Chapter 7
Building Intercultural Competence and Professional Confidence Through Collaboration in an Italian IPE

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In my school professional experience during my Master of Teaching in Australia in 2015, I felt that my mentors viewed me and other Chinese international students as a problem. My shyness was seen as lack of capability. But here in Prato, my mentor sees me as an asset and appreciates my skills, so my confidence has grown. I speak Mandarin, so I can communicate with the Chinese kids whose families work here in the textile industry. But I also connect well with the Italian students. I can see them responding to my teaching, so I'm offering to take more lessons for other teachers as well. I'm learning more about planning and using approaches to teaching from my own past, as well as new ideas I'm trying through each class.

Normally I sit back and don't offer my opinions, but I soon saw that here, when I meet with my peers and Monash mentors to reflect on the day, it's expected that we open up, talk about our experiences and support each other. We don't have these daily opportunities to talk in Melbourne. I'm thinking of coming back to teach in Italy after I graduate, as I've learnt some Italian language and culture in classes Monash provided here in Prato. I know now that I'm adaptable and passionate about teaching. I love being here as it has taken me completely out of my comfort zone. I've really grown and changed. After this, I can teach kids anywhere in the world and know that I'll be fine. (Yin 2016)

Introduction

This excerpt is from an interview during Lui Yin's three weeks International Professional Experience (IPE) in Italy. It provides a snapshot depicting growth in her professional confidence and intercultural competence achieved through deep reflection on her learning, one of the core aims of this kind of international program

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in teacher education. Our observations and research focused on pre-service teachers' (PSTs) learning during this international practicum have shown us that not all students involved in this program achieve the same growth as Lui Yin claimed, since students have different experiences depending on a range of factors. Her thoughts are consistent with Bolton's (2005) view that 'to be effective, reflective practice requires an openness to having our understandings challenged and an acceptance of new aspects which may alter our views' (p. 276). Similarly, Tangen et al.'s (2015) research is finding that 'studying abroad has the potential to both enlighten students about others and … raise awareness about oneself and one's own cultural and pedagogical knowledge' (p. 24). Lui Yin's story shows what Boyd and Myers (1989) call 'transformation' involving 'fundamental change in one's personality involving the resolution of a personal dilemma and the expansion of consciousness resulting in greater personality integration' (p. 269). Lui Yin told us she began to open up, to see and expand her capabilities through the experience of success, positive feedback and support from her school and university mentors and peers. These factors empowered her to take risks in her own professional learning journey. It is interesting that her growth was enhanced through this practicum because her fluency in Mandarin language and Chinese nationality gave her value as a teacher that was not recognised in the domestic Australian context. In Prato, her presence as a PST was viewed differently by her mentors and peers, and the expectations and opportunities she encountered were markedly different from her practicum experiences in the environs of Melbourne. In fact, Lui Yin's own past intercultural experiences as a globally mobile student enabled her to have empathy with young Chinese and African learners, many of whom were struggling to adapt to life in this Italian town dating back to medieval times. Mezirow (1991) argues that for change to occur in people's 'meaning schemes (specific beliefs, attitudes, and emotional reactions)… they must engage in critical reflection on their experiences, which in turn leads to a perspective transformation' (p. 167), their is something which we found Lui Yin and many other PSTs achieve in international practicums.

In this chapter, we provide a brief contextual discussion from the literature on how IPE experiences can be situated in a macrosense within the evolving concept of the internationalisation of education, highlighting the scope, purpose and potential learning benefits from IPE for PSTs in these times where international experience is seen to be a highly desirable aspect of higher education (see, e.g. Tangen et al. 2015). We then further explore findings from our interviews and narratives that capture the learning experiences of PSTs involved in the practicum between 2014 and 2016. (Note that pseudonyms are used throughout the chapter). We continue to draw on various theoretical frames to analyse our teacher and student collaboration in building intercultural competence, and making sense of our PSTs' learning through the Prato IPE. Both positive learning and challenges are discussed through narratives of the outcomes of daily experiences constructed by us and our students, and what these experiences reveal about the impact of varied factors influencing individual PSTs' personal and professional learning. While the findings show that not all PSTs develop the same degree of intercultural competence and evolving

sense of teacher identity and confidence as Lui Yin, most are able to demonstrate and articulate aspects of their learning to be teachers through negotiating a range of situations during their practicum experiences. It is evident that complex factors influence their individual journeys, so in this chapter, we explore narratives from the PSTs about how various experiences have helped them to 'move to adopt or establish new ways, and finally, integrate old and new patterns' (Boyd and Myers 1989, p. 268). We have intentionally selected PSTs who have had mixed success in their learning, as well as narratives that provide multiple perspectives on experiences in this IPE context.

