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Strengthening intercultural teacher competence through internships abroad?

Music student teachers' reflections

Stärkung der interkulturellen Lehrkompetenz durch Schulpraktika im Ausland? Reflexionen von Musiklehramtsstudierenden

Schulpraktika im Ausland (SIA) werden in der Musiklehrkräftebildung immer häufiger durchgeführt, was vor allem zurückzuführen ist auf das gestiegene Interesse an Global Citizenship Education und interkultureller Lehrkompetenz. Die Literatur weist auf einige wichtige Vorteile von SIAs hin, es finden sich jedoch auch kritische Stimmen und es fehlen empirisch gesicherte Informationen speziell zur Musiklehrkräftebildung. Dieser Artikel präsentiert Reflexionen von angehenden Musiklehrkräften, die Schulpraktika im Ausland absolviert haben, insbesondere zu Aspekten des interkulturellen Lernens und Erfahrungen mit dem Musik Unterrichten in einer Fremdsprache. Die Ergebnisse unserer Auswertungen deuten darauf hin, dass Lern-erfolge eher auf sozial-kommunikativer Ebene stattfinden, und Lernziele wie ein gesteigertes kulturelles Bewusstsein oder kulturelle Sensibilität nicht automatisch erreicht werden.

1. Introduction

While compulsory internships in Europe's teacher education programs primarily take place either domestically (Bons et al., in review) or in national schools abroad, such as *Deutsche Auslandsschulen* (German Schools Abroad), internships at schools in foreign countries with a different educational system – school internships abroad (SIAs)¹ – can be a further type of enriching experience for student teachers (ST). The number of SIAs offered by teacher education institutions throughout the world has increased significantly in recent years (di Pietro, 2022).

1 In this article, we frequently use the abbreviations "ST" for "Student Teachers" (students in a post-secondary teacher education program), "MT" for "Mentor teacher" (school teachers who accompany student teachers as mentors during their internship), "SIA" for "School Internship Abroad".

Why is it attractive to strengthen SIAs in general and in music teacher education in particular? In the literature, justifications for SIAs focus on the effects they may have on students, including the general strengthening of personality (Pence & Macgillivray, 2008; Willard-Holt, 2001), the development of critical reflection (Murray & Kujundzic, 2005) and intercultural competence (Kabilan, 2013). TALIS, the survey on teachers as lifelong learners in 34 countries worldwide (OECD, 2019), shows that only one quarter of teachers studied feel adequately prepared for intercultural education – a term which the authors applied broadly – and only one third gained experience in multicultural/multilingual contexts during their teacher training. Our study, from which we present interim results in the following text, takes place within the EU co-funded project TEAM – Teacher Education Academy for Music.² In our working group in TEAM, we work within a Design-Based Research (DBR) setting to develop SIA formats and OERS for use by and with music STs in an SIA context. In this article we focus on aspects of music STs' reflections in the area of intercultural teacher competence, which is set forth in the literature as a key learning area in SIAs. We believe that this topic is particularly worth investigating in the field of music because of the referring discourse in music education. In this article we ask: What kind of experiences do music students relay that refer to the field of intercultural teacher competences during SIAs? How do they reflect on these experiences? And how do they deal with their experiences, including teaching music in a foreign language?

2. Internships abroad to deepen intercultural competence

In his systematic review on skill development in international internships, Di Pietro (2022, Table 3) proposes an understanding of intercultural teacher competence as *cultural awareness / cultural sensitivity / cultural appreciation*, placed together with *adaptability / flexibility* and *open-mindedness* under the heading of *intellectual openness* and within the domain *intrapersonal skills*, which stands alongside the two further domains of *cognitive skills* and *interpersonal skills*. Essentially, we can define intercultural teacher competence as the ability to be flexible, open and culturally aware in order to develop beneficial teaching options for culturally diverse and/or foreign-perceived learning groups. Intercultural dispositions such as those listed above are understood as the basis for intercultural action competence. These dispositions are positively related to the ability to reflect on (one's own) attitudes and action practices, to critically question them

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and, if necessary, to modify them (e.g. Mahon, 2009) as well as to adequately pursue intercultural learning goals in class (Göbel & Hesse, 2008).

