Global Learning Experience: Developing Intercultural Competence Through Virtual Exchange

*Melissa S. Ockerman, Marta Milani, Elisa M. F. Salvadori, Agostino Portera**

Abstract

It becomes clearer every day that the world faces a broad array of global challenges that will likely be solved if people – especially young people – from a wide range of backgrounds holding diverse beliefs and practices, develop the competences to sit with those different from themselves to solve problems – or they will not be solved. An evidence-based practice to help mitigate this challenge in higher education has been the proliferation of Information and Communications (ICT) and e-learning strategies. A virtual exchange program, the Global Learning Experience (GLE), provided an ample opportunity to structure collaborative international learning experiences, and thus foster the development of intercultural competence, amongst graduate level counseling and social work students. Using a qualitative paradigm, the authors examined students' general perceptions about the GLE, how it both benefited students and posed challenges, and, importantly, how it impacted students' development of intercultural competence. We offer implications and recommendations.

Keywords: intercultural competence, intercultural education, intercultural counseling, counselor education, virtual exchange.

1. Introduction

While the XX century has been characterized by remarkable discoveries and scientific achievements, at the dawn of the new millennium the dominant concept seems to be "crisis". Growing migration is associated with an

---

* The authors collegially contributed to the preparation of the paper; however, Agostino Portera wrote the introduction; Melissa Ockerman wrote sections 2, 2.1, 2.2, 3, 7 and the first two themes in Section 6; Marta Milani is the author of sections 4, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 8; Elisa M.F. Salvadori wrote section 5, the three final themes in section 6, and section 9.

increasing loss of the sense of community: strangers are perceived as a threat; many people feel more and more self-sufficient, pushed to act solely by the search of their own pleasure and immediate happiness (Bauman and Portera, 2021). Globally, social, psychological, and educational professions have become more and more complex. In this scenario, helping professionals, including social workers, school and community mental health counselors become essential for advocating for the emotional needs of clients and for helping to create learning environments that are safe, caring, and supportive.

Considering the growing globalization and diversities, for educational and social professionals it is necessary to acquire specific competences. Throughout the world, diverse approaches have been developed: multicultural, cross-cultural, trans-cultural, culturally different, intercultural, Afro-centric, black feminists, antiracist, race, and culture (Moodley, 1999). From a European perspective, Portera (2020a) summarized the following different models: 1. *Metacultural*: intervention aiming to work with clients, without considering the cultural differences, and without "changing the culture" of people with an immigration background. Since no interpersonal encounter can take place without cultural change, this assumption is faulty and misleading; 2. *Transcultural* or *Cross-cultural*: refers to elements spreading through culture and is rooted in a theory of cultural universalism. It brings many advantages (e.g., recognizing common human nature, developing human rights and shared values). Limitations of this model include the possibility of leading to a uniform view of the world, and the risk of considering as universal one's own theories, values, norms, and rules; 3. *Multicultural* (prominent in the USA): this model is based on cultural relativism, which emphasizes the uniqueness of every culture. It shows many advantages, like the effort to recognize, understand and respect cultural differences, by strengthening the personal and cultural identity. This approach promotes social advocacy, understanding ethnic identity and counter discriminations, racism, and xenophobia. However, a limitation is that cultures are viewed as static, and interventions as identity "conserving" rather than as changing and expanding; 4. *Intercultural*: considers identity and culture as dynamic; cultural differences and migration are seen as an opportunity for positive personal and social growth. The intercultural approach is collocated between universalism (transcultural) and relativism (multicultural). At the same time, it goes beyond both and frames a new synthesis, which includes all the positive aspects of the transcultural and the multicultural theories, by adding the opportunity for interaction. According with the UNESCO (2006), the intercultural approach shares a number of features with multiculturalism (since it combats cultural barriers, discrimination, and intolerance, and promotes education for understanding and respecting diversities) and also with the transcultural approach (common laws and structural political, economic, and

social mechanisms for reducing inequalities, discrimination, poverty, and marginalization). However, in counseling and educational interventions, the intercultural approach is preferable because it places a central emphasis on (intercultural) dialogue, encounter, interaction, through the application of intercultural competence (IC).

2. Global Learning Experience (GLE)

IC is a complex construct that involves more than one component. While attitudes, knowledge, understanding, and skills are all necessary components of IC, possessing these components alone is insufficient for an individual to be credited with IC (for example, knowledge or language does not guarantee intercultural competence). It is also necessary for these components to be deployed and put into practice through action during intercultural encounters. Thus, specific learning strategies need to address the development of the components of IC in a variety of ways (i.e., course work, case study, training programs, interaction [both in presence and virtual] with students from different cultural backgrounds, etc.). In short, at the level of action, IC provides a foundation for being a global citizen. IC has strong active, interactive, and participative dimensions, and it requires individuals to develop their capacity to build common projects, to assume shared responsibilities and to create common ground to live together in peace. This is particularly true for those interested in pursuing careers within the helping profession (e.g., teachers, counselors, social workers, nurses, etc.). Thus far sufficient attention has not been paid to the issues of IC for those interested in these fields (Hladik and Jadema, 2016). An evidence-based practice to help mitigate this challenge in higher education has been the proliferation of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and e-learning strategies (Wihlborg *et al*, 2018). A virtual exchange program, the Global Learning Experience (GLE), provided an ample opportunity to structure collaborative international learning experiences, and thus foster the development of IC, between master's level counseling students in Chicago, an urban midwestern city in the United States, and graduate social work students from Italy, in northern Italy's Veneto region.

