

Intercultural Competence in Host Students? A Study of Danish Students Facing China at Home

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INTRODUCTION

Intercultural encounters with individuals living in other parts of the world through study visits present students with situations in which learning can take place, particularly the development of what is most commonly referred to as intercultural competences (IC). There has been much research in the field of intercultural competences based on mobile students engaging in studies abroad for short- and long-term sojourns (Byram & Feng, 2006; Dervin, 2009), whereas information on the host as the subject of study-abroad research is scarce (Knight & Schmidt-Rinehart, 2002; Weidemann & Bluml, 2009) and specifically lacking in relation to IC. Increased internationalization within education also makes it relevant to research student learning through internationalization at home activities that might bring about new perspectives on IC and intercultural

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meetings. In addition, most research deals with study-abroad activities at the upper-secondary-school level and in higher education (Byram & Feng, 2006; Dearsdorff, 2009; Dervin, 2009), while research involving younger learners at primary and lower-secondary school levels is less common (Snow & Byram, 1997).

The overall aims of this chapter are to explore the potential of developing IC in students hosting an exchange student during short-term study visits, to examine the challenges and possibilities of short-term study visits at the lower-secondary level, and to contribute to the discussions of internationalization at this educational level. More specifically, in this chapter, we ask the question: *What are the challenges and possibilities of using short-term study visits to develop IC in host students?*

Theoretically, this chapter finds inspiration in social constructivist understandings of culture based on the understandings of researchers such as Dervin (2009); Holliday (2013), and Jensen (2013), and also in Byram's (2008, 2009) research on the development of ICs in individuals. Empirically, data used in this paper were derived from the study of a group of Danish lower-secondary-school students of ages 12 and 13 who hosted a group of same-age Chinese students in homestays during a four-day study visit to Denmark in early 2012. Qualitative data were collected before, during and after the visit by means of portfolios and focus-group interviews.

It is important to stress that although we do not want to assess the possible IC development of the students, some evaluation on this matter is unavoidable. Instead, our main focus is to discuss host students' experiences in relation to the challenges and possibilities of using short-term study visits to develop IC in host students.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Culture, Hybridity and Negotiation

In this chapter, and in line with Chap. 1 in this volume, we employ an understanding of culture that emphasizes hybridity and considers cultures as being produced by individuals. A constant negotiation between the individual and the social world leads to the shaping and reshaping of culture. Cultures are not fixed entities but social constructions created by people, and they undergo constant negotiation and development (Dervin, 2009; Holliday, 2013). Thus, intercultural meetings do not involve meetings or interactions between cultures or groups, but between individuals

(Byram, 2009, p. 186; Deardorff, 2009, p. 6; Dervin, 2009, p. 119; Wikan, 2002, p. 84).

Echoing Jensen (2013), we recognize the fact that in practice, it is difficult to delineate a sharp division between social constructivist and more essentialist understandings of culture. However, there is a need to be critical toward and continuously challenge essentialist understandings that treat ‘cultures’ as things (Phillips, 2007, p. 42) and individuals as ‘robots programmed with “cultural” rules’ (Abu-Lughod, 2008, p. 158). The terms ‘Chinese’ and ‘Danish culture’, respectively, are used in this chapter based on recognition of the fact that the particular structures of the society in which we were brought up have an impact on us as human beings and are resources on which we draw (Holliday, 2013).

A Constructivist Approach to IC

Much consensus exists about the holistic nature of competences, encompassing cognitive, emotional, behavioural and social elements, but the most common characteristic of a competence is the pivotal role of action orientation: What is essential is not what individuals ‘have learned but what they can do with or through what they have learned’ (Illeris, 2014, p. 114), and emphasis is on the ability ‘to cope successfully with new, unknown, unfamiliar, and unpredictable challenges and situations’ (Illeris, 2014, p. 115). In relation to IC, definitions and models generally acknowledge that IC entails four dimensions, these being knowledge, attitude, skills and behaviours, and requires the ability to interact effectively and appropriately with others in intercultural situations or contexts (Deardorff, 2009).

This chapter employs a constructivist approach to learning (Kolb, 1984; Wenger, 1998) and considers social interaction and experiences to be important parts of learning. IC is considered a specifically qualified learning in relation to the intercultural area (Illeris, 2011). Such learning is a never-ending process that can be developed in both formal and informal learning contexts (Byram & Feng, 2006).

