Intercultural competencies: To what extent were they explicitly promoted during an Intensive Study Programme

Karen Hudson
Northumbria University
Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom

Abstract

Engagement in short study abroad experiences in the form of Intensive Study Programmes is a popular aspect of many Initial Teacher Education Programmes. Due to the short timeframe that these programmes operate in it is possible that some aspects of the programme aims can remain implicit. It is the responsibility of staff involved in programmes to ensure that students derive as much benefit as possible from their engagement in them. This article focuses on the extent to which the aim to develop intercultural competencies during an Intensive Study Programme was successful.

Key words: Intercultural competencies, intensive study programmes, teacher education

Context

I was first introduced to the term ‘international competencies’ as a Teacher educator involved in an Intensive Study Programme. The programme’s primary aims were associated with the theme of inclusion of children with special educational needs within mainstream early childhood education. These had been much discussed and debated by the Teacher educators who were the academic leads from the countries involved. The secondary aims of the programme however were less regularly discussed, but the Intensive Study Programme handbook (GOPRINCE Team 2014 p6) states that

Each student is challenged to grow in the following international competencies
- Cultural self-knowledge
- Cultural flexibility
- Cultural open-mindedness
- Cultural relationship building
- Cultural communication competence
- Cultural multi-perspectives

As part of my professional reflection on my involvement in the programme I became aware that I had not focussed explicitly on this aspect of the programme’s aims with the UK student group and part of the reason for this was, in the first instance that I was not really certain what these competencies actually were in any meaningful sense. Goode (2008) notes that the preparation and training for Teacher educators involved in Intensive Study Programmes and other study abroad experiences with students, often focusses heavily on the practical and logistical aspects of taking students abroad, rather than any form of intercultural training. This was certainly my experience, with the complexities of risk assessments taking precedence over all other considerations. Goode goes on to identify that many study abroad programmes are explicit about what aspects of international competencies they want participating students to learn, but then fail to explicitly support their development. Clearly it is the responsibility of the teacher educators involved in ISP and other exchanges to ensure that students derive as much...
benefit as possible from their engagement in them. My reflections suggest that this was not the case in relation to the experiences of the UK students on the programme. Working within UK Teacher Education I am used to exploring competence in terms of the student teachers demonstrating competence against the Standards for Qualified Teacher Status (DfE 2012). In doing so I, as the Teacher educator, have a clear notion of the scope of each of the standards and an understanding of the skills, knowledge, attitudes and aptitudes a student needs to demonstrate in order to be deemed ‘competent’. When I juxtaposed this deep understanding of the Teachers’ Standards with my current understanding of international competencies I was starkly aware that I was not in a position to explicitly support their development. Nor was I able to judge whether the participating students had achieved or were able to demonstrate any of these competencies because my personal knowledge and understanding of what they entailed was inadequate. In terms of ensuring that I will be in a position to ensure that future Intensive Study Programmes can promote these competencies it is essential I develop my own knowledge and understanding. As my work began to develop my knowledge and understanding I made an early significant finding: although we had used the term international competence within the Intensive Study Programme when I began to search for literature using this in the search engine the results were limited and primarily consisted of business focussed check lists. The term intercultural competence was far more prevalent and the results generated by using this term seemed to better reflect the international working within an educational context that I was interested in. Intercultural competence also resonated with me because it implies that interaction is a key aspect for the development of competence. For this reason the term intercultural competence will be used throughout the rest of the article. Armed with my new terminology the questions I asked myself were very similar to those of Vande Berg and Paige (2008) who posed the following three key questions: What is the nature of intercultural competence? What is the process by which intercultural competence is developed? and lastly, How can individuals be taught / trained / mentored regarding the development of intercultural competence? With the first of these questions in mind, I began a personal learning journey to explore what these competencies entailed and if, despite my initial considerations, aspects of them were either implicitly or explicitly evident as part of the Intensive Study Programme for the participating students from my University.