Establishing Our Collaborative Learning

Both authors of this chapter has been leaders of the Prato IPE program in the Tuscany region of Italy, where Monash University has a Centre that supports the development of engagement in local schools and community. The Centre provides a broad range of academic and extra-curricular activities for our students including a language and culture program, opportunities to engage in conversations with local residents and home visits to interact with families. These activities extend our students' capacity to understand the local context and make meaning from their experiences. Being leaders of the Prato practicum provides daily opportunities for us to actively collaborate with our students in an intense and collegial way through both academic and social interactions, and most students have willingly agreed to engage with us in our research. We make ourselves available to converse, co-plan, share stories and reflect on the PSTs' learning each day, something not possible when our students are scattered over a large metropolitan area in Melbourne.

Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) argue that in narrative research where stories are captured, a relationship between the researcher and the researched can develop, leading to learning and changed ways of thinking and acting. This is certainly the case in Prato where we begin working with our students before they travel to Italy, providing insights into what to expect in local schools and curriculum, including through the lens of previous students who share their experiences. After the students arrive, we formally invite them to engage in narrative research with us, and provide explanatory statements and consent forms if they choose to be participants in taped semi-structured interviews during and after the practicum in Prato. We build our conversations as the PSTs begin to understand the local culture, and settle into observing, then teaching in preschool, primary and secondary schools, many of which are in historic centres of learning dating back to the twelfth century. Each student negotiates difference in their own way as they experience the cultural community, the schools and our evolving group dynamics, as we live, learn and work together.

From the first day of the IPE, we meet together to engage in narrative inquiry as a way of understanding the diverse experiences that unfold. We are involved in what Clandinin and Connelly (2000) call 'collaboration between researchers and

participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus' (p. 20). The sense of the researcher and the researched begins to blur as we each engage in this regular practitioner inquiry within our learning community. Our PSTs develop 'praxis', in line with Freire's (1970) view that it is not enough just to talk about narratives. The next step must be taken to move beyond reflection on learning, in order to understand practice critically, and then to use new theoretical understanding formed to act and plan to further enhance practice. As university mentors, we know that we play a critical part in this process in creating the opportunities, expectations and questions that will prompt and extend our students' thinking about their practice. This sometimes occurs in one on one conversations, and at other times through establishing peer interaction activities in varied ways including formal group debriefing and informal conversations in Italian cafes and bars.

Drawing on Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) call for collaboration in different places over time, we have found it particularly valuable to use these conversations to establish collaborative exploration of what happens and how students are feeling and learning from their experiences at different times in the journey, including during their days in school and in living with their peers and within the Prato community. This kind of narrative inquiry can act as prompts for the PSTs to think deeply about their own practice. For some students, this is their first travel abroad, while others are seasoned travellers. But the variables impacting on their learning are far more complex than for the tourist who observes and moves on, since the practicum demands keen observation of cultural nuances in the professional context of schools and schooling, and the negotiation of language in the classrooms. We encourage both formal sharing through students' written reflections and individual taped interviews that form part of our narrative inquiry. We also engage in informal sharing and discussion of the challenges, joys, frustrations and learning that unfold over three weeks, as the students continue to make sense of their experiences and how they impact on their own professional self. As Lui Yin shows, this unpacking can have a powerful impact as each individual focuses on their own emerging professional identity in varied ways.

Theoretical Frames Informing Our Narrative Inquiry

In the next section, we introduce various theoretical ideas and concepts with reference to international experience and themes pertinent to our narrative data analysis. First, we discuss Mezirow's (1991) views on critical reflection and transformative learning. This is followed by sections explaining links to the notions of internationalisation of education and developing intercultural competency that are now often featured in the literature as desirable outcomes of IPE (Tudball 2012).

