other cultures. Before the stay in Namibia, a majority answered slightly on the positive/yes side. After their stay, most of the students had become more positive and said that they felt at ease when engaging with people from other cultures. In general, they had become more relaxed and curious about cultures different from the Norwegian, as demonstrated by the fact that they said it was important to make an effort to get to know people from other cultures. Many said that the warmth of the people, the openheartedness and the friendly atmosphere they experienced contributed to a positive view of other cultures.

This change in attitude is interesting in relation to their future jobs as teachers in multi-ethnic Norwegian classrooms and is an intended outcome of an international practicum. However, the students also reported that some aspects of Namibian culture were
problematic, especially those related to gender issues and child-rearing. Particularity, the 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 negative stereotypes. They experienced their own culture as superior to Namibian culture. The following quotes are telling:

This is a very unequal society. Moreover, the level of unemployment and how they spend their money on non-necessary items increases the problems.

I did not think cultural differences would be as large as it is. I do not like the lack of rights for women and children. They are far behind our culture when it comes to for instance women’s liberation.

Lack of knowledge about finance, and the local black population lack economic sense and use up their entire monthly salary on nonsense.

We were surprised by some statements that clearly show that the students see their own culture and ways of doing things as superior to the host culture. This attitude was more common among the students of the 2015 cohort than the other two. We had the impression that the 2015 group socialised less with local people than the 2014 and 2016 students did. They stayed at home, watched TV series, and had a lot of contact with Norway online. Internet is a problem for a programme where the intention is to immerse the students in another culture. It makes it easy for students to stay in contact with their home culture and be entertained by TV series in their spare time rather than connecting with people from the host country. When we first launched this programme, Internet was not available in the Namibian districts, but it is now and it has become cheap as well. Engle and Engle (2012) observed the same in a French exchange programme, and they claim that over the years they have seen a decline in students’ interpersonal and language skills due to extensive use of e-mail, Skype, Facebook etc.

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 (Kabilan, 2013). Most students criticised the teacher’s classroom praxis without looking for underlying reasons. According to the students, the typical Namibian teacher conducted a teacher-led, top-down form of teaching with little dialogue, little differentiation, and little focus on motivation or concern about learning outcome. The teaching style was mostly authoritarian and teacher-centred. Differentiation and motivation are key aspects in teaching ideology in Norwegian schools. In Namibian schools, the students reported that there is little differentiation in teaching methods. It seems that for most teacher’s discipline was paramount. The following two quotations illustrate what many students felt:

The students respect the teacher. More than I am used to from Norwegian classrooms. Teacher-pupil relationships do not exist; I even doubt if the teacher knows the names of her students. I have not observed differentiation and motivation efforts by the teacher. If the students do not follow, this does not seem to concern the teacher. Teachers down there are very concerned with formalities and less concerned with learning outcomes. If the pupils are quiet, the teacher is doing a good job.
The teachers’ use of psychological methods of punishment, such as bullying and public humiliation towards their pupils, upset and bothered the Norwegian students. The asymmetric relationship between teacher and pupils in particular surprised the students:

When you are a teacher you have the power …you have power over the pupils and you can do whatever you like. For instance, you can be on the phone as long as you like during class and you can leave the classroom during class …”

Few students questioned the reasons behind Namibian classroom praxis and the teachers’ behaviour. More typically, many students developed a negative understanding of the local school culture that strengthened their belief about the superiority of Norwegian school culture. We saw little reflection upon how local culture, values and customs influence classroom practices and teacher-student relationships. Instead, most student teachers felt that Norwegian methods of teaching were superior to what they observed in Namibia, as the following quotation illustrates:

I think they are lagging behind and teaching as we did during the 70s. No, I think we must go back to the 50s in Norway.

According to Hammer (2012), students at minimisation stage face challenges regarding ethical or moral dilemmas. In conversations, several students told us that they had witnessed corporal punishment in schools and kindergartens. This was a shocking experience for the students. Corporal punishment is not acceptable from a Norwegian educational point of view, but according to the students is still quite common in Namibia. Forms of punishment ranged from threats of physical violence, to minor blows and knocks, and to pupils having chilli powder poured into their mouths for answering back to the teacher.

However, some students have had experiences that have helped them to see the other culture as different, but equally human. One student describes her feelings after having been included in ordinary life in the small town:

Several of us have got to know some young people; we have had lunch with them several times. This has been very nice, and we will remember them as good friends. The last time was last Saturday. We were here in, and it started as enjoyably as usual. Local food, music and chatter. The whole setting is so special because there are people in the street all the time, children playing, the smell of woodstove cooking comes from every house and everyone is in such a good mood. While we are cooking, children flow into the compound. Children from the neighbourhood constantly drop by and often sleep over. Everyone is in good mood and everyone is welcome. I am not used to this from Norway. It reminds me of what I heard Norwegian society used to be like and I like it! The sharing and the solidarity I see impresses me. They share everything, even if they do not have much. Everyone kids everyone else and they all have fun. Some of the kids who come are also so small that they can’t talk yet, they just toddled around, but they came without parents, they had come by themselves. All the grownups are called aunts and uncles! I was told: Here we are all related, regardless of blood relationship.