Inspiration has been found in Byram’s (2008, 2009) research on IC within foreign language teaching, which is based on the ideal of the intercultural speaker being an individual who is aware of cultural similarities and differences and able to act as a mediator in intercultural encounters (see Chap. 4, this volume). Byram’s model comprises five elements: (1) Knowledge (savoirs), (2) Attitudes (savoir être), (3) Skills of interpreting and relating

(savoir comprendre), (4) Skills of discovery and interaction (savoir apprendre/faire), and (5) Critical cultural awareness (savoir s'engager) (For a critical approach to Byram's model see Chap. 8, this volume).

For this study, it is important to understand what it means for learners of ages 12 and 13 to be interculturally competent. At this age, students have just entered into the formal operational stage of adolescence (Inhelder & Piaget, 1999) and have not yet reached full cognitive capacity. Thus, new ways of thinking are still being developed, such as metacognition and critical reflection. These cognitive and emotional aspects influence young learners' development of IC, so while these learners may not be able to reach their full potential, it is still possible for them to develop elements of intercultural competence (Byram, 2008; Illeris, 2007).

Research Methodology

In this study, we have employed a qualitative research approach emphasizing the words, feelings, perceptions and experiences of young host students. We hold that children are significant and competent social actors and take their life experiences seriously. We emphasize the importance of their reflections and lived experiences while keeping in mind that certain biological aspects influence their cognitive and linguistic abilities (Andersen & Ottosen, 2002). This was taken into consideration in the research design and in our analysis of the empirical material (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2009).

Research Context: A Study Visit from China

In late 2011, a school located in Hangzhou, China, and with a focus on foreign languages, planned a study trip that would allow 22 students (12 girls and 10 boys of ages 12 and 13) to visit Germany during a Chinese school holiday in early 2012. The organizers found that there would be time to make a four-day sojourn to a school in Aalborg, Denmark, and through the Confucius Institute for Innovation and Learning at Aalborg University (CI AAU), cooperation was established with a local public school willing to find same-age host students (14 girls and 9 boys, see Table 3.1). The objective of bringing the students together was to create an intercultural community of practice (Wenger, 1998), facilitate institutional development toward internationalization, establish a foundation for future Danish-Chinese student exchanges, and possibly facilitate the development of ICs at a student level.

Table 3.1 Research participants

	<i>Grade 6 Girls</i>	<i>Grade 6 boys</i>	<i>Grade 7 girls</i>	<i>Grade 7 boys</i>	<i>All students</i>
Host students	6	6	8	3	23
Focus group interviews	6	4	7	3	20
Portfolios	5	5	7	2	19

With the exception of one case caused by unequal numbers, each of the Chinese students was randomly paired with a same-gender host partner in an individual homestay. In practice, the study visit included the use of English as lingua franca, workshops, a communal student dinner at school, regular school classes, a GPS run in the city, spare time spent with host families, and dinner for host families, students, teachers and organizers at a Chinese restaurant. The design of the study visit as an intercultural community of practice and the organizers' reflections in relation to the visit have been discussed in a previous publication (Lyngdorf, Egekvist, Du, & Jiannong, 2013).

METHODS

The following qualitative research methods were used to explore and document the study visit for the purpose of researching the Danish host students' intercultural experiences and learning:

1. Student portfolios (before, during and after the visit),
2. Focus group interviews (after the visit).

A portfolio is a pedagogical documentation and learning tool that has the potential to clarify students' learning and development in various learning situations through the use of reflection (Ellmin, 1999; Lund, 2008). Host students were introduced to a student portfolio with pre-designed categories in order to capture some of their understandings and intercultural experiences, and to stimulate reflection thereon (Byram, 2008). Prior to the arrival of the Chinese students, Danish students were asked to share their expectations of the visit and their guests. During the visit, they were asked to share particularly meaningful experiences and new knowledge. After the visitors departed, they were asked to share reflections on whether their expectations had been met. The portfolio was

made voluntary rather than integrated into the school context. Nineteen students worked on portfolios (Table 3.1), but in some cases, descriptions and reflections were limited.