Transformative Learning

In our introduction, which focused on Lui Yin's story, we included Mezirow's (1991) views on critical reflection and 'perspective transformation', which he describes as

> …[a] process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrating perspective; and, finally, making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings. (p. 167)

As leaders, we see reflection as important for individuals to grow during a teaching practicum, but are constantly aware of the varied ways that individual PSTs respond to their IPE. Based on findings from empirical studies, Taylor (1998) suggests that not all learners are predisposed to engage in transformative learning. In Prato, we noticed that our PSTs' accounts of their learning differed depending on their daily experiences and their own capacity and openness to learn and change, or to develop their practice through reflection. Taylor (1998) argues that meaning structures are frames of reference drawn from each individual's cultural and contextual experiences, which influence how they behave, interpret events and choose to act. Mezirow (1995) claims that through experiencing a 'disorienting dilemma' (p. 50), new responses or transformation of views can develop. For example, Massimo, one of the pre-service teachers who learned Italian language, as he grew up with his parents and grandparents, was comfortable about cultural differences in Prato, a leader in the group in negotiating menus and shopping, and very positive about his school experience in the first few days. But as he moved into a focus on teaching lessons, he realised that having cultural confidence in Prato was not enough. He lacked the content knowledge required to teach a senior school science unit on 'cloning' and the confidence to plan as well. His anxiety was only resolved through sitting down with his peers and university mentors to explore resources and possibilities for his classes in the following days. This commitment to share learning continued throughout the three weeks and was, in Massimo's words during the practicum,

> …one of the most critical learning opportunities in my learning to be a teacher so far… Coming to the realisation that I was floundering shocked me, but knowing that I just had to reach out and ask for ideas, meant that the help from some of the other students and my mentors stopped me from drowning. I know I seemed really confident at first, but that was about different things.

Lui Yin knew that she could no longer sit back and avoid interaction with her peers, and she found that in becoming more socially connected and ready to share, her professional learning also continued to grow. Massimo felt lost until he realised how important collaboration could be. Drawing on theoretical frames that make explicit the importance of reflection, sharing these views with students, and then

making sense of learning through the telling of stories and narrative inquiry is a powerful way of making meaning explicit.

Internationalisation of Education

Against the backdrop of the globalisation of education and particularly salient in the context of the continuing interest in notions of the internationalisation of tertiary institutions, the link between studying abroad and intercultural competence has been increasingly documented over the last twenty years (see, e.g. Jackson 2012; Knight 2004). Bremer and van der Wende (1995) define internationalisation as developing 'curricula with an international orientation in content, aimed at preparing students for performing (professionally/socially) in an international and multicultural context, and designed for domestic students and/or foreign students' (p. 10). Benefits we see of IPE programs include the personal and professional growth of PSTs. We argue that being engaged in a program where our PSTs are expected to teach in Italian schools, where the main language, curriculum, culture and expectations are at times marked by substantial differences from previous experiences, provides particular learning challenges and opportunities. There is evidence that immersion in a different culture and language can enhance language proficiency and cultural proficiency (Jackson 2008; Medina-Lopez-Portillo 2004), and can provide outcomes in terms of interpersonal skills, which are becoming increasingly sought after for professional development (Olson and Kroeger 2001).

Knight (2003) broadens thinking about this learning, stating that 'Internationalisation …is defined as the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension' (p. 2) into higher education. Increasingly, universities across the world have focused on how elements of the internationalisation of education at the tertiary level can develop graduate attributes in students which reflect a sense of professional and intercultural capability, global citizenship and preparedness for life and work in their own contexts and in the wider world. These graduate capacities are now deemed to be desirable by universities across the globe. They are also reflected in the Erasmus + program (European Commission 2013), where international experience, developing foreign language skills and intercultural competencies are advocated as a means of enhancing graduate employability. There is recognition amongst educators that in this age of globalisation, students should have knowledge of global concerns and the skills and capacities to work in varied contexts, so they develop the characteristics and dispositions to be global citizens (Messelink et al. 2015; Tudball 2005, 2012). Conversations with the growing group of Monash Faculty of Education colleagues who have led IPE programs reveal an increasing body of knowledge demonstrating that our students can utilise by sharing stories about their growing professional and intercultural confidence (see, e.g. Parr and Chan 2015).