There are empirical studies confirming that SIAs provide opportunities for STs to acquire and deepen parts of this field of competence. Rotter (2014) posits that SIAs lead students to gain a better understanding of their own cultural anchoring and to learn to question their existing notions of normality (p. 53). Among other competencies, language sensitivity is mentioned as becoming increasingly important in today's educational contexts due to growing migration (Cheng & Huang, 2023; Marx & Moss, 2011; Buschmann & Malmberg, in press), as is the hope of preparing future teachers in the sense of global citizenship education (Cushner & Brennan, 2007; Merryfield & Kasai, 2010) and creating "global-work-ready" graduates (Wrench et al., 2021). Dealing with uncertainty and risk are seen as competencies that can be trained in particular through internships abroad. A few studies indicate that these effects can even be achieved with shorter internship durations, such as four weeks (Pence & Macgillivray, 2008; Willard-Holt, 2001). In light of the TALIS study's results regarding inadequate intercultural competence in teachers, these findings on the opportunities and strengths of SIAs are especially pertinent.

At the same time, critical voices are emerging: In their study of an SIA in South Africa with Australian STs, Parr et al. point out a danger of superficiality: "The study might run the risk of falling into what some researchers have termed 'myth-making,' where superficial feel-good stories of intercultural learning serve to disguise an old-style colonial rhetoric of enlightenment and education" (Parr et al., 2017, p. 164). At the same time, the partially implicit power relations that underpin the cooperation between ST and mentor teachers (MTs) need attention (Major & Santoro, 2016). Studies of SIA differ greatly in terms of breadth and their proximity of the foreign school experience: Many of the studies were conducted within the Anglo-American region or between two systems with the same language (e.g., between Spanish-speaking countries). If we assume language to be a central means of communication, enabling us to more precisely confirm what is perceived, to enter into deeper exchange with each other and to approach the unfamiliar, then additional questions regarding foreign language teaching and mentoring arise. This is the reason why in the following text we include all data referring to language issues. It is also essential to note that the framing of SIA experiences is heavily influenced by the differences in curricula and educational contexts across regions and countries when teaching in another country. Moreover, some studies suggest limitations of the desired positive effects of international internships, such as the assumption that shared cultural understandings or interpretations cannot be guaranteed for the relationship between ST and host community.

If we assume that SIAs influence the intercultural learning of prospective teachers, then subject-specific questions arise. Regarding music education, there is not yet much empirically verified information. VanDeusen (2019) perceived

different stages of teachers noticing cultural differences in the music classroom. She also reports having had particularly good experiences with bringing student teachers into close contact with people who are perceived as foreign, even outside of school, thereby “immersing” them. Apart from looking at SIAs in teacher education, intercultural sensitivity in music education has been discussed in various respects in recent years. This led to a discussion about a possible global music canon for schools (Campbell, 2004). The right to adapt foreign music in the classroom has also been frequently debated, arguing the question of cultural appreciation versus appropriation (Hömborg, 2022). Especially in the 2000s, an advanced discussion took place on the concept of *culture* for music education in schools; the German-speaking countries promoted the meaning-oriented concept of culture at the expense of the ethnic-holistic concept (Barth, 2007). The current discussion around intercultural sensitivity in music education centers largely on its connection with social learning and democratic competence (Rideout, 2023; Westerlund et al., 2020). Anne Bubinger (2023) shows how the way in which music educators set ‘boundaries’ can influence a process determined by power and dominance relationships. Buchborn and Tralle (2024) investigated the action-guiding intercultural knowledge of STs at a German music academy. They point to an interesting discrepancy: The STs primarily value the international diversity of the student body and are oriented towards integrative coexistence in the academy, but on the other hand they align their actions along ethno-national logics. Following Foucault’s discourse-analytical theory of the *dispositif*, Eva Tralle (2023) points out the contradictory nature and power of the interculturality *dispositif* in music teachers’ language, suggesting that the buzzword interculturality and its discursive use in music education contexts should be approached more skeptically than before.