**What is the nature of intercultural competence?**

Bennett (2011 p3) suggests intercultural competencies represent a “set of cognitive, affective and behavioural skills and characteristics that supports effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural contexts.” She continues by suggesting that intercultural competence “provides an overarching perspective ….. for interacting across both global and domestic differences.” The Cedofop (2008) add to this by suggesting that intercultural competencies encompass a consideration of ethical values too. Deardorff (2009) puts forward a broad definition of “effective and appropriate behaviour and communication in intercultural situations.” I like this version because it acknowledges that there are many opportunities for intercultural competencies to develop in students’ home country. Adopting Deardroff’s definition has the potential to make access to the development of these skills open to all students, not just those fortunate enough to be going on an exchange. Within literature from USA intercultural competencies are seen as essential for students and teachers working within complex multi-cultural school contexts ( Cushner and Mahon 2009, Deardorff 2006). Within the
United Kingdom there are many such areas where students will need to draw on intercultural competencies in daily life. However, the University I am based in is situated in the North of England and although many areas have very diverse communities, data from the Office for National Statistics (2012) indicated 95% of the population of the North East of England are white-British. Although different sub-cultures do exist within this population it is fair to say that many of our students have limited opportunities to work within rich and diverse cultural contexts. This, I reflected, makes the need to focus explicitly on the intercultural competence aspect of the Intensive Study Programme more important.

**Considering the specific aspects of intercultural competence highlighted in the Intensive Study programme**

The fact that the list of intercultural competencies had been adopted as an aim of the Intensive Study Programme presupposes that they will be assessed, if not, then how can we, as Teacher educators be assured that the participating students had developed them. The term ‘challenge to grow’ reveals the assumptions that the required skills, knowledge and personal characteristics already exist to some degree within the students, enabling them to act successfully in their day to day lives. More importantly the ‘challenge to grow’ also suggests that there is a requirement that these are added to, developed or adapted in some way for successful use within a transnational or inter-cultural context. Fantini (2009) (in Deardorff 2009 p456) suggests that developing intercultural competencies may entail “learning new behaviours and interactional styles that go beyond those of their native culture’. With this in mind I began with the seven elements of intercultural competence that the Intensive Study Programme had adopted, and reflected in the following way [a] what did the literature say about these competencies [b] to what extent had the development of these competencies existed, either explicitly or implicitly, during the three distinct phases of the Intensive Study Programme, namely the preparation phase, during the Intensive Study Programme itself and after in the reflection phase.

**Cultural Self-knowledge**

A general definition of self-knowledge describes the knowledge or understanding of one’s own characteristics, motives, abilities and feelings (Merriam-Webster.com. Merriam-Webster, n.d. Web.12 Feb. 2016) Individuals with self-knowledge are sure of their own perspective, they understand how they will react in a given situation, Kayes, Kayes and Yamazaki (2005) suggest that having self-knowledge enables an individual to cope more positively with ambiguity. Characteristics such as a strong sense of self, personal strength and stability (Ting-Toomey 1999) and self confidence (Simons, Korevaar, Hindrix and Joris 2013) have all been identified as indicators of successful participation in study abroad experiences. It was clear from some of the students’ applications to be part of the Intensive Study Programme that they were demonstrating self-knowledge.

I enjoy working with new people, sharing ideas, talents and experiences and I feel my friendly, enthusiastic and hard-working attitude will only add to the positiveness of the experience for me and I would love to be able to engage with the challenge. (Participant 1)

I see myself as a happy and enthusiastic person so I feel I can help to cheer people up and keep people motivated after the long hours each day. I think I can also bring
my desire to learn more about the themes and the ways in which these countries approach teaching. (Participant 2)

I have a committed approach to learning and appreciate the opportunities that I am given to learn, I try always to lead by example. I am practical and a problem solver and have the skills and determination to make things happen, I was a successful team leader in a previous job. I have a caring and nurturing approach and am often to be found looking after everyone! I am also a fairly confident speaker and very sociable, I will chat to anyone and love meeting new people. (Participant 3)

It is one thing to be aware of your own characteristics, motives, abilities and feelings when you are in your home environment, at this point it is easy perhaps to speculate how you will cope when living and studying in a transnational group. Once immersed in the intensity of the experience it is important to enable the students to have some time in their national groups to reflect on how they are coping with their cultural experience. There were such opportunities during the programme and while the focus of these meetings can sometimes be on practical issues and potential tensions that may be emerging, these sessions do have the potential to have a focus on shifts in self-knowledge. However, our aim is to support the development of cultural self-knowledge, not just knowing yourself but understanding your home culture and how this influences your behaviour, values and ways of looking at the world (Pusch 2009). Both Bennett (1993) and Deardorff (2006) stress the importance of this as the essential precursor for the development of intercultural competence. When considering cultural self-knowledge we can see the first example of how an Intensive Study Programme experience can engage the participants in some form of ‘growth’, enabling them to know themselves better through reflection on their encounters of cultural differences at first hand. I consider it to be a real missed opportunity that there was no built-in opportunity to explicitly reflect with the student participants about their perceived personal growth in this area as part of the Intensive Study Programme.