2.1. Goals and Objectives

The purpose of this research was to investigate a Global Learning Experience (GLE) in two consecutive graduate programs: one in counselor education at DePaul University and one with graduate social workers at the University of Verona. Faculty collaborated for two years to create an effective

cross-cultural experience in alignment with DePaul University's Global Learning Experience standards. The GLE was designed with the following specific student outcomes:1) respect for and learning from the perspectives of others different from themselves; 2) knowledge of global interconnectedness and interdependencies; and 3) knowledge to become a steward of global resources for a sustainable future. The goals of this research were to determine: 1) students' general perceptions of the global learning experience; 2) how, if at all, the global learning experience benefited the students; 3) how, if at all, the global learning experience posed challenges for students; and 4) how, if at all, the GLE impacted their IC. Lessons gained from this research will: 1) contribute to intercultural training for helping professionals; 2) contribute to the significant dearth of qualitative research in this area; 3) inform future iterations of virtual learning exchanges; and 4) serve as a foundation for intercultural exchange programs and continued research.

2.2. Context and Setting

During a six-week collaborative GLE project in Spring 2022, students focused on how school and community mental health counselors (DePaul University) and social workers (Università degli Studi di Verona) collaborated with their cities to broker community assets for their students and their families. As such, students were placed in groups and assigned to a specific community within their respective cities. They then analyzed the resources available within their assigned communities and created a community asset map (Griffin and Farris, 2010). The purpose of this assignment was to help students identify all community resources upon which they could draw when they enter their chosen professions. Each community group was assigned to a corresponding international community group. Students then analyzed differences and similarities between their map and their international partner group's map and thereby expanded their global perceptions about community-building and their professional roles through an applied case study activity. It is important to note that the Italian international partners were particularly interested in helping their students assist the growing refugee population in Verona. According to the Statistical Dossier on Immigration (IDOS, 2022), there are 6.1 million immigrants in Italy. The number of applicants for international protection present in the Province of Verona began to grow substantially starting in the summer of 2015 and has since risen consistently (http://www.cartadiroma.org). This goal aligned with an increasing need in Chicago, as the city has historically been comprised of a large immigrant population.

According to the American Immigration Council (2022), one in seven Illinois residents are immigrants and 20% of all Chicagoland businesses are

owned by an immigrant. Accordingly, school counselors, community mental health counselors, and social workers working with immigrant and undocumented students and families should be well-versed on how to best serve this population (Crawford, Aguayo and Valle, 2019). Moreover, IC is an ethical imperative. Indeed, IC «in the helping professions is the expression» of a certain ethical standard. The research shows that cultural competence is related to the efficiency of working with clients in the helping professions» (Hladik and Jadama, 2016, p. 678). Thus, a facet of this project focused on current institutions and community organizations that contributed to this effort.

3. Strategies for Trustworthiness

Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness, sometimes referred to as "rigor" (Hayes *et al*., 2021), are necessary in qualitative research to demonstrate confidence in, and quality of, qualitative design and analysis. We employed several trustworthiness strategies to enhance our study including peer debriefer, reflexivity, triangulation, an audit trail and a thick, rich description (Giordano *et al*., 2021; Lincoln and Guba, 1986). To begin, each researcher recorded our axiological assumptions regarding the role of our values and preconceptions in reflexive journals. Thus, we attempted to bracket our assumptions in order to honor participants' experiences. We engaged in reflexivity throughout the analysis process. After each round of coding, we examined each others' audit trail (e.g., coded data, proposed themes, code book). As described below, we also triangulated researchers' perspectives (Italian and U.S. investigators), data sources (e.g., comparing U.S. and Italian participants as well as pre and post tests), which allowed us to investigate data from multiple perspectives (Creswell and Poth, 2018). We had lengthy discussions in which we engaged in rival explanations, debated inconsistencies, and engaged in consensus coding (Hayes and Singh, 2012). Lastly, we used thick, detailed descriptions of the research process as well as maintained an audit trail to assist in future application and replication (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Hayes *et al.*, 2021).

4. Research Objectives and Methodological Paradigm

Although qualitative research is an integral part of understanding the helping professions and often requires five crucial components of «compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding [data]» (Castleberry and Nolen, 2018, p. 808), many educational professionals have resisted employing qualitative research techniques. This may be due in large part to the

nature of qualitative research which is typically expensive, time and energy consuming, and often results in vast amounts of documents to be analyzed (Haven and Van Grootel, 2019). Thus, the research project outlined in this manuscript will help address the paucity of qualitative studies in the field and emphasize the ways in which research can enhance collaborative and interdisciplinary work (Savitz-Romer *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, since the aim of this project was the identification of the peculiarities that IC takes on within the context in which it originates, the most appropriate research approach turned out to be a qualitative one, which is based on a set of interpretive practices that enable the reality under investigation to be made visible (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). Specifically, the paradigm from which the research took inspiration is the naturalistic-interpretive paradigm, which originates from the assumption that reality can be understood and analyzed from the people who are involved in the action being investigated (Cohen *et al.*, 2011). The goal, therefore, is not to seek a generalization of the theory that emerges, but rather «to know how people act in a certain context and what meanings people attribute to their experience and to the events in which they are involved in the environment in which they live» (Mortari, 2012, p. 64). The specificity of the paradigm is that the context element is thus interconnected to the person acting within it, and both thus become the focus of the analysis.

4.1. Participants

The research involved 45 students: 35 females and 10 males between the ages of 22-70. Specifically, the students were enrolled in CSL 520 "Counseling Children and Adolescents" (DePaul University) in Spring Quarter or enrolled in ardor or the master's degree in Intercultural Education and Competences (University of Verona), Spring Semester. Of the 45 subjects, 10 were Italian females between the ages of 23-28. Students participated after being informed about the research purpose in an announcement posted to D2L, a course management platform, and in-person script, so that they could possibly review it. The research project (with all consent documents, information sheets, and recruitment materials) was submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of DePaul University, which approved it (Research Protocol # IRB-2022-598). No incentives were provided and participants could opt out of the study without penalty.