Other literature in this field acknowledges that international learning experiences can be an effective means of enhancing global citizen identity and cosmopolitan ideals (Hendershot and Sperandio 2009). Williams' (2005) research on intercultural adaptability and sensitivity documents the positive impacts on students' intercultural learning in the context of specific short-term exchanges. But as discussed above, in our experience of working with multiple cohorts of students, we have found that the extent of achievement of the kinds of competencies and learning connected to 'internationalisation' is highly dependent on the student's degree of open-mindedness, willingness to embrace and learn from new experiences, the nature and success of the reflective learning experiences they are engaged in and their willingness to see teaching as a collaborative practice.

Intercultural Competency and Learning During IPE

Intercultural competence is, at its core, concerned with communication and has been defined as 'the ability to communicate effectively in cross-cultural situations and relate appropriately in a variety of cultural contexts' (Bennett and Bennett 2004, p. 149). However, Byram's (1997) view is that intercultural competence also encompasses 'knowledge of others, knowledge of self, skills to interpret and relate; skills to discover and/or to interact, valuing others' values, beliefs and behaviours, and relativizing one's self' (p. 34). In our work with PSTs in Prato, there are multiple opportunities for this learning, but as in the development of teaching abilities through the practicum, we have found that the extent of development of these competencies is highly determined by how each individual responds to the circumstances that arise. John, for example, a mature age Master of Teaching science education PST, involved himself in every possible opportunity to interact and learn through his Prato experiences, which moved constantly between personal and professional learning. In an interview at the end of the second week of the practicum he said,

> This experience has helped me to find skills that I didn't know I had. I have tuned into my Mentor teachers' expectations and thought more deeply about my planning for classes than ever before. When I realised I was struggling to plan, I knew I could ask my university Mentors and peers for help. Italians are still in secondary school when they are eighteen, so it's been weird to go and have a coffee with them in the school's café bar … it's more like being in a university and the students seem older …and cool. It's more casual, yet education focused. In the specialist science school where I'm placed, I've been challenged to think about how I can negotiate language, use a lot of visuals to communicate, and slow down and check that these quite mature students are really understanding. The relationships between teachers and students is very warm. My mentors have welcomed us into their homes for a traditional family lunch, so I'm learning about local cultural expectations through so many experiences that are different from being on a practicum in the Australian context.

Fiona's response to being in Prato was at the opposite end of the spectrum. As leaders, we had reservations about her capacity to 'fit' in the IPE, since in her

application interview she was reserved and awkward amongst her peers and appeared to lack personal confidence. While these personal traits did cause us to question whether Fiona would be well suited to a placement in a different cultural and communal experience, her referees urged us to accept her into the program to give her a chance to grow and learn. Despite our best efforts to work with Fiona, our concerns were confirmed. She failed to show significant development in building 'knowledge of self, skills to interpret and relate' (Byram 1997, p. 34). She did not connect with her colleagues in the way many others did. Additionally, her relationships with her mentor teachers and the students in the school appeared more distant than the relationships formed by other PSTs. These differences were not only noted by us as leaders of the program but also by other PSTs. One of the other students placed in Fiona's school who tried to offer support suggested that *'being in Prato, on her first trip overseas away from family support added to her anxiety about her teaching'*. She refused to taste Italian food, engage in the conversation evenings with locals or join in group trips to neighbouring towns. While we continued to offer support, our concerns remained, evidenced by this extract from one of the authors' journals:

> I am worried about Fiona. In observing her class at the primary school today, I saw that she is not relating to her Mentor, or the six year olds she is teaching. She is more focused on sticking posters on the wall than engaging with the kids. It's about the products, not the learning. She didn't notice when half the class had nothing to do and just quietly opened their books to read …I'm sure she is homesick and unhappy. I've tried to debrief with her, but she puts up a brick wall.