Two months after the visit, providing students time to digest the experience, four focus group interviews (referred to as FGI-4) of approximately one hour each were conducted with 19 host students (Table 3.1) to supplement the written portfolio data through the creation of a forum for oral reflections through shared experiences, ideas, beliefs and attitudes. In order to create a safe context for students to share experiences, discoveries and viewpoints, interviews were arranged in groups of five or six students according to their classes, with a researcher functioning as a mediator (referred to as M) and thus a co-constructor of the knowledge produced. The combination of a group of students and one researcher helped balance the asymmetric power-relation between adult and child (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2009), and the serving of snacks and drinks generated a relaxed atmosphere.

Focus groups were expected to bring about discussions, joint reflection and mutual learning through a sharing of experiences. Interview themes covered elements of IC and supplemented the portfolios by exploring incomplete information and common elements in more detail. The moderator transcribed the interviews based on a strategy of maintaining the contents of what was said, and the data were categorized, analysed and interpreted through meaning condensation (Brinkmann & Tanggaard, 2010).

Limitations

One of the main objectives of internationalization efforts at the school level in Denmark is to establish a foundation for and initiate a process of IC development in students in order for them to engage actively in handling the multifaceted future challenges in the international arena (Styrelsen for International Uddannelse, Denmark, 2010). Schools make use of various activities to achieve this, including short-term international experiences, but primarily due to the young age of the students at this educational level, short-term international experiences often last less than one week. One might argue that such brief encounters cannot play a significant role in individuals' IC development, but these very short intercultural meetings are a condition of researching international activities at this educational level. Furthermore, Dervin emphasizes that:

Many researchers have demonstrated, for example, that people who travel a lot or spent extensive time abroad are not necessarily more open-minded than others (cf. for instance Phillips, 2007, p. 30) and sometimes they are even less. (Dervin, 2009, p. 124)

Thus, in relation to IC development, it is not the quantity (e.g., number of intercultural meetings or time spent abroad) that matters, but the quality of the intercultural encounters (see Chap. 1, this volume).

Ethical Considerations

It was emphasized as a condition for everyone involved, both in Denmark and in China, that the study visit would be used as a research context. The Danish school involved has a tradition of engagement and participation in research projects, and the Head of School gave permission both for research to be carried out and for students to work on portfolios and participate in focus-group interviews for research purposes. The school informed the host students' parents about our research activities in relation to the visit.

In a meeting prior to the host experience, the students were carefully informed about our role as researchers during the visit and presented with copies of the pre-designed student portfolio. It was emphasized that working on the portfolio and sharing the reflections therein was voluntary. Furthermore, students were asked to participate in focus-group interviews upon the departure of their visitors, and anonymity was promised in all cases.

FINDINGS

Findings in this study reflect general understandings, experiences and reflections of the host students involved and are presented within the following categories:

1. Pre-understandings
2. Experiences during the study visit. Continuous revisiting of data showed that students repeatedly referred to experiences in relation to (a) Dining and home environment routines, (b) Interests, (c) Physical appearance, and (d) Language.
3. Overall reflections

Quotations from student portfolios and focus-group interviews (translated from Danish into English by the authors) are included in order to give voice to the students (students are identified with abbreviations, e.g., G2-6, meaning Girl 2 grade 6), and each category is summarized concerning the possibilities and challenges of using short-term study visits to develop ICs in host students. These will be used as a point of departure for discussion.

Pre-understanding

Findings from host-students' portfolios show that their main expectations were for the study visit to be a fun, exciting and/or educational experience. One girl wrote:

It will be exciting to learn about their culture and getting to know a Chinese. It may also be embarrassing and awkward in some situations due to our language and that we may not know what to talk about. (Portfolio, G13-7)

Host students' main expectations of the Chinese students were for them to be kind and well behaved. Additional expectations among the students were for the Chinese students to be, for example, small, fast, serious, good at English, and similar to themselves. These findings bring insight into students' pre-understandings (Jensen, 2013) and hetero-stereotypes (Dervin, 2012).

Experiences

Dining and Home Environment Routines

Nineteen students shared experiences related to dining situations, which revealed differences in the use of cutlery or chopsticks, table manners, eating habits, preparation of ingredients, doing the dishes, and behaviour while dining. Two boys elaborated:

What I remember best was when my mother had prepared a chicken and bacon sandwich [...]. He just chewed his food so noisily. [...] I have just never heard a human being eat so noisily. (FG4, B7-7)

At breakfast [...] [my Chinese visitor] put buttery cheese on one side of the bread roll, then some ham, and some thin slices of chocolate [traditional

Danish food ‘pålægchokolade’], and then he closed it. [...] We don’t usually eat something like that in my house.