Cultural Flexibility

Within the literature a number of different aspects of cultural flexibility are explored. The focus on flexibility in communication style and the ability to adapt your communication style to the demands of a new situation is not considered here as our framework for intercultural competence contains a communication specific strand. I pursued other aspects of flexibility emerging from the literature in order to explore this further. Flexibility suggests the ability to adapt in some way, The Council for Europe (2015) describe the need for cognitive flexibility in intercultural situations focussing on the ability to adapt your thinking according to the context you find yourself in or as a result of a new situation or experience. Bennett (2011) discusses cognitive flexibility in conjunction with cultivating curiosity and suggests that it is a key aspect of developing intercultural competence. There is a need to ensure that cognitive flexibility leads to flexibility of actions and in particular the ability to regulate your behaviour in relation to your new cultural situation. In terms of how I had considered flexibility and the students who participated in the Intensive Study Programme, I reflected that in the preparation stage there were some aspects of cultural self-knowledge and cultural flexibility that were explicit. A consideration of host culture and local customs is an explicit part of the preparation stage, with students investigating and suggesting aspects of their behaviour that they may have to adapt and demonstrate flexibility in. One aspect of this is social drinking, which in my early experiences as a Teacher educator on an
Intercultural competencies: To what extent were they explicitly promoted during an Intensive Study Programme

Intensive Study Programme was the cause of some tension. For many of the student population in the North of the United Kingdom social drinking is an important part of student life and can often be characterised by glamorous dress, drinking spirits and drinking to excess, something that was not a feature of student life in the country we visited. It is important that students understand the ‘student culture’ of the country they are visiting and are prepared to adapt their home behaviour to accommodate this.

Within the Intensive Study Programme focus of early childhood education there is a great deal of scope for flexibility or perhaps open-mindedness. The Intensive Study Programme was specifically designed to offer opportunities for participants to study aspects of early childhood education that feel secure about from a range of differing perspectives. This can cause participating students (and educators) to experience dis-equilibration as some of the ideas and practices that the students witness can really challenge their pedagogy and thinking and require them to engage in open-minded (or flexible) reflection to accommodate and assimilate their new experience and understanding. One example of this took place in a Danish Kindergarten which had been chosen for us to visit because of its inspirational design. While there, the students saw a number of things that really challenged their sense of ‘health and safety’. For example there was no secure perimeter fence round the kindergarten, very young children sat on stools at adult height tables with no adults near by to stop them falling, there were lighted tea-lights on tables within reach of the children, to name but a few. In the UK schools and nurseries have reacted with excessive caution to Health and Safety guidance, fuelled by the general litigiousness that prevails in society in general. A recent newspaper report by Bloom in the Daily Mail (17 January 2014) highlights that a primary school in the region had banned children from running in the playground because of fears they would injure themselves if they fell. Although this is an extreme example, the UK students are training to be teachers in a health and safety conscious context and the kindergarten did not fit their view of a ‘safe environment’. All of the students were shocked by what they saw and initially concluded that the staff were negligent and the children were in danger. Yet we stayed there all morning and there were no accidents or incidents, once the students were able to relax they saw that the children were safe and there were actually positive benefits to the children of some of the perceived dangers. The experience led to many long conversations about what constituted a safe learning environment and the possibility that our health and safety stance might act as a barrier to children’s freedom and development. Challenges like this as well as discussions during the Intensive Study Programme formed the main focus of the post programme phase, where students are encouraged to reflect on aspects of practice in light of their experiences and explore changes in their perceptions.

Cultural Open-mindedness

Open-mindedness is the ability and the willingness to learn from others and see other perspectives. Kayes et al (2005) suggest that this competence is based on valuing diversity and difference. This is about being curious, and Bennett (2011) suggests that curiosity and seeking to understand are key affective skills. Open-minded people are more likely to want to make connections, are keen to accept behaviours and approaches that are different to their own and possess a willingness to question the norm. When considering the students who applied for the Intensive Study Programme many of the students explicitly acknowledged aspects of open-mindedness within their applications.

