INTERVIEWS WITH FORMER HIGH SCHOOL EXCHANGE STUDENTS IN COLOMBIA: EXPLORING CONTEXT DEPENDENT AND SUBJECTIVE ASPECTS OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

ANA MARÍA CAMARGO REYES

(Newcastle University)

Abstract

This exploratory study investigates the experiences of 5 former high school exchange students in Colombia, by analysing their relationships with others, the challenges they faced and their general reflections and insights about the overall experience, in light of the process model of Intercultural Competence (IC