Deardorff (2006) argues that developing intercultural competence can be a lifelong journey, which suggests it is not the result of a single experience, such as study abroad or international placement. When Fiona came to the reunion a month after the Prato IPE, she still remained an observer of rather than a participant in the group, but it was encouraging that she chose to come to travel to the city to meet with her peers. In order to address a lack of consensus on terminology in regard to intercultural competence, Deardorff (2006) conducted a research study resulting in agreement amongst leading intercultural scholars on a common definition of 'intercultural competence' as 'effective and appropriate behaviour and communication in intercultural situations' (p. 33). Deardorff (2006) propose the following visual model (Fig. 1), now well acknowledged as a useful framework to analyse, and potentially assess, intercultural competence. One of its main merits is highlighting that becoming an intercultural person is a process, in which knowledge (such as sociolinguistic awareness) is only one prerequisite, while self-reflection and mindfulness are required to develop openness, curiosity and respect, qualities that appeared under-developed in Fiona at this stage, but which can be very helpful in learning to be a teacher.

Deardorff's (2006) model promotes the view that new knowledge and skills, including adaptability and empathy, are required before a person can communicate effectively in an intercultural situation. The model resonates with the 'developmental model of intercultural sensitivity' (DMIS) developed by Bennett (1986),
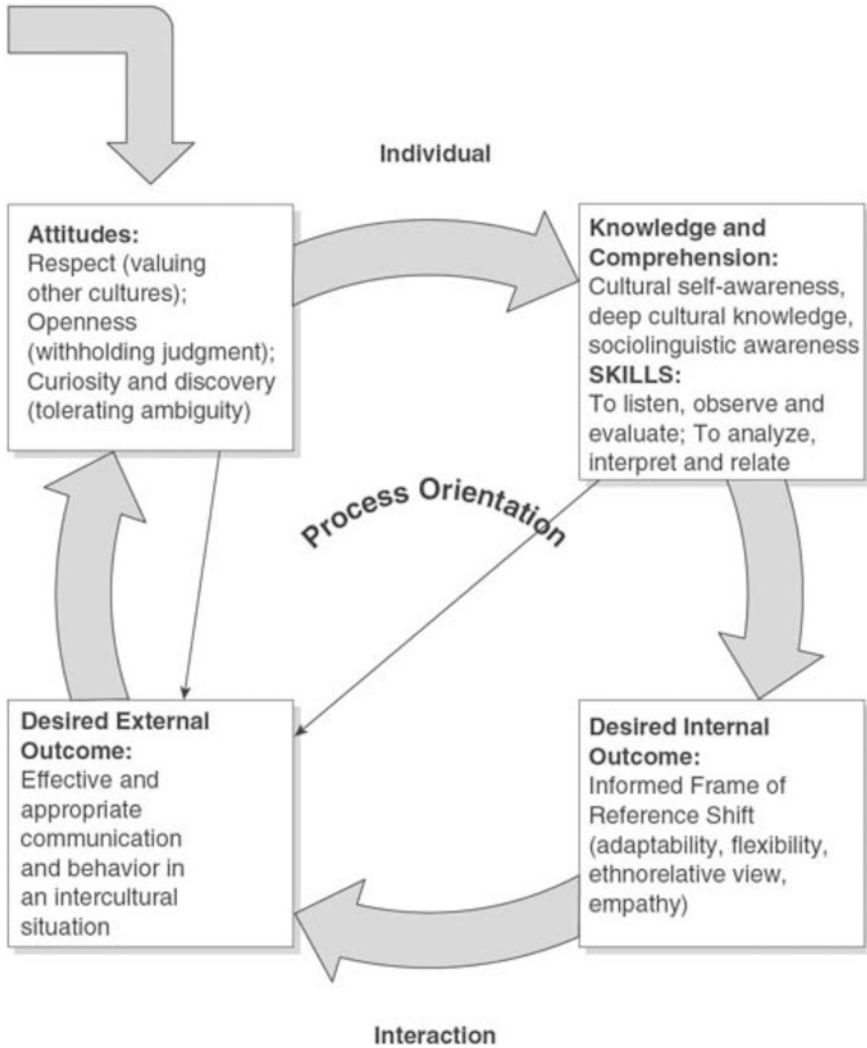
Fig. 1 Deardorff's (2006) Model of intercultural competence (p. 256)

where he define three ethnocentric stages ranging from *denial* (when people think that there is no other way than their own), to *defence* (when people think that their own way is the best one), to *minimisation* (when people tend to consider that, despite differences, other people are like them). The next three stages, under the label of *ethno-relativism*, are *acceptance* (when people recognise that values and behaviours can be different to their own), *adaptation* (when people are adding new behaviours to be more effective) and finally *integration* (when people are able to fluently adapt their behaviour according to the cultural context they are moving in).