All of my placements and experiences of schools are those of small village schools and having experiences of observing schools that are different to this will be
amazing and when paired with lectures from lecturers all over Europe I think that this will be extremely beneficial and an opportunity that I would really engage with. (Participant 2)

To gain knowledge about how children from across Europe interact with the educational system in place within their native country; and how they compare to an average British child’s experience in the educational system in Britain. Play has been discussed within the British educational system lately; it would be interesting to see how different countries incorporate play into their curriculum of education. (Participant 5)

The Programme presented many challenges to students’ thinking and there were a range of planned opportunities for students to discuss, clarify, explore and question as they begin to shift their thinking to accommodate their new learning and experiences. The focus of the Intensive Study Programme was the inclusion of children with special educational needs into mainstream education. The students were challenged to consider the practices they saw and heard about within the context of each particular country’s special educational needs context and culture. Students needed to demonstrate open-mindedness by not jumping to conclusions or judgemental opinions before examining all of the available information. Again, after the Intensive Study Programme opportunities to consider how the focus of the Intensive Study Programme may impact on their work as early years practitioners in the UK were provided. Unfortunately there was no opportunity to reflect on their personal shifts or how their experiences had impacted on their cultural open-mindedness.

Building relationships

Building relationships was a key aspect of every model of intercultural competencies that I looked at and Bennett (2011) notes this as a key behaviour that will promote intercultural competence. Intensive Study Programmes are by their nature short and intensive, there is no time for a slow growth of new friendships and relationship, but neither can you throw large groups of students together and just hope that relationships will develop and that they will be able to work together productively. For this reason building relationships within the student group is central to the success of any Intensive Study Programme. Prior to the programme relationship building was country specific; we did not encourage students to make contact with each other outside their own national group. However it is the only aspect of the Intercultural Competencies that is explicit within the Intensive Study Programme with ice breaking, team building and bonding activities key features of the first few days. Notions of nurture and containment (Trevarthen 2005) are important here; working in transnational groups and as a lone representative from your country can test your reserves, so as well as scaffolding relationship building, offering opportunities to return to your national group, your comfort zone is also important. Building relationships within a social as well as a working context is also a feature of the Intensive Study Programme, with the cultural programme making a significant contribution to the development of relationships. The International Supper, an early feature of the programme is important here and thanks to global TV and the internet, popular music helped the blurring of international and intercultural barriers. This was demonstrated recently when the song Gangnam Style was played, 70 students from seven countries across Europe and every one of them knew the dance moves, they all had something in common, the barriers were coming down!
Intercultural Communication

Lack of foreign language proficiency is one of the anxieties felt by students participating in study abroad experiences (Deviney, Vrba, Mills, and Ball, 2014). For the UK students this aspect of the programme appeared to be the least challenging of all because the programme is delivered in English. Experience has taught me otherwise and I now appreciate that in this context intercultural communication competence is about more than language proficiency. For example, some of the UK students expressed frustration and concern that they were pushed to take the lead or ‘carry’ their group, especially if some of the other students lacked confidence to engage in meaningful discussion in English. Some students felt that this had the potential to unwittingly draw them into a ‘facilitator’ or ‘leader’ role rather than an equal participant. These issues were raised but solutions involving all students were not considered. This is a challenge noted by Wickline (2012) in relation to American and international students in the Crossing Borders Programme. Some would view the fact that the majority of the UK students do not have a second language as a barrier to the development of intercultural competencies, Deardorff (2009) stressed that language is the key to intercultural competence and Fantini (2009 p 459) states that “Proficiency in a second language at any level enhances all other aspects of intercultural competence in qualitative and quantitative ways.” However Briguglio (2006) found that bringing issues about language out into the open and making them the focus of a workshop enabled participants in transnational group work to become more sensitive to the needs of others. A number of the participants in this study were native English speakers in a project conducted in English, like the participants from my University. The workshop enabled second language speakers to explain some of the challenges they faced and as a result enabled the native speakers to consider the adaptations that they needed to make to enable the second language speakers to participate fully. As a result participants reported that they had taken more care with their accent, had spoken more slowly and had regularly paused and checked in to ensure everyone was keeping up with the meaning of the conversation. It is clear that such an addition to the programme would have the potential to improve the experience of all the students, and to bring to the fore aspects of intercultural communication. Similarly exploration afterwards would enable key transferrable skills to be acknowledged.

Intercultural Multi-perspectivity

Multi-perspectivity is an approach in understanding, which takes into account other perspectives and demonstrates a willingness to regard a situation from a different point of view. It is found in many of the frameworks for intercultural competence in a slightly different guise, for example Council for Europe (2013) talk about understanding and respecting others, Hunter, White and Godbey (2006) cite being respectful of others and Fantini (2009) and Bennett (2011) list empathy as a key behaviour for intercultural competence. From the discussion above we can see that the Intensive Study Programme provided opportunities for students to develop multi-perspectivity in relation to their developing pedagogy and when exploring practices within early education, there were not, however, any explicit opportunities to explore aspects of intercultural multi-perspectivity.
Findings

My initial reflections considered whether the aspects of intercultural competencies were either explicitly or implicitly focussed on during the Intensive Study Programme and are captured on the table below.