4.2. Research Process Steps and Tools

The survey data collection took place in May 2022. The students received a link to the survey, conducted via Qualtrics (an on-line survey collection

website), with access only provided to the principal investigator and co-investigators. The survey included the use of self-report instruments; more specifically, short answer questions about their perceptions related to IC and demographic information (university, course, counseling/social work specialty area, age, gender, ethnicity), which were optional. In particular, the first round of the survey consisted of a pre-test of an adapted version of the "Intercultural Competence Self-Evaluation form" (Deardorff, 2006) based on "Intercultural Competence Models" by Deardorff (2004), which comprised of 15 Likert questions (on a 4-point: 5 = very high and 1 = poor) and two open-ended questions. Specifically, students were asked to rate themselves on the following IC components: respect (valuing other cultures); openness; tolerance for ambiguity; flexibility; curiosity and discovery; withholding judgment; cultural self-awareness/understanding; understanding others' worldviews; culture-specific knowledge; sociolinguistic awareness; skills to listen, observe and interpret; skills to analyze, evaluate, and relate; empathy; adaptability; communication skills. The two open-ended questions aimed to investigate what helped the students to be more appropriate and effective in the interactions, and how they could continue to develop their IC, especially the areas they rated as lower. The main purposes of the pre-test were: 1) helping students to become aware of their proficiency in one or more IC dimensions; 2) documenting the possible effectiveness of the GLE project in implementing students' IC; 3) identifying possible areas that still need to be strengthened. The second round involved a post-test of the same adapted version of the form (Deardorff, 2006) comprised of the same 15 Likert questions and the two open-ended questions, plus seven open-ended responses designed to better understand the impact of the GLE on students' IC, especially in relation to some traits/dimensions: openness; flexibility; knowledge; skills of listening, observing and interpreting; skills of analyzing, evaluating and relating; adaptability; communication skills. The survey remained available to students on the platform for one week (both for the pre-test and post-test form) and it was expected to take 15-20 minutes to complete.

4.3. Data Analysis Technique

Open-ended surveys responses were summarized using thematic analysis for overall trends and patterns to give a "snapshot" of what has been done in developing intercultural competence and in interacting effectively and appropriately with people from other cultures. Thematic analysis is a method centered on generating themes from qualitative data. It is an approach in which theory serves as a co-requisite but leaves the researcher free to select the qualitative theoretical horizon of reference (Terry *et al*., 2017). Deductive data

analysis based on prior research and conceptual framework was preferred (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006), using predetermined literature on IC. In fact, in this case, the methodological indication suggested by Deardorff (2009) and Fantini (2007) was followed, that is, working out the definition of IC before proceeding to data analysis. Therefore, the notion of IC was kept as a basis, which includes attitudes, skills, knowledge, and the role of context as foundational elements. These elements thus served as the references for data analysis with respect to the construct of competence. Also, for IC, the areas represented a guide and not a search for theoretical validation and did not preclude the possibility of the emergence of nuances or additional elements that were not previously predetermined. Units of analysis were created according to the characteristics that emerged from the text. Thus, in this case, the macro-areas were a guide during the data reading, and the contents emerged essentially inductively from the words used by the students. Afterwards, the categorization of the selected units of analysis was refined, also proceeding with the construction of subcategories where peculiarities emerged with respect to the main unit. The criterion for choosing the name to be given was first brought out by the meanings attributed by the students themselves. Only after that, it was checked whether the category was in the existing literature on models of IC and whether there was a specific explanation of the term. As highlighted by Balloi in her research (2021), a critical point to note is the fact that there is a tendency to explain in detail the meaning of the IC macro-areas models composition, while the individual elements that make them up are usually only mentioned. In this sense, verification, and validation by each individual member of the research team was therefore crucial in the debriefing phase, in order to contain the risk of excessive subjectivity in naming the categories that emerged and thus increasing the credibility. In the next paragraph, the data coding steps will be described in detail.

5. Data Coding Process

Data were summarized utilizing Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps to thematic analysis:
1) Increasing familiarity with the data: the two research groups (Italian and U.S.) had access to the entire dataset and were able to reflect on first impressions (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). An initial reflection in the Italian group concerned how some questions were answered. Analyzing some answers revealed a possible overlap and confusion between skills possessed and desired skills; it was not always possible to clearly distinguish

whether the response reported skills actually possessed by the student or simply a list of skills recognized as important and desirable.

2) Systematically creating codes across the data set: an open and inclusive coding process was carried out: the two research teams assigned labels to the parts of the text considered significant, starting with the identification of all content deemed interesting and relevant (Terry *et al.*, 2017). Each group worked following the same path: starting with the content, each team first determined which ones they considered relevant, identifying a possible label for each. The Italian group worked synchronously, so each label was assigned only once in common agreement. At the end of the work in separate groups, the researchers met online to jointly redefine the labels of each significant content.

3) Grouping the coded data into potential themes: theme generation was done by the entire research team and resulted in a codebook. The researchers examined the codes for combining and grouping them into patterns, identifying similarities, relationships, and affiliations. Initial codes can generate the main themes but can also construct subthemes (Nowell *et al.*, 2017). Initially, following a deductive approach, some preliminary themes were used, created from the reference theory and questionnaire structure (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Aronson, 1995) to which new themes were added. As a result, the grid that served as a guide changed as the data interpretation work proceeded.