In regard to this theory, when someone who is insufficiently prepared for an overseas sojourn experiences severe culture shock, the reinforcement of ethno-centrist tendencies is likely to encourage individuals to stay or to even go back to Bennett's 'defence stage'. Fiona remained firmly in this stage, whereas Lui Yin, Massimo, John and others in Prato confidently *adapted* and *integrated* into their new contexts in both their personal and professional experiences.

Anderson et al. (2006) use Bennett and Hammer's (1998) *Intercultural Development Inventory* (an instrument tied to the DMIS) in a pilot study to assess the intercultural sensitivity of student teachers. The IDI was administered before the students travelled abroad and then again four weeks later when they returned to the USA. Their findings illustrate individual differences amongst the students, but find overall that short-term study abroad can have a positive impact on cross-cultural sensitivity. Bennett (2004) argues that

> The crux of intercultural adaptation is the ability to have an alternative cultural experience. Individuals who have received largely mono-cultural socialisation normally have access to only their own cultural worldview, so they are unable to experience the difference between their own perception and that of people who are culturally different. (p. 74)

It was extraordinary for us as leaders to realise that for the five Chinese international students in our group in 2016, their opportunity to be involved in the Prato professional experience opened up friendships with the other Australian students in the PST group in more meaningful ways than what they had encountered in the whole previous year of their studies in Australia, where they tended to rely on other Chinese students for support.

In spite of scales such as the DMIS (Bennett 2004) providing a useful way of capturing students' development through new cultural experiences, we are convinced that Bennett's linear depiction of learning shifting from denial to acceptance and adaptation is likely to be variable in the Prato programs, depending on factors such as individual students' personal characteristics, prior experiences and adaptability, as well as the nature of the programs in which they are involved. It is to be expected that some students will take a more active and sensitive interest in cultural differences and develop relationships within the local community that can act as more powerful proponents in facilitating the growth of their 'worldviews' (Bennett 2004, p. 74) and capabilities. For several students, the visit to family homes to share a meal helped them to feel part of the local community. Others found that interacting with parents who could speak English gave them insights into their students' backgrounds and family expectations about learning.

We found in 2015 that one cohort of four students, whose intercultural and professional learning and confidence development was interesting to observe, was the group of Italian descent PSTs who had scholarships for the IPE based on their heritage and applications showing that without financial support they would not have been able to apply. Each one of them experienced an obvious re-connection with their cultural heritage and pride in being Italian. They formed a group who went to small cafes where they spoke in Italian and explored local cuisine, but they also shared their insights with the wider group. Grabov (1997) views transformative

learning as an 'intuitive, creative, emotional process' (p. 90), and it was clear this was true for these students. Taylor (1998) also argues that people's meaning structures are based on the totality of individuals' cultural and contextual experiences that influence how they behave and interpret events and how they choose to act. He believes that individuals change and grow as they add to or integrate ideas through learning. As leaders, we could see significant growth in our students' capacities across the three weeks.

Developing Professional Confidence

In thinking about these models and our leadership, we agreed that learning through an IPE is both an individual and a collaborative process, but the level of personal and professional learning that is achieved is highly variable amongst every cohort. Gloria, an older Masters of Teaching student in her 30's, was placed in a highly acclaimed music college in Prato. She commented that for her this experience caused her to question her sense of professional confidence, but being in Prato provided her with opportunities to develop her skills as a music educator. She said in an interview in Australia after the practicum,

> I was humbled by the Master musicians I was able to observe and learn from in a cultural context where musical skill is highly prized. …At the same time I was using my own previous skills, I was learning new approaches. I looked at myself differently, sometimes more reflectively than ever before, perhaps because of the deep conversations you gently forced us to have with you and amongst our group. At home, I can't converse meaningfully about what has happened in my teaching, as there are not the same opportunities to debrief with family and friends who aren't teachers, but in Prato we all wanted to share what happened during the day. I had the chance to co-teach at Gramsci School on Australia Day with other students who took an integrated approach to teaching about our culture through songs. We co-planned, team taught and talked about our learning and how the students responded. It didn't all go well as we had about 100 students in a big, noisy hall, which isn't what we planned for, but it just made us think about how we could do it differently another time.