Table 1. How intercultural competencies were addressed in the Intensive Study Programme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect of Intercultural Competency</th>
<th>Phase of the intensive study programme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Preparation phase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-knowledge</td>
<td>Implicit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility</td>
<td>Explicit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open mindedness</td>
<td>Implicit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship building</td>
<td>Explicit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication skills</td>
<td>Explicit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-perspectivity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These initial reflections have clarified that the theme of the Intensive Study Programme had been my primary focus and those aspects of intercultural competence that were being touched on explicitly were those that were to do with flexibility, relationships, communication, those inter-personal skills that enable or challenge us when ‘getting along with people’. They were the issues that had to be explored and addressed to ensure the Intensive Study Programme was able to function. Firstly, I was struck by the number of gaps on the grid, particularly in the post Intensive Study Programme phase, which represents a missed opportunity engage students in the critical reflection that will ensure that their experiences can be used to gain new understandings and influence their future practice. Secondly the fact that multi-perspectivity was not touched on at any stage of the programme was worthy of deeper reflection. If multi-perspectivity is about taking the views of members of others cultures on board, it could be proposed that it lies at the heart of intercultural competence. I am interested in exploring this further and in particular in relation to Bennett’s (1993) notion of intercultural sensitivity as it seems to be contingent upon some level of awareness of cultural issues. By failing to pay any regard to this aspect of the project’s aims it could be argued that the chances of developing any intercultural competencies are diminished.

Conclusions

After consideration of what the programme was trying to achieve, I was able to identify that there had been opportunities to develop some aspects of intercultural competencies in the preparation and programme phases of the Intensive Study Programme. However it was clear that there were opportunities to develop intercultural competencies throughout the three phases of the programme that had been missed. The table below indicates the points at which actions to address this are needed.
Intercultural competencies: To what extent were they explicitly promoted during an Intensive Study Programme

Table 2. Numerals indicating points at which interventions will be planned

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect of Intercultural Competency</th>
<th>Phase of the intensive study programme</th>
<th>Preparation phase</th>
<th>Intensive study phase</th>
<th>Post intensive study programme phase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-knowledge</td>
<td>Implicit</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility</td>
<td>Explicit</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open mindedness</td>
<td>Implicit</td>
<td>Explicit</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship building</td>
<td>Explicit</td>
<td>Explicit</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication skills</td>
<td>Explicit</td>
<td>Explicit</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-perspectivity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At point 1 it is essential to implement some formal awareness-raising to set the scene for intercultural skills development. At point 2 an intervention based on the work of Briguglio (2006), enabling students to tune into each others’ communication needs will facilitate group work and learning. Finally at point 3 scaffolded reflections on the development of these skills and competencies, once the Intensive Study Programme is over, needs to be exploited. Bringing experiences to the fore and exploring them explicitly is a theme running through the literature and builds on the accepted wisdom that just being there is not sufficient to guarantee an intercultural experience. Deardorff (2009) considers reflection to be central to the development of intercultural competencies. Students need the opportunity to consciously think about their experiences, to analyse them in order to learn from them (Schon, 1991).

Returning to Vande Berg and Paige’s (2008) key questions I have explored ‘What is the nature of intercultural competence?’ through my research I have begun to gain an understanding of ‘What is the process by which intercultural competence is developed?’ The next Intensive Study Programme is in November 2016, I have a more secure knowledge and understanding of what that programme aims to achieve. I now need to use this knowledge and understanding to develop three manageable interventions, as indicated, to be used across the programme phases to address Vande Berg and Paige’s (2008) final question, ‘How individuals can be taught / trained / mentored regarding the development of intercultural competence?’ Or more specifically what interventions can I reasonably make to the pre-programme, programme, and post-programme activities to ensure that I am able to explicitly facilitate the development of intercultural competencies with all of the students participating in the Intensive Study Programme.

References


Great Britain Department for Education (2012). Teachers’ Standards


Biographical notes:

**Karen Hudson** is a Senior Lecturer in Education at the University of Northumbria, Newcastle upon Tyne where she teaches across a range of Initial Teacher Education Programmes. Before joining the University Karen worked as an Early Years Teacher and Head Teacher of a Nursery Centre and her current teaching focus remains centred on the education of the youngest children in school. As the International Champion for the Department of Education and Lifelong Learning Karen’s interest in the benefits of short exchange visits, especially Intensive Study Programmes, and the internationalisation of the curriculum in Higher Education are emerging research interests.