This student is able to appreciate aspects of the host culture as valuable no matter how different they are from her Norwegian experiences. Furthermore, she sees that there are values in Namibian culture that we have lost in modern Norwegian culture, such as sharing even if you do not have much. For this student, being in Namibia has put Norwegian society and culture into perspective. She sees that development comes at a cost – the loss of solidarity and joy.
Some other students also reflect on how their stay has changed their perceptive on other cultures. They have seen that even if the host culture is different and people do things differently from what they are used to in Norway, it seems to make sense and works quite well in Namibia. The students that have experienced this conclude that there is no right and wrong when it comes to cultures – they are just different. These students claim that they have changed as people and that the stay has helped them to expand their perspectives. They have learned that Norwegian culture is not universal or better and this has made them curious, more tolerant and willing to experience other cultures. This personal development is recognised and valued by some students.

Transformation takes time

A part of the study asks teachers who have taken their international practicum in Namibia some years ago what it has meant for their work as teachers. They all said that their experience of a different culture and a different education system had made them better teachers in a multicultural classroom. Many said that their experience had taught them the importance of communication. Moreover, they had learned how difficult communication can be in a multicultural and multilingual setting. Their stay in Namibia had made them feel more competent at relating to diverse pupils and their parents. For instance, some claimed that they felt more aware of how the parents’ backgrounds have a bearing on how they are able to relate to the demands of the Norwegian school system. As an example, many of these parents find it strange that they are expected to play a role in their children’s education. For the teachers, the experience of not being understood and not understanding while living in Namibia had been important. Some mentioned that they had gained a better understanding of how difficult it must be for minority pupils to learn in an unfamiliar language environment. Moreover, they believed that this insight had made them more understanding, and thereby, better teachers.

All the teachers said that they use what they learned in Namibia in their own teaching about Africa and global and cultural issues. Their stay in Namibia have had lasting effects on most of them. They claimed, for instance, that they are more interested in learning from other cultures, their way of living, and their attitudes than they were before they went to Namibia. Many also claimed that they had become more open to other cultures and think that Norwegians have a lot to learn from others. It is interesting to see how these teachers value the intercultural competence their stay in Namibia has given them. As a group, they have a more positive perception of the value of their stay in Namibia than the student group. This might illustrate the point that transformation takes time and reflects the difficulty of evaluating the long-term effects of an international practicum programme the same semester as it is obtained.

Conclusion and implications of findings

The research question of this paper is; how do Norwegian teacher students’ intercultural competence develop during a three-month practicum placement in Namibia? We find that some have learned to appreciate the differences between cultures and have opened up their minds and increased their acceptance of differences. However, others have returned more certain of the superiority of their own culture, especially related to educational matters.
The experience in Namibia have raised the student’s appreciation of cultural diversity and many of them believe that it will make them better teachers in a multicultural classroom. Some also express that they are better qualified to communicate with people from other cultures than before they left for Namibia. From the interviews of the teachers who have taken their international practicum in Namibia some years ago, we also find that they value the intercultural competence and sensitivity the stay had given them, and it seem like this has had long lasting effect. This might indicate that the stay has transformed their perspectives, and given them a new frame of reference that is more integrative and open to other points of view, as described by Mezirow (1997). On the other hand, a more critical attitude to Namibian educational practices, gender roles and views on child rearing, might be interpreted as more ethno-centric thinking.

Our findings are in accordance with other studies that have found that immersing students in another cultural context does not automatically mean that they become interculturally competent (Brathurst and La Brack, 2012; Lou and Bosley, 2012; Vande Berg et.al, 2012). By using the method of categorisation developed by Bennett (2012) and Hammer (2012), we find that most of the students can be categorised in the stages of ‘defence’ and ‘minimisation’. A few have started to recognise the host culture as different but equal to their own culture.

These findings have led us to reflect upon the preparation, structure and implementation of international practicum. The international practicum programme at HUAS consists of three phases: pre-departure, in-country and re-entry. Based on the understanding that “students learn more effectively abroad when we intervene in their learning” (Vande Berg and Paige, 2009, p. 433), the programme is designed to help the students to become more interculturally competent.

According to Vande Berg et al. (2012), the key is to support student reflection. The students need close mentoring and processing in order to make meaning of their experiences. Immersion is a necessary but not sufficient condition for intercultural competence as an outcome of international practicum. Further, we need to design the program so that the students are encouraged to engage and socialise in the local community after work. Staying in a compound with fellow Norwegian students and being closely in connection with home through the internet, hampers integration and might contribute to enforce negative stereotypes of the host culture.

As an institution of teacher education, we must therefore put even more effort into guiding and mentoring the students while in Namibia and after their return if we want to reach the full potential of the programme.

References