4) Reviewing themes in an iterative process: the authors investigated each theme's coded data to see if they seemed to form a coherent pattern (Nowell *et al.*, 2017). Patton's (2002) criteria were used in reviewing the themes: internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity. Together, the researchers reflected on the internal coherence of individual themes and the clear distinction between one theme and another, not forgetting the connections and relationships between different themes. It is noted how some codes can be attributed to more than one theme and how the research team's choices are therefore central.

5) Defining and naming themes after being engaged in consensus coding: for each theme, the researchers identified a definition that was able to immediately communicate what the theme is about, without losing all the underlying nuances. Consistent with phase 4, possible relationships between themes were explored, and the underlying codes for each theme were reviewed to create the definition better. At the end of the phase, the researchers reviewed the entire dataset to understand whether the identified themes captured (or not) the most salient aspects of the research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Pagani, 2020).

6) Creating a research report: in the final step, the report was written following an analytical style (Terry *et al*., 2017), so the data and results were discussed collegially by all the researchers involved in the analysis, considering the research questions and the literature. Interpretations of the data made by the research team were also included at the end of the report. Also, in the research report, as well as in the data analysis process, the researchers' reflexivity was a key component that allowed them to reread the data and not simply illustrate them (Braun, Clarke and Hayfield, 2019). The research report served as the basis for writing this manuscript and the presenting of the findings.

6. Findings

We sought to discover participants' general perceptions (both perceived benefits and challenges) of the GLE as well as its impact on their IC. Using thematic analysis, five overarching themes emerged: (a) positive impact of GLE, (b) barriers to communication, (c) communication between language and culture, (d) fostering intercultural competence and (e) students' reflections for improvement.

Theme 1: Positive Impact of GLE

Students who participated in the GLE found many aspects of the experience to be beneficial to their growth and development in their chosen field of study. Specifically, participants described three subthemes: (1) discovery of individual strengths as they pertain to the helping profession (2) the need for sustained self-improvement in IC and (3) application of the project to their personal and professional lives.

According to the students in the present study, the project encouraged reflection upon their own individual strengths and how they, in turn, cultivated a desire to continually work on improving oneself to foster IC. This is concurrent with other studies (Baiutti, 2019, 2017; Czerwionka, Artamonova and Barbosa, 2015) that show sustained exposure to other cultural groups helps to foster both self-awareness and a more nuanced understanding of the need to nurture self-improvement in IC.

Discovery of individual strengths as they pertain to the helping profession

As illuminated by several students, participating in the GLE helped them discover much needed competence sets in counseling and social work.

Specifically, students learned through this experience the necessity of fostering empathy through considering multiple viewpoints beyond one's own. One participant stated,

During the project, I discovered that I have strong empathy for others. In particular, as I described services and mapped the city, I put myself in the shoes of those who are struggling every day and need help to have a better life and settle in a new place.

And yet another student highlighted this finding,

Now I know not to take anything as granted, when talking to people from different countries I have to put in my mind that they might not think the same as me and they might have had completely different experiences as they have different cultural background and information.

And finally, one's ability to authentically listen to enable understanding was enriched as well:

Listening was very important in trying to understand what our clients needed. It was also very important while working with other counselors in training because various perspectives expanded the overall understanding of what the challenge was, how to approach it, and what our goal was.

The need for sustained self-improvement in IC

As previous research explains, well-designed, intentional dialogue and interaction with others different than oneself, helps create a desire to foster lifelong learning (Baiutti, 2019, 2017; Bennett, 1993). As elaborated upon by one student:

I need to work on researching more about different cultures (like Italian) so I can be even more effective at communicating with others. Overall, I believe my knowledge of multiculturalism and social skills help me with intercultural competence, but [I] would love to research, travel, and communicate more effectively in the future as well.

Others believed similarly, specifically that travel and exposure to diverse cultures would help cultivate IC. To this end students stated,

To improve further I think it is necessary to travel a lot and visit as many places as possible, so that we can really understand other cultural context" and "In order to improve some of the skills…I think it is essential that I continue to learn about other cultures and meet new people with whom to interact and exchange views.

And yet another student echoed, «I think the best way my intercultural competence will grow in the future is working with more people of different races than me».

Application of the project to their personal and professional lives

The instructors of the course took great pains to ensure that the assignments in the course were applicable to both those of Italian social workers and U.S. counselors. Specifically, scaffolded assignments were designed to engage students in higher level thinking (e.g., analyzing, evaluating) and application to real-world professional situations in which students would find themselves working within their professional careers (e.g., through an applied context-specific case study). Students recognized these explicit intended outcomes as illuminated below:

In comparing the maps from Chicago and Verona, and answering the questions from the discussion board, we were tasked with finding best possible outcomes regarding the related families from our case studies. We had to anticipate the needs of the family… from all viewpoints. We had to critically analyze the services in which we could provide based on the criteria given and evaluate whether or not the skills would be helpful for the presenting needs...It was quite eye-opening to then understand where our map lacked in terms of free, or government funded, after school and childcare services in America.

As enumerated by another:

I think an experience that summarizes the demonstration of analyzing, evaluating, and relating was when we completed our maps and shared our discussion about it with our group and our Italian group mates. Being able to create a discussion based off of evaluating the difference and relating the similarities was a great way to practice these skills.

Still, other students found that creating connections within the community – actually visiting the site and hearing from community members – was a significant experience that fostered interest and gratitude:

Being very open to learning about what the people in that community needed, and seeing how the site accommodated for those people allowed me to appreciate the importance of sites like those throughout the world. To develop my intercultural competence, I believe communicating more with the people I visited and learning what they are doing for people of multicultural backgrounds will allow me to be more aware of the conditions of those within communities.