We close this section by presenting a theoretical framework useful to describe the development of *intercultural awareness / sensitivity / appreciation*. The so-called *Intercultural Development Inventory* (IDI) (Hammer & Bennett, 2003) defines how groups make sense of and respond to cultural differences and commonalities. It offers six Summary Orientation Descriptions (cf. <https://www.idiinventory.com/>):

1. *Denial*: An orientation that likely recognizes more observable cultural differences (e.g., food) but may not notice deeper cultural differences (e.g., conflict resolution styles), and may avoid or withdraw from cultural differences.
2. *Polarization (Defense / Reversal)*: A judgmental orientation that views cultural differences in terms of “us” and “them.” This can take the form of (1) an uncritical view towards one’s own cultural values and practices and an overly critical view towards other cultural values and practices, (2) an overly critical orientation towards one’s own cultural values and practices, or (3) an uncritical view towards other cultural values and practices.

3. *Minimization*: An orientation that highlights cultural commonality and universal values and principles that may also mask deeper recognition and appreciation of cultural differences.
4. *Acceptance*: An orientation that recognizes and appreciates patterns of cultural difference and commonality in one's own and other cultures.
5. *Adaptation*: An orientation that is capable of shifting cultural perspective and changing behavior in culturally appropriate and authentic ways.
6. *Cultural Disengagement*: A sense of disconnection or detachment from a primary cultural group.

We will use this framework below to discuss some of our findings.

3. Methodological approach

Given the DBR research context of our project (cf. Bakker, 2019; Konrad & Lehmann-Wermser, 2022; McKenney & Reeves, 2019), different settings and formats of SIAs as well as mentoring tools are explored, tested and continually developed through several cycles of SIAs with continuous data collection. Thus, design principles are formed as overarching elements typical of DBR (in our case for the productive formation of SIAs as well as for helpful mentoring in SIAs), which evolve from initial theory-informed conjectures and preliminary design decisions to research results through testing, evaluation and redesign.

In this article we use data from the first three cycles of our research project (another four cycles are yet to come), representing two different types of SIAs which frequently occur:

IA type 1: SIA in an international school: English is the primary means of communication, both for teachers and students at school; the curriculum of International Schools applies.

IA type 2: IA in a national school: The national language of the host country is the dominant means of communication; the National curriculum applies.

However, within these two types different circumstances apply, e.g., the length of the internships, the STs' and the MTs' proficiency in speaking English, the age range of the students in the school and whether the MT students are in a peer situation with other interns or doing their SIA alone. The sample of our three specific cycles is as follows:

- Cycles 1 and 2 were IAs type 1, an international school (lower and higher secondary) in a Western European country. Two students from a bordering country completed internships independently from one another; one internship lasted two weeks and the other three. The language of communication and instruction was English. The MT is a native English speaker, both STs speak fluent English as a foreign language, and the pupils at the school have

a broad range of native languages but are accustomed to communicating in English.

- Cycle 3 was SIA type 2, taking place in a national school (lower secondary school) in a Central European country. Two students from a Northern European country completed a month-long joint internship in a peer learning situation. The language of communication and instruction at school is typically the national language. English, a foreign language for all parties involved, was used for the purposes of the internship.

In the course of our DBR proceedings, various types of data collection are carried out: (1) *preparatory talks* between MT, ST and researcher; (2) *debrief interviews* (ST and researcher)³ and (3) regular (ideally daily) short *voice memos*⁴ by the STs, following prompts provided by the researchers. The prompts try to provoke immediate and memorable impressions as well as reflections on how IA experiences relate to prospects and self-perception as (future) music teachers.