[...]

Well, we were having dinner, and then he has finished. Without carrying out his plate or anything, he goes to his room to find out something about an email. And we have not even finished eating. Then he comes and asks, ‘Can you help me with my email address?’ We are having dinner. Then we have to get up and help him. (FG2, B4-6)

In addition, a girl noted a difference in the process of washing dishes:

They used cold water to do the dishes. Here we usually use hot water [...] I thought it was a bit strange, but still, I did not know if it was because they did not know you are not supposed to use cold water, or because they used cold water at home. (FG2, G5-6)

Sixteen host students emphasized home environment routines related to showering, changing and washing clothes, and sleeping, and also differences in the everyday lives of Chinese and Danish students. In a focus-group dialogue, three students shared experiences regarding changing clothes and sleeping:

G1-6: At first, I thought that perhaps she would be afraid of changing clothes in front of me. But she just quickly took off her pants and slept in her knickers.

B1-6: Mine wore all his clothes while sleeping. He wore it for 2 days [B2-6: *looks disgusted*]. It is so nasty.

G3-6: Mine, she, what was strange was that the clothes she was wearing, then when she was off to bed, she just took off her pants, and then she wore pajamas underneath. And then the next day she just put on her clothes again on top of the pajamas. That was a bit strange. (FG1)

One female host also described differences in their everyday lives:

At least she has described it [school life in China] very well; that it is *really* hard, and that she would stay up until 12pm and do her homework. She finished school at 6pm, and then she would just sit in her room in the dormitory until 12pm. You see, they did not live at home, they lived at school. So I think it is really hard, because she also sent me an email saying ‘My teachers are *so* mean and cranky’ [...]. (FG3, G7-7)

Findings show some common traits in host students' experiences regarding dining and home environment routines, which confronted them with tacit knowledge of cultural practices in their own environments through their visitors' hands-on engagement. This also allowed students to gain knowledge about differences in school systems.

Interests

Seventeen students emphasized experiences related to interests such as sports, games, activities, school and topics of conversation among friends. One girl shared an experience of learning about Chinese social interaction:

G7-7: [...] they asked us questions about which boys we thought were cute and so [laugh]. It was mega weird, I think. I did not even think they thought about such things.

M: Well, do you talk about such things with your friends?

G7-7: Yes.

M: Since you think it was strange...

G7-7: Yes. I think it was strange. I did not think they did so. Well, I thought that boys and girls could not date. And they said they could not.

M: But you still think it is strange for them to even think about...?

G7-7: Yes. But I don't think it was strange. I just did not *think* they did. I did not think they were allowed to. And then they were teasing someone with some boy and so. And I did not think they were allowed to do so. I did not think they could date in China. I thought it was like with Muslims—that they cannot date anyone before getting married and so. (FG3)

Two boys elaborated on an experience related to gameplay:

B4-6: At [B5-6]'s house they asked if we should play poker. We said yes, because we knew what poker was. Then they bring out this box, and it was not that kind of poker they had. It was a different kind of poker. [...]

B5-6: Yeah, it was a bit difficult to understand.

B4-6: Yes, but we learned in the end. It was pretty funny, and we won. (FG2)

The findings illustrate students' encounters with similarities and differences in both cultural products and practices related to interests between the Danish and Chinese students. For example, the Chinese students' interest in boyfriends and girlfriends was puzzling for some host students and thus illustrated the presence of a hetero-stereotype.

Physical Appearance

Twelve host students emphasized experiences related to aspects of the visitors' physical appearance, such as height, teeth, bracelets, glasses and fashion. Two explained in their portfolios:

Almost all the Chinese either wore a bracelet or glasses. [...] I think it was strange that so many either wore a bracelet or glasses, because not as many people do that here. (Portfolio, G8-7)

[It was surprising] that he was as tall as me. I always think Chinese look so tiny on TV. Perhaps they stop growing before us? (Portfolio, B2-6)

Likewise, differences in fashion trends were discussed in a focus-group interview:

G5-6: Yes, they wore really colourful clothes. We usually wear black and white and darker colours. [...] They always wore red and... [*The girls speak all at once*]

G6-6: A jacket with ears and something that looked like a pirate. It was 'Lalabobo' [fashion brand] [*All the girls laugh*]

G5-6: Yes.