Theme 2: Barriers to Communication

Students quickly discovered that the GLE posed some challenges that were not usually encountered in typical classes. These obstacles tended to center around barriers to communication. Specifically, two sub themes emerged from the data: (1) time difference; (2) language barrier.

Time difference

Given that the U.S. and Italy have a 7-hour time difference, challenges presented themselves when communicating with each other, particularly when asked to find time for synchronous meetings. As elucidated by one student:

I feel like a big example of flexibility during this project was working with the Italian partners, especially in finding times to meet due to the time differences. Although it was difficult schedule-wise with work, I was able to make it happen, and it helped me to consider clients who may have unique or different schedules as well.

As highlighted above, others noted the time difference required a different level of flexibility: «it was quite challenging to select a day that worked for everyone, but we were all able to shift our schedules in order to meet each other to discuss our cases». Through the scheduling of meetings, students learned they needed to develop and augment skills to gain desired effects, as expressed by this participant,

Having an open minded and flexible attitude towards uncertainty is a skill that I have enjoyed developing through this project and think it has been the most important part in my experience with the GLE. This was also related to scheduling our meeting time with my American group partners. We all have busy lives and as a result had to do our meeting a week early before all of the information had circulated around. Having a plan and staying flexible helps keep my mind open as we work together to execute the assignment.

Language barrier

When creating intercultural groups, it was important that instructors placed at least one English-speaking student in the Italian group who served as liaison and interpreter between their group and the American group. This was an arduous task for some as explained by one such Italian student, «...it was hard because in my group I was the only one speaking in English so I had to find all the correct words for [sic] explain all the things».

Students from the U.S. recognized this struggle and their part in helping to alleviate some of the challenges associated with it, as elaborated here:

We [U.S. students] also had flexibility with the language - only one student could speak fluently in English, so we had to be flexible about letting the other group converse as a group before bringing their conversation to us. This required lots of patience and listening to what was actually being shared. I wish I knew Italian and could have had more sociolinguistic awareness in this project!

Students from both countries acknowledged they employed skills, such as active listening, to mitigate the differences in language, such as, «Language barriers when communicating called for more focused active listening» and «At times the language barrier was hard to understand, but I listened attentively to get the most out of what was being said».

Theme 3: Communication between language and culture

It is clear that in this project the dimension of communication is central. Starting from Watzlawick's first axiom "one cannot not communicate", we can say that it is equally impossible not to communicate culturally. First, because culture and language mutually influence each other. Secondly, because, in a multicultural society, communication between different people to be effective requires knowledge and awareness of one's own cultural framework and that of others. Therefore, many authors include communication skills and knowledge of different cultural systems among the key components of intercultural competence (Byram, 1997, 2009; Fantini, 2000; Barrett, 2012). In this sense, students stressed the importance of knowing not only the language but also the cultural system, stating: «it was difficult to understand services I didn't know about and explain services they don't have in the USA» and «being conscious of Italy's history, culture, geo-political positioning, government structure, neighboring country relations, etc., really helps inform an understanding of why certain services are provided a certain way compared to the U.S.». In addition, having access to shared systems of meaning supports exchange, confrontation, and intercultural dialogue (Council of Europe, 2008) as a student argued:

Specific knowledge about religious institutions as well as supplementary community associations (such as AA and NA) helped me contribute to our larger conversation about how people receive certain types of care (in this instance, in a discussion about substance counseling in XX vs. XX).

Finally, to interact and communicate effectively, it is also important to recognize one's cultural references, to be aware of them (Alred, Byram and Fleming, 2002). As one student stated: «understanding our culture allowed me to talk about it in a way that helped our Italian counterparts learn».

Theme 4: Fostering Intercultural Competence

As described above, the tool used to detect students' intercultural competence was developed from the Intercultural Competence Models developed by Deardorff (2004; 2006). The pre-test showed that students generally believed they had good intercultural competence (see Table 1). In fact, the assigned values are concentrated between the 3rd (average) and 5th level (highest).
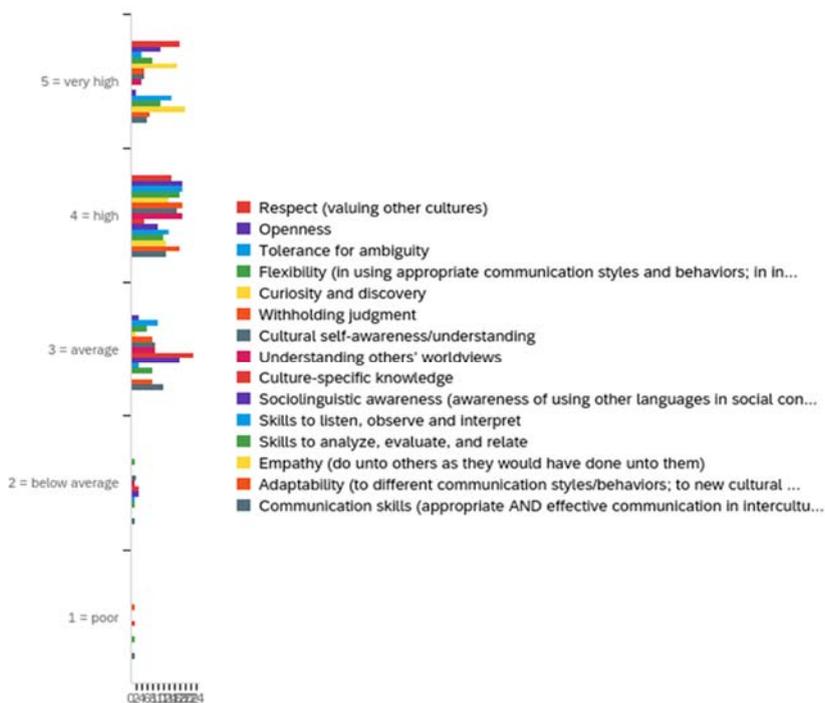

Table 1

At the end of the project, the skills with the most significant increase in level 5 (very high) were: withholding judgment, tolerance for ambiguity and cultural self-awareness/understanding. Interestingly, the number of people who

assigned themselves score 5 on the skills to listen, observe and interpret decreased, moving to levels 4 and 3. Similarly, students who rated themselves empathic as level 4 and 3 increased, while 5 significantly decreased.