For this article, we look exclusively into the voice memos. They were transcribed and coded using MAXQDA, following the principles of qualitative content analysis by Kuckartz (2018) and assuring intercoder reliability by combining the perspectives of the four members of the research team (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019). In this text we are not so much looking at the practical products (OERS) that are still on their way to being developed, or at the evolving design principles, but rather at some theoretical knowledge that is evolving from data during the empirically supported testing of the products.

4. Student teachers' reflections on culture: First insights

In the following, we present categories found in our two data corpora (i.e., SIA types 1 and 2) which refer to *intercultural awareness / sensitivity / appreciation* as well as teaching in a foreign language.

3 In the debrief interview (so far during the research project) a researcher offers each ST a summarizing reflection discussion on learning experiences of the SIA. This guide will be developed into an OER (interview guide) for the use of STs and MTs as a final practice tool.

4 For the first two cycles, the voice memo prompts were: 1. *How did I feel today / How do I feel like it went today?* 2. *What were the most memorable impressions?* 3. *What concerns me, or what is occupying my mind the most?* After data analysis and the subsequent refinement of design principles, the VM prompts were updated for Cycle 3 to the following: 1. *These were my most memorable impressions today ...;* 2. *These are the reasons why they are memorable to me (because they were fascinating / striking / challenging / occupying my thoughts) ...;* 3. *This is the connection between today's thoughts and how I see myself as a (future) teacher ...*

4.1 Internship Abroad in an international school (cycles 1 + 2)

The category **cultures as nations** encompasses statements by STs about groups in terms of ethnically holistic attributions. When the term “culture” is explicitly used, it refers to nations or ethnic groups. The statements grouped in this category are rather neutral, analytical observations where culture appears as a dividing element, with no reflection on connecting aspects.

VM 1/1: And it was quite interesting that they told me that as there [are] about 70 different nationalities at the school, there is not one shared culture, (..) and therefore culture or (..) personal cultural background has a different meaning for everyone.

The category **the school’s culture** describes STs’ reflections on the peculiarities, values, and norms they attribute to the internship school – not to the individuals acting within it, but rather as characteristics of the school environment itself. This category includes aspects brought up in formal settings, such as an inspiring talk given during a morning assembly, as well as insights shared during collegial conversations, such as teachers’ working conditions at the international school and experiences of being a teacher in that country, etc. These aspects express the students’ perception of their SIA environment. Their statements consistently reveal a positive attitude toward the unfamiliar setting.

VM 5/1: The day started with morning advisory again. After going through all the important dates and information, they usually use the remaining time, they have ten minutes in total, to play little games [...], and one of the teachers likes reading out inspirational quotes from his book. That’s pretty sure it’s a lovely way to begin the day, in my opinion.

The category **the perception of oneself in the SIA system** includes students’ reflections on whether their actions and demeanor meet the expectations of their MTs, pupils, or other school representatives. They question the impressions they leave on others, whether it was appropriate to ask specific follow-up questions, or worry about how their sick days might be perceived.

VM 3/2: I think what concerned me the most today was, like, I think [my MT] was a bit stressed today because he had, like, he was leading one of the meetings and (..) you could, and he was also teaching three classes today, so you could tell that he was kind of stressed out and I still had, like, one document I asked him to sign and, you know, I kind of had the feeling that he’s stressed out and I wouldn’t, like, I didn’t want to stress him out even more because of myself, but it just, like, it played out alright at the end.

VM 2/2: I guess what concerned me the most today was, like, (.) what is the impression I make by oversleeping on the second day, but I guess that just worked out all right and they're all pretty chill about that.

The category **teaching in English as deficit-oriented** describes the student teachers' reflections on their own linguistic performance – in this case, English in the international school. Verbal language proves to be a central element of communication, with no mention of other forms of interaction (e.g., through music making, gestures etc.). Although some remarks highlight linguistic progress achieved during the internship, the overall perspective remains deficit-oriented. Language difficulties are emphasized as a dividing element, both in terms of the student teacher's own ability to express themselves and the students they work with.