Karen and Sally, two PSTs in the Prato practicum group in 2015, were placed at Gramsci Keynes 'Liceo scientifico', a type of senior secondary school in Italy designed to give students the skills to progress to any university or higher educational institution. Students can attend the school after successfully completing middle school. Karen and Sally initially struggled with the complexities involved in negotiating communication and language, and working out what their mentors wanted them to do. They found that in Italy, PSTs are put in full charge of the classroom, so identifying lesson objectives and learning intentions, where they were unsure about the curriculum and what students had learned before, was not easy. Their school mentors were happy for them to team teach, so for the whole three weeks they co-planned. In an interview Karen said,

> I wish I had the opportunity to co-plan back in Melbourne when I had a mentor who, frankly, expected too much of me in my first practicum. I was floundering and so unsure of how to start and then develop my lessons with some kind of balance between me lecturing the students and then involving them in learning. Here, Sally and I talk about what we want them to learn, how we will teach, what resources we could use, and our roles during the lesson. We bounce off each other really well and then circulate to support the students in their tasks.

Other PSTs team taught and commented on how this helped them negotiate 'disorienting dilemmas' (Mezirow 1991), such as how to teach when students have different levels of understanding, or when there is no access to the Smartboard technology they had come to rely on in teaching. Stefanie and Ashleigh both used their own laptops in the school. They took the whole class into a space with Wi-Fi access, pre-tested the students' understanding and divided them into ability groups small enough to be able to see their computers for maths learning using online games. They shared this idea with peers who then also teamed up to use similar approaches. David, who was placed at Mazzoni, a secondary middle school, was only at the end of his third year of his education double degree studies, so his previous practicum experiences largely involved observation of classes. He was unsure about how to plan his teaching strategies and engage the Italian students, who seemed to him to be more mature and knowledgeable than students he had observed so far in Australia. He commented,

> …I relished the opportunities in Prato to be frank about what I didn't know about sequencing learning. I got involved in dialogue with my mentors and peers who helped me grow and increase my knowledge of the complexities of teaching. For me, I think the big hurdle I overcame in this practicum was developing confidence to have a go, learn from my mistakes and then move on. I have not actually written a full plan for a lesson before this, and realised that it does make a difference when you really have thought about what you will do to get the students involved in their learning.

Susan, another Chinese international student in the Prato group, struggled with many aspects of the practicum in the first week; but most marked was her own lack of professional confidence and concerns about her capacity to plan and use a range of teaching and learning strategies in the classroom. But she very quickly asked us for help. We suggested forming a group where the three PSTs teaching Mandarin language classes in different schools could work together to help plan ideas for Susan's classes together. We agreed that this could then be continued to provide support for each other over the practicum. We started with being clear about the learner needs in Susan's class. On hearing that half the class were mother tongue Mandarin speakers and the other half locals speaking only Italian, our discussions moved to exploring how to plan for differentiated learning and engagement. Susan told us she would have access to data projectors and the Internet, her classes would be an hour long and her mentor teacher was happy for her to choose any content and approaches that would encourage all the students to be involved, something that he had been failing to do. Susan's interview comments revealed how successful this process was in achieving her own 'perspective transformation' and helping in

'making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings' (Mezirow 1991, p. 167):

> I really did not know what to do after watching a few of my mentor teacher's classes. It was awful watching the ten fluent Mandarin speakers sitting there politely and quietly while the rest of the class learned how to count to ten. I knew something had to be done, but my mentor teacher is not qualified and was hoping I'd be the one to help him with ideas. He agreed to take on an Australian student teacher…which I'm not…to see how you/we teach! The others in our group (PSTs) and you (author) filled me with ideas in our sessions together. Getting the Chinese kids to teach the Italians was amazing. After using the translated sheets with hip hop song lyrics from YouTube clips, to simply enjoy hearing and using Mandarin, meant that they had fun… they began to mix together, more apparently, than ever before. We still had to go back to more basic phrases and the really hard character learning, but it worked to get them involved. Their own teacher told me he will continue to use this peer teaching and differentiated approach. He admitted that he knew he wasn't doing anything for the Chinese students at all. When he saw how I planned two sets of activities, but joint things as well, he was pretty inspired as well.