Theme 5: Students' Reflections for Improvement

In the post-test, some questions (e.g., Q13: If you feel you have implemented the skill of adaptability in the GLE project, did you encounter any difficulties? If yes, which ones?), made students think not only about skills but also about the organization of the project. Students pointed out some problems related to organizational arrangements, «it was quite challenging to select a day that worked for everyone». These were compounded by problems related to the timing of the project. Indeed, it was not always clear all the steps to be taken in anticipation of the next meeting: «When we did the zoom meeting and despite not knowing what we had to do we managed to give all the information requested» or the structure of the entire course: «I felt that I had to adapt to the structure a lot, and it was very difficult as it was ambiguous and confusing at times».

7. Discussion

Results from the present study not only heeded calls for IC development and innovative curriculum (Wihlborg *et al*., 2018), but also validated and expanded upon previous research on international virtual collaborative learning (e.g., Wihlborg and Friberg, 2016). Indeed, the GLE helped students foster intercultural competence–specifically, a perceived increase in their knowledge, skills, attitudes. The project provided opportunities for cross-cultural dialogue, whereby students learned together, and thus broadened and deepened their thinking. As study abroad experiences can be cost prohibitive and time-intensive, highly structured virtual international collaborative practices such as the GLE, provide effective and efficient opportunities to form global citizenship and collective problem-solving skills needed for the far-reaching challenges before us (Wihlborg *et al.*, 2018). This need for critical thinking as a tool for fostering intercultural competence and the solving of multinational problems is especially acute within the helping profession (Hladik and Jadama, 2016). Students in the present study noted a deeper understanding of how IC directly impacted their ability to perform their desired professional goals. Students recounted the value of reality-based context-specific learning opportunities as a vehicle for examining their own biases. For example, U.S. students were astounded by Italian free healthcare; whereas Italian students

were impressed with the number and variety of U.S. services offered. Students also saw these experiences as a driver for fostering necessary helping professional competence sets-namely, amplifying the need for empathy, perspective-taking of others, and active listening. Indeed, advanced education in counseling and social work should promote these salient skills necessary for professional practice and uphold the ideal of praxis pedagogy, (Arnold and Mundy, 2020), whereby students have an opportunity for critical reflection and dialogue based on real-life issues and practical application. Importantly, students viewed this learning experience as a springboard for future learning. They explicitly understood that intercultural competence is a lifelong process and readily named areas in which they would benefit from continued training and experience, specifically, travel, language acquisition and further exposure to diverse peoples and cultures. The GLE thus helped create a virtual bridge between theory and practical application leading to a transformative educational experience (Taylor, 1998; Mezirow, 1996).

8. Research Limits and Implications

As it turned out, from an application point of view, the data emerged in the present research have made it possible to identify multiple avenues of development on which interventions, tools and methods can be hypothesized to promote and support the IC development not only in virtual exchanges, but also *vis-à-vis*. However, some limitations should be pointed out:

1. The self-report nature of the instruments used, which implies the possibility that responses may be influenced by social desirability (Goldthorpe and Hope, 1974), or subject to limits of introspection. Moreover, since non-anonymous feedback on the experience was regularly asked during the weekly lessons, this may have influenced their responses based on the investigators' higher position of power compared to the students. Future research could compare self-reported measures with other-reported measures.
2. The unrepresentative sample and the cross-sectional nature of the data. In fact, the results may not accurately reflect the impact of GLE but may be the results of a combination of factors. We are also aware that a short but highly structured project with a few online and asynchronous meetings is not comparable to an exchange in/with a foreign country (Baiutti, 2017), but that despite this, IC can still be stimulated or emerge in the encounter with differences (even a short online one). In addition, the tools used did, however, allow for an important exercise of critical thinking, reflective, and capable of meta-consciousness. Future research may investigate the

hypothesized relationships with representative samples and longitudinal research designs in order to explore the use and effectiveness of pre- and post-testing approaches. This shed some light on the importance of formative assessment as key to IC development.

3. Since IC is constantly in flux, which means it is a continual process of improvement (Portera, 2020b; Portera, 2017; Deardorff, 2009), because of negative factors/variables that might interfere with students' lives, a person might not experience advancements in the IC development (but it could be, even if it does not manifest itself at that time or period of time). In fact, it may vary based on the peculiarities of the Self, the situation (periods of stress, crisis, etc.), the environment, and the relationship (extent to which it has been established). Therefore, it is difficult to understand and accurately assess the degree of competence, since besides not being stable, it can be influenced by factors of a personal nature, of which one is sometimes unaware. Based on this assumption, it can be stated that it is best to use multiple assessment methods and not just one tool.