B4-6: Also, all of their jackets were, at least in my opinion, these shiny ones, all smooth and shiny. (FG2)

Experiences related to physical appearance illustrate how host students were confronted with visible similarities and differences, both due to biological differences between and within the European and Asian races (e.g., height) and due to cultural practices in their home environments (e.g., bracelets and fashion trends).

Language

English was used as a lingua franca, and six host students noted improvements in their own English as a consequence of the visit. However, in their portfolios, nine students pointed at the limited English skills of some Chinese students as a challenging aspect of the experience. Due to the visitors attending a school with a focus on foreign languages, the hosts had expected better skills. Three girls jointly reflected on the limited English skills:

G9-7: I also think it is because our language is more similar to English than theirs. There is not a single similarity there. [...]

G7-7: That is actually true. [...] Actually, I have never thought about the fact that it might be difficult for them to learn English. It is just as difficult for them, as it is for us with French. But of course, we have only had French for half a year.

G8-7: We have not learned much either. (FG3)

While there were some instances of limited English skills influencing attempts to understand situations or experiences and causing irritation for the hosts, nine students pointed at the use of activities such as board games, cards, soccer, foosball, and ‘truth or dare’ as a way to interact positively with the Chinese students by getting to know them better and creating a sense of community. One girl shared an experience of playing the game ‘truth or dare’:

[...] I think they think it was funny, because it was the Chinese students who had to decide a consequence for us [...]. And then I believe they thought it was funny, because they could laugh with us at them. Whether it was them or us who had to do something, they could laugh with us. So there was a kind of community to it. (FG4, G10-7)

Students developed strategies to cope with language challenges, such as resolving misunderstandings or unravelling mysteries by asking clarifying questions or using digital translation tools such as Google translate. However, some did not make an effort to clarify communication, such as a girl who explained: ‘They probably could not understand what I said anyway’ (G9-7).

Findings show that while host students experienced improvements to their English through the practice of English as lingua franca, lack of language proficiency proved to be a challenge and created gaps between hosts and visitors. Strategies to overcome challenges involved acting as a mediator and dealing effectively with misunderstandings or puzzling episodes through engagement in social activities. In addition, games established a positive and informal atmosphere of community in the intercultural encounter.

Students’ Overall Reflections

Looking back, students generally agreed that they had a good and educational experience through which some found new friends while others learned to take more responsibility or appreciate aspects of their own lives.

As one boy explained, the experience was also an opportunity to experience some aspects of China at home: ‘Not to travel abroad to see how they are. To have the culture brought home’ (FG2, B4-6).

The experiences led to overall reflections in relation to habits, similarities and differences in general, as well as varying understandings of politeness. In one of the focus groups, a girl reflected on her visitor’s habits:

I also thought about that in Denmark, with certain things, we could not imagine anything different. Therefore, in many cases I thought: ‘Oh, that was a bit strange.’ But then, after her departure, I reflected upon it and came to think it was a bit peculiar that we have so many things we cannot see done differently—with the cold meats and how they eat. [...] They just do it. They just try all kinds of things that we could not even think of. [...] Not only in terms of food, but generally speaking. [...] at least I now think a lot about it. That it is fine. That you do not always have to think about things in that way. (FG2, G6-6)

Another girl reflected on the similarities and differences between the Danish and Chinese students:

Well, there is not much difference in behaviour in our age group; how you behave as a Chinese and as a Dane. But when there are differences, then it is reasonably big differences. [...] They behave very similar to us when they were hanging out with their friends. Then they had some things they could talk about. It was similar to us, if *we* were hanging out with our best friends. [...] They were also looking at all kinds of singers from Asia and said that they were hot and such things, like we did. It is kind of the same. (FG4, G10-7)

In addition to limited vocabulary, other reasons for communication difficulties were discussed:

G7-7: [...] It was a bit difficult. I also think they are just a bit shy in general, because they have been taught in their upbringing not to be so ahead of the curve. I also think the reason why you talked only with your own Chinese is because, first, it was really difficult getting to know your own Chinese, and then it is even more difficult getting to know the others. It takes three days or so, before you really know the Chinese, so that you can talk a lot with them.

M: But did that have anything to do with them being Chinese? [...]

G9-7: I think you judge them quickly.

M: How?

G9-7: Well, it is just like, because you know, because we have learned about China [in school], then you hear about how strict it is, and then you judge them to be these quiet and boring people, I think.

G7-7: Yes.

M: Okay, yes. So did they live up to the things you judged them to?

G9-7: Many times, I would say. They were boring. [...]. She was very posh all the times. (FG3)

A few students expressed that they did not feel their expectations had been fulfilled. One experienced a very homesick visitor who did not engage in or share anything while visiting. Others expected something similar to a previous experience of international student exchange¹ (that they would interact with everyone, make many friends, and communicate easily via English).

Students' overall experiences led to discussing and reflecting on cultural practices, rules, and meaning constructions in different cultural environments, including their own. Understandings of 'politeness' and 'normality' in relation to such things as family and school life were widely discussed, and host students were confronted with the fact that 'good manners' and the definition thereof stem from an individual's cultural resources, or what is learned from family and society during their upbringing.

Challenges and Possibilities

Students' pre-understandings of, experiences during, and overall reflections on the visit indicate several possibilities and challenges in developing ICs:

- Students' pre-understandings indicate a willingness to engage in the host experience with a positive attitude (*savoir être*). However, students' retrospective attitude is closely linked to the (un)fulfilment of expectations during the experience.
- Concrete intercultural experiences in host students' own cultural environment provide possibilities for experiential culture learning (*savoirs apprendre/faire*) and confrontation of pre-understandings and hetero-stereotypes (*savoirs*). However, pre-understandings and stereotypes can be difficult to change.
- English as a lingua franca provides students with possibilities to improve their English through practice (*savoir apprendre/faire*)

and to gain new knowledge in face-to-face communication (savoir). Conversely, the lack of language proficiency poses a challenge that demands effective coping strategies. Games were found to establish a positive atmosphere in the intercultural encounter by creating laughter, informal interaction and a feeling of community.

- Some students' retrospective reflections on the host experience indicate curiosity, openness and a readiness to suspend disbelief about both their own and others' culture (savoir être), in addition to an ability to critically evaluate practices and products in both their own and other cultures (savoir s'engager).

These challenges and possibilities will be discussed in relation to theory and other studies within the following categories: (1) experiential learning, (2) stereotypes, and (3) coping strategies and support.

DISCUSSION

Experiential Learning

Hosting an international student creates an opportunity to experience an individual with another cultural background in a face-to-face meeting without travelling abroad. Homestays are an intense internationalization at home experience for host students, providing possibilities for them to learn in their comfort zones and seek parental support during the experiencing of similarities and differences in terms of cultural practices, which are some of the most noticeable signs of culture, and of which people may hardly be aware until they experience situations confronting them with unfamiliar practices (Holliday, 2013).

Byram and Feng (2006) argue that experiential learning about culture through hands-on experiences is more effective than classroom learning about culture. However, research on IC shows that face-to-face meetings between individuals of different cultural backgrounds do not automatically lead to IC (Deardorff, 2009, p. xiii; Dervin, 2009). Similarly, in his research on competences, Illeris (2011) argues that even though practical experience in a specific field is considered desirable, it is rarely enough for an individual to develop a structured understanding and react both quickly and appropriately to new situations. Conscious, critical and analytically orientated reflections are needed in order to develop a personal attitude and overview. Thus, a combination of practical experience and

theoretical schooling is considered the best way to develop competences (Illeris, 2011, p. 44). This leads to considerations related to the design of study visits and the support of students' IC development before, during and after host experiences, which will be discussed in the next section.

Based on a social constructivist understanding of intercultural encounters as involving meetings between individuals (Dervin, 2009), it is, however, also relevant to discuss why international study visits should be prioritized and whether intercultural encounters might as well happen locally. This study shows that the international perspective can bring about training in foreign language skills and raise awareness of similarities and differences between people. Elements such as different first languages and nation states can create borders between people. Phillips (2007, pp. 50–51) argues for a need to challenge the tendency to exaggerate differences between cultures and focus more on similarities instead. This might result in a deeper sense of global citizenship, while a focus on differences could be used as a point of departure to reflect upon normality and the social construction of culture.

Stereotypes

Host experiences can bring about some of the possibilities and challenges in confronting existing stereotypes formed around oneself and others in a process of stereotyping, re-stereotyping and de-stereotyping, an example in our findings being the development of one student's understanding of Chinese dating practice.