Susan moved rapidly through Bennett's (1986) adaptation and integration DMIS stages, and her 'knowledge of self, skills to interpret and relate, skills to discover and/or to interact' (Byram 1997, p. 134) blossomed. She also formed better relationships within her peer group after reaching out for support and found that she had skills and ideas to share as her professional confidence grew. When one of the authors later acted as a professional referee for Susan for her first teaching appointment, it was clear that the deep knowledge of her skills and capabilities, formed through involvement with her in the planning group and multiple observations of her teaching that Prato Mandarin class, was pivotal in her success in getting the job.

Conclusion

The many narratives captured through our conversations, interviews and field notes from PSTs involved in the Prato program demonstrate that personal and professional learning occurs on multiple levels and in diverse ways through IPE. The students showed that since the Prato placement school settings are characterised by some similarities, but also at times marked differences from their previous experiences, the PSTs have opportunities to develop 'intercultural inquisitiveness' and many 'gained cultural and linguistic knowledge in interaction' (Messelink et al. 2015, p. 7). For some students, there were shifts in their 'frame of reference' (Mezirow 1997, p. 6) and for many (including Lui Chin, Susan, Karen, Massimo, David and John) 'transformative learning' occurred. In relation to Bennett's (2004) DMIS scale, there were substantial shifts and evidence demonstrated by most students showing increased 'adaptability' as the programs evolved. In our joint experience of five Prato IPE programs, our sense has been that few students in the cohort of nearly a hundred students have so far remained in total 'denial' of difference, reluctant to embrace and participate in local culture and to learn through

immersion in the local schools. For most, their confidence and professional learning about teaching in varied contexts showed remarkable growth. Granted, our application and selection processes do help to ensure that the students we take on these programs demonstrate sociability, good communication abilities and a well-articulated rationale for wanting to be involved. We also require them to have had some success in their previous practicum experiences 'at home' and to be willing to work collaboratively. However, we do know that variable individual student learning depends on a range of factors including the personality and personal confidence of the students, their level of knowledge of the content they teach, their capacity to plan for learning and to respond creatively to learners' needs in the schools. Their experiences are strongly influenced by the connections they do or do not form with their peers and mentor teachers, and the degree of open-mindedness they have about the cultural context. Fostering a learning environment where pre-service teachers can build intercultural competence, teacher confidence and identity requires 'establishing an environment that builds trust and care and facilitates the development of sensitive relationships among learners. This is a fundamental principle of fostering transformative learning' (Mezirow 1991, p. 7).

In their narratives, many students say that when we as program leaders form open and positive relationships with them and gently encourage their engagement in reflective conversations, they see the value of dialogue about daily scenarios that contribute to their development as PSTs. We have learned that problem solving 'in the moment' can be a constant challenge and highly dependent on the practicum contexts, locations, characteristics of schools, beliefs and attitudes of mentor teachers, and other complex factors. The timely nature of this problem solving sits in contrast to our experiences of professional experience in Melbourne where students often do not engage in conversations about their experiences until weeks after the event and they return to the university campus for classes. We have learned that stopping, thinking, questioning, seeking the student's views before offering ours, expecting them to reach their own conclusions on what should happen next and listening to other views in our ongoing collaboration, can help them to reach their own authentic learning and create rich opportunities for mutual learning for us all. The evidence of the increasing demand for student places in the Prato teaching program and the expansion to two programs each year is testament that word is spreading amongst students of how worthwhile this program is. The Prato IPE program creates rich opportunities for peer learning and support, close mentoring from university program leaders and school mentors, along with deep reflection on evolving daily experiences that can lead to transformative learning. We leave the last word to Lui Chin:

> It's nearly a year since my Prato practicum. Looking back, there are some things I did in the classroom there that I'd never do now, like getting the students to repeat things after me in a rote learning kind of way, and maybe a bit too much having the children all working in the same tasks…some of them without much learning focus.. It just reminds me that learning about teaching doesn't end. But that boost to my confidence and the friendships I formed have been so valuable. I'm still keen to go back, still learning Italian and see that international experience as a really special time for me to grow.

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