4. The concept of IC on which the survey was based represents a Western and mostly US-based paradigm of IC, an approach in which such competence resides largely within the individual. In fact, as stated by some scholars (Milani, 2020; Dalib *et al*., 2017; Deardorff, 2006), oftentimes the unit of analysis in some cultures is not the individual but rather the group or one's interpersonal relationships. Relationality, other-directedness, power distance orientation, harmony and circularity, the very concepts of space, time, and place are indeed some of the factors that may offer an alternative answer to the dominant Western framework. Thus, the data from this survey are reflective of the investigators' cultural contexts.

5. IC involves more than observable performance (Baiutti, 2017; Deardorff, 2006), even though it is very difficult to distinguish skills and attitudes because they are inseparable from one another (Portera, 2017).

9. Implications for future practice

In a final meeting, the researchers discussed possible changes regarding the project, looking ahead to the future. From the students' solicitations and the researcher's considerations, the following possible implementations were identified: (a) establish a shared operational planning that is accessible to all from the beginning; (b) prepare a Vademecum of welfare and services in the two countries, to be shared with students at the onset of the project; (c) provide students the opportunity to work on cases not only from stories but also from interviews with real people (to increase engagement and immersion in the

reality of the Other Country). In this regard, Service Learning may be a powerful vehicle of training and educational vehicle towards the development of intercultural competence. In fact, Service Learning, thanks to its articulation and structuring (in particular, critical reflection and the sharing of thoughts, proposals and doubts, etc. with the community agencies where the service is offered), ensures that the competence can be monitored and assessed with a view to continuous improvement (Milani, 2022; Bringle, Hatcher and Jones, 2011); (d) provide for informal acquaintance meetings between students before and during the project, if possible with the support of an interpreter; (e) implement accompanying mentoring and/or peer tutoring, particularly to support students at critical stages; (f) provide for a mid-project monitoring time so that the progress of the project can be evaluated and possibly modified; and (g) It would be then interesting to combine the project with a meeting between the two groups in one of the two territories (the United States or Italy). This is, of course, difficult, both because of the different timing of the two universities (semesters do not coincide), and the work commitments of the students; lastly, most importantly, because of the cost that would be mostly borne by the students. In conclusion, the present research, while representing a limited first contribution to the understanding of virtual experiences as an avenue for the development of intercultural competence, can nevertheless offer useful insights into the psychological processes and contextual factors that influence them. These elements can therefore be considered in the design and implementation of educational and counseling interventions aimed at promoting increasingly inclusive work and living environments.

References

Alred G., Byram M., and Fleming, M., a cura di (2002). *Intercultural experience and education*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

American Immigration Council (2022). *Annual Report*. Testo disponibile al sito: https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org. 10/07/2023.

Arnold J., Mundy B. (2020). Praxis pedagogy in teacher education. *Smart Learn. Environ*, 7(8). DOI: 10.1186/s40561-020-0116-z.

Aronson J. (1995). A pragmatic view of thematic analysis. *The qualitative report*, 2(1): 1-3.

Baiutti M. (2017). *Competenza interculturale e mobilità studentesca. Riflessioni pedagogiche per la valutazione*. Pisa: Edizioni ETS.

Baiutti M. (2019). *Protocollo di valutazione intercultura. Comprendere, problematizzare e valutare la mobilità studentesca internazionale*. Pisa: Edizioni ETS.

Balloi C. (2021). *La diversità nei luoghi di lavoro. Modelli, approcci e competenza pedagogica interculturale per il Diversity Management*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.

Barrett M. (2012). Intercultural competence. *EWC Statement Series*, 2: 23-27. Testo disponibile al sito: https://theewc.org/content/uploads/2020/02/EWC-Statement-Series-2012.pdf. 10/07/2023.

Bauman Z., Portera A. (2021). *Education and Intercultural Identity: A Dialogue between Zygmunt Bauman and Agostino Portera.* London: Routledge.

Beck U. (1994). *Riskante Freiheiten*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.

Bennett M.J. (1993). Towards ethnorelativism: a developmental model of intercultural sensitivity. In: Paige R.M., editor, *Education for the Intercultural Experience*. Yarmouth: Intercultural Press.

Braun V., Clarke V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3: 77-101. DOI: 10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.

Braun V., Clarke V., and Hayfield N. (2019). "A starting point for your journey, not a map": Nikki Hayfield in conversation with Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke about thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 19(2): 424-445. DOI: 10.1080/14780887.2019.1670765.

Bringle R.G., Hatcher J.A., and Jones S.G. (2011). *International service learning: conceptual frameworks and research*. Sterling: Stylus Publishing.

Byram M. (1997). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Byram M. (2009). Intercultural competence in foreign languages: the intercultural speaker and the pedagogy of foreign language education. In: Deardorff D.K. (Ed.). *The Sage Handbook of Intercultural Competence*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Clarke V., Braun V. (2018). Using thematic analysis in counselling and psychotherapy research: a critical reflection. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, 18(2): 107-110.

Cohen L., Manion L., Bell R., and Morrison K. (2011). *Research methods in education*. London-New York: Routledge.

Council of Europe. (2008). *White paper on intercultural dialogue: "living together as equals in dignity"*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.

Crawford E.R., Aguayo D., and Valle F. (2019). Counselors as leaders who advocate for undocumented students' education. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, 14(2): 119-150. DOI: 10.1177/1942775117739301.

Czerwionka L., Artamonova T., and Barbosa M. (2015). Intercultural knowledge development: evidence from students interviews during short-term study abroad. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 49: 80-99. DOI: 10.1016/j.ijintrel.2015.06.012.

Dalib S., Harun M., Yusof N., and Ahmad M.K. (2017). Probing intercultural competence in Malaysia: a relational framework. *SHS Web of Conferences*, XXXIII(4): 1-5. DOI: 10.1051/shsconf/20173300045.