VM 4/2: And, you know, it upset me that this, like, this one girl, she's also [nationality of the ST]. [...] She's coming from [a bordering country] every day, she has a one-hour drive. And her parents just, like, sent her off alone [...]. And my goal is to talk to her, like, in the next weeks or something. And, like, try to, you know, find a spot where I can talk to her, maybe also in [native language]. Just so, you know, she has someone to talk to in her native language.

4.2 Internship Abroad at a national school (cycle 3)

In IA type 2 the category **English as a common language** describes the STs' reflections on teaching in English at a school where it is not the language of instruction. The category contains references both to language barriers as well as to how these barriers were overcome.

VM 1/3a: [N]ormally when you teach, you have your toolbox of things, you can say that word, and if it gets quiet, you can say those words and it fits. But since I was teaching in English, I didn't have any of my normal teaching words, so it was quite difficult to suddenly not have your toolbox at all. Uh, so I felt kind of lost [...]. It was scary as, uh, very much, but also very fun. It was hard.

Although the language situation posed a significant challenge, both STs found that their confidence in teaching and communicating in English improved throughout their internship, as did their ability to communicate using music and other non-verbal means. One ST found that music served as a "common language," and that shared music-making facilitated connection with pupils. This is summarized in the category **use music to communicate**.

VM 1/3b: [I]t was like we [were] communicating with music and, um, I think that was a really, really nice experience [...]. We can use music to communicate with

each other [...]. Everyone understands music. So we're using the music as a language to communicate with each other. That's pretty interesting.

The category **attitudes towards other philosophies of teaching and school** includes the STs' reflections on teaching philosophies and practices in the host school that differ from those prevalent in their home context. The STs frequently asked host teachers questions about their philosophies of student assessment, classroom management and the role of aesthetic subjects in general education and they expressed intention to adapt specific methods and exercises to their own school context. However, the STs displayed a tendency to measure what they observed and experienced against the standard of what they know from their own context. For example, the STs have been socialized and also trained as teachers to place a high value on pupil agency:

VM 7/3a: [O]ur laws mandate that the students at every level must be able to impact how the lessons are done. For example, do you want to do this alone or in groups? That's a big deal.

When examples of teaching philosophies valued in their country were found during observation, the STs positively evaluated what they had seen. In contrast, perceived lack of warmth in the pupil-teacher relationship was portrayed negatively by the STs, as were some assessment and classroom management methods. These they described as being at odds with their values, which they indicated stem from their own cultural context.

VM 1/3a: [I]t's so different from what we're used to. Uh, the complete opposite in [home country]. That would be very wrong [... the] connection between today's experience and how I see myself as a future teacher. I don't want to teach like that, but I see its merit.

The category **emerging teacher identity under challenging circumstances** describes the STs' reflections on the teachers they are and hope to become. Reflecting on their own teacher identity within the context of a foreign school system gave the STs new perspectives. Some reflections indicated a strengthening of identity as teachers within their national educational system, while others indicated increased confidence as result of navigating uncertainty in the foreign context. For example, one student spoke about teaching a class where his lesson plan did not go as he had anticipated:

VM 6/3a: It was scary. A good experience and I learned a lot from it, from just being nervous in that way. I haven't been that nervous or that unsure in a long while. It was cool. [...] Yeah, it's going to help me to – if I ever am in a situation like that again, I can think back, and I can, uh. This is not my first time. Next time it might

go better, and I can [...]. I know how it feels to not know how things are going to go. Yeah.

5. Discussion

The categories found show some similarities within the SIA types, but also differ in several respects.