Stereotypes are poorly nuanced images charged with values (both positive and negative) that emphasize differences and boundaries between groups of people and either ignore or explain away deviating examples (Illman, 2006). Stereotypes are 'understood as tools for defining the otherness of the other and maintaining symbolic order' (Hall, 1997, p. 258). Once stereotypes become part of our worldview, they are difficult to change. As explained by Lippmann (1922, p. 64): 'They are the fortress of our tradition, and behind its defenses we can continue to feel ourselves safe in the position we occupy'.

Increased intercultural contact between individuals does not necessarily disarm stereotypes (Hewstone, 1996; Illman, 2006), and Allport's research on contact hypothesis in relation to prejudice and stereotypes concludes that mere contact between individuals of different groups does not necessarily lead to a change of attitudes. Contact has to 'reach below

the surface in order to be effective in altering prejudice' (Allport, 1954, p. 276).

Keeping this in mind, it is crucial to create awareness of stereotypes in students involved in study visits. However, echoing Dervin (2012, p. 186), attempts should not be made to 'break' stereotypes or replace them with the 'truth'. It is unrealistic to believe that stereotypes can be completely eradicated. They will always exist, but it is possible to heighten the awareness of their existence and provide an understanding of how and why they are created, and how they may influence individuals in intercultural encounters (For more on stereotypes see Chaps. 1 and 10, this volume).

Coping Strategies and Support

Students' intercultural encounters in study visits are complicated and, in many ways, unpredictable. Similar to Weidemann and Blüml's (2009) study on German host families, the present findings show that it was not a purely positive experience for the host students involved; in some cases, it was found to be problematic to varying degrees due to such factors as language difficulties, lack of interaction or specific negative episodes left unexplained. The findings illustrate a need to help students put cultural behaviour in context and understand that there are, in fact, many similarities between people from different cultural backgrounds, no matter how different they may initially seem. Some behaviour is universal, some is cultural, and some is personal (Storti, 2009).

This fact points to the challenge of helping students manage pre-understandings and expectations of the hosting experience in relation to the reality of the experience and of exploring certain experiences during the intercultural encounter. Learning situations are not necessarily conflict-free and can be experienced as both difficult and frustrating (Illeris, 2014).

To assist host students, study visits can be designed in ways that prepare them in advance for the intensive and sometimes challenging character of the host experience through theoretical schooling. Themes and theories of culture, IC, stereotypes, coping strategies, human interaction, and the general etiquette of being a host (to avoid alienation of the other) could be addressed at a learner-appropriate level (Byram, 2009; Dervin, 2009). Furthermore, this study suggests that laughter and the use of games as mediating objects are positive aspects in intercultural encounters, which could be emphasized during the experience. Likewise, it is important that the experience is not merely left to evaporate into thin air, but used to

create a foundation for coping successfully with future unfamiliar and challenging intercultural situations. Individual portfolio writing can assist students in their learning process in relation to the experience, and support through creation of a forum for joint reflections was found to add nuance to experiences, raise awareness of similarities and differences, and bring about overall reflections of critical cultural awareness. Thus, the 'right' facilitation of intercultural learning spaces (see also Lyngdorf et al., 2013) and help during the reflection process can assist students in their intercultural competence development and their appreciation of diversity.

CONCLUSION

Findings from host students' experiences and reflections in this study indicate both challenges and possibilities of IC development in relation to experiential learning, stereotypes and coping strategies and support.

The study shows that host students experience many challenges involved in the intercultural encounter despite its taking place in their own cultural environment and comfort zone. There is a continuous interaction between potential difficulties and possibilities in such a meeting, and the study shows clear signs of challenges related to cultural practices such as eating and visible cultural products such as clothes, both of which illuminate differences. However, the challenges host students encounter appear to be eased through laughter and games, which were found to bridge the intercultural meeting by bringing about a feeling of community and emphasizing similarities in the students.

It is essential to maintain awareness of the fact that ICs are not necessarily the result of a host experience; the experience can also reinforce host students' negative hetero-stereotypes. Thus, the 'right' facilitation of the study visit is important in order to establish a context for possible IC development, and support is essential before, during and after the experience. Shared experiences and joint reflection in groups were found to reveal many nuances to students' experiences and lead to a critical cultural awareness among some of the participants.

NOTE

1. Five students had experiences from Poland and Sweden via EU-funded Comenius programmes.

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