Deardorff D.K., a cura di (2009). *The Sage handbook of intercultural competence*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Deardorff D. K. (2006). Identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalization. *Journal of Studies in International Education,* 10(3): 241-266. DOI: 10.1177/1028315306287002.

Deardorff D.K. (2004). "The identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of international education at institutions of higher education in the United States", Raleigh, North Carolina State University (unpublished dissertation).

Denzin N.K., Lincoln Y. (2018). *The Sage handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Fantini A.E. (2000). A central concern: developing intercultural competence. *SIT Occasional Papers Series,* 1: 25-42.

Fantini A. (2007). *Exploring and assessing intercultural competence. Research report*, *development*. Washington: University of St. Louis Press.

Fereday J., Muir-Cochrane E. (2006). Demonstrating rigor using thematic analysis: a hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding and theme development. *International Journal of Qualitative Research*, 5: 80-92.

Giordano A.L., Schmit M.K., and Schmit E.L. (2021). Best practice guidelines for publishing rigorous research in counseling. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 90: 123-133. DOI: 10.1002/jcad.12360.

Goldthorpe J.H., Hope K. (1974). *The social grading of occupations: a new approach and scale*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Griffin D., Farris A. (2010). School counselors and collaboration: finding resources through community asset mapping. *Professional School Counseling,* 13(5): 248-256. DOI: 10.1177/2156759X1001300501.

Hays D.G., Singh A.A. (2012). *Qualitative inquiry in clinical and educational settings*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Hays D.G., Wood C., Dahl H., and Kirk-Jenkins A. (2016). Methodological rigor in journal of counseling and development qualitative research articles: a 15-year review. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 94: 172-183. DOI: 10.1002/jcad.12074.

Haven T.L., Van Grootel L.D. (2019). Preregistering qualitative research. *Accountability in Research,* 26(3): 229-244. DOI: 10.1080/08989621.2019.1580147.

Hladik J., Jadama L.M. (2016). Multicultural competence of helping profession students: Cross-cultural comparison between Europe and Asia. *Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 217: 660-778. DOI: 10.1016/j.sbspro.2016.02.117.

IDOS (2022). *Dossier statistico immigrazione*. Roma: Edizioni IDOS.

Lincoln Y.S., Guba E.G. (1986). But is it rigorous? Trustworthiness and authenticity in naturalistic evaluation. *New Directions for Program Evaluation*, 30: 73-84. DOI: 10.1002/ev.1427-

Maguire M., Delahunt B. (2017). Doing a thematic analysis: a practical, step-by-step guide for learning and teaching scholars. *All Ireland Journal of Higher Education*, 8(3): 1-14.

Mezirow J. (1996). Contemporary paradigms of learning. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 46: 158-172. DOI: 10.1177/074171369604600303.

Milani M. (2020). Developing Intercultural Competence: Beyond Western Theories and Models. *Pedagogia e Vita Online*, 3: 104-117.

Milani M. (2022). Assessing Intercultural Competence. The Potential of Service Learning. *PedagogiaPiùDidattica*, 8(2): 55-67. DOI: 10.14605/PD822205.

Mortari L. (2012). *Cultura della ricerca e pedagogia. Prospettive epistemologiche*. Roma: Carocci.

Nowell L.S., Norris J.M., White D.E., and Moules N.J. (2017). Thematic analysis: striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1): 1-13. DOI: 10.1177/1609406917733847.

Pagani V. (2020). *Dare voce ai dati. L'analisi dei dati testuali nella ricerca educativa*. Bergamo: Edizioni Junior.

Paige R.M., a cura di (1993). *Education for the intercultural experience*. Yarmouth: Intercultural Press.

Patton M.Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Los Angeles: Sage Publications.

Portera A. (2017). Intercultural Competences in Education. In: Portera A., Grant C.A. (Eds.), *Intercultural Education and Competences. Challenges and Answers for the Global World* (23-46). Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Portera A. (2020a). Has Multiculturalism Failed? Let's Start the Era of Interculturalism for Facing Diversities. *Intercultural Education*, 31(2): 1-17. DOI: 10.1080/14675986.2020.1765285.

Portera A. (2020b). Intercultural Competences in Mediation, Counselling and Psychotherapy. In: Portera, A., Moodley R., Milani M. (Eds.), *Intercultural Mediation, Counselling and Psychotherapy in Europe* (10-30). Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Savitz-Romer M.S., Nicola T.P., Jensen A., Hill N.E., Liang B., and Perella J. (2018). Data-Driven school counseling: the role of the research-practice partnership. *Professional School Counseling*, 22(1): 1-9. Available at this link: https://www.jstor.org/stable/26784453. 10/07/2023.

Taylor E.W. (1998). Transformative learning: a critical review. *ERIC - Clearing house on Adult, Career, & Vocational Education*, 374: 1-90.

Terry G., Hayfield N., Clarke V., and Braun V. (2017). Thematic analysis. *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 2: 17-37. DOI: 10.4135/9781526405555.

UNESCO (2006). *Guidelines for Intercultural Education*. Paris: UNESCO Publishing.

Wihlborg M., Friberg E., (2016). Framework for a virtual nursing faculty and student learning collaboration between universities in Sweden and the United States: a theoretical paper. *Nurse Educ. Today,* 41: 50-53. DOI: 10.1016/j.nedt. 2016.03.012.

Wihlborg M., Friberg E.E., Rose K.M., and Eastham L. (2018). Facilitating learning through an international virtual collaborative practice: a case study. *Nurse Education Today*, 61: 3-8. DOI: 10.1016/j.nedt.2017.10.007.