Firstly, it is noticeable that the topic of language frequently arises in both types. However, the two data sets differ. The STs at the international school experience themselves as severely deficient; they are the only ones who struggle with language. In the national school the STs experience difficulties with English as well, but as all parties (pupils, MTs and STs) are faced with communication difficulties in unfamiliar English, the language problem seems manageable. And furthermore, in the national school, the STs seem to feel sufficiently free to experiment with further communicative solutions, namely to communicate non-linguistically and/or musically. Here, the subject of music seems to offer subject-specific opportunities for non-verbal communication, such as gestures that arise from making music, that can be helpful when teaching in contexts with language challenges.

Secondly, although the literature on SIAs emphasizes their great potential for expanding intercultural teacher competence, our data shows a somewhat contradictory picture. Cultural aspects are mentioned by our STs, but less in the sense of a catalogue of experiences in the foreign country / school system, but rather in a more specific and localized sense. We find it helpful to divide the reflections found into three levels:

On the macro level (reflection on experiences of the other region, country, music, its educational system, curricula, etc.), we find reflective statements that remain very general (cf. category cultures as nations). Within the IDI this would correspond to “minimization.” Reflections on the meso level (customs of the individual internship school, teaching styles, MTs teaching, practices around musicking, cf. category the school’s culture) are found in large numbers and in both types. In type 1, reflections tended to be very appreciative and curious, with statements that also included a possible transfer to later practice in the home country. In type 2, the opposite happened: the students frequently excluded the experiences from their own later practice or rated the practices of the internship school as worse. This would refer to “polarization” in IDI. Finally, there are extensive reflections on the micro level (intrapersonal) of the individual ST’s encounter with the internship school in the foreign country: The STs are extremely concerned with how they can personally succeed as teachers in this unfamiliar system, how they may cause friction, how they can contribute something – how they themselves “fit in.” They seem to delve very deeply into their experiences and reflections here. Yet, one must also consider that personal ties are largely

lacking in the SIA, and the STs in our SIAs spent comparatively more time at the schools than would have been the case in internships in their home country. This may also explain the deep immersion in questions of belonging or fitting in. We see potential here in revealing this deep personal need to “fit in” and questioning one’s own appropriate place as a typical experience of foreignness and of migration experiences. In our view, this experience could very well increase the understanding of their future pupils’ migration stories.

Our cautious conclusion is therefore: On the one hand, SIAs can offer STs the opportunity to become acquainted with unfamiliar educational systems or types of music lessons and to use these experiences for their own professional development, expanding their intercultural learning skills. On the other hand, it seems that getting the STs to reflect on the “big picture” is not so easy to achieve; the STs’ own backgrounds shape not only how they evaluate various aspects of their internship, but what they evaluate, and what escapes their conscious attention altogether. The most fruitful learning processes seem to happen mainly at the micro level. We do not want to condemn this at this point. It is only too understandable that prospective teachers first want to become confident at the micro level, in developing their own teaching personality. In SIAs, STs are pushed out of their comfort zones in unique ways and afforded particular opportunities. One could almost say that the internship school abroad is one more practice school of several and becomes only to a lesser extent than expected the place for developing intercultural competencies. However, we see problems in those situations in which STs position themselves almost exclusively negatively toward the “foreign school system” and do not cultivate ways for themselves to act in a culturally sensitive, open or appreciative manner.

We can summarize that in internships abroad – at least based on these VMs – it is not a given that intercultural competence as a teacher will be improved, helpful attitudes strengthened or the repertoire of actions in multicultural settings expanded. However, in order to facilitate the expansion of competencies such as *cultural awareness / cultural sensitivity / cultural appreciation*, helpful tools seem worthy of testing and developing further in our next cycles in the DBR process. We are currently planning adaptations in the design of our conversation guidelines, which will facilitate reflective discussion between ST, MT and, when applicable, university advisor, before and after the SIA. These guidelines, combined with other tools we are developing to encourage cultural self-reflection from both STs and MTs, will facilitate the discussion of similarities and differences in their contexts, as well as a discussion about the larger concepts between their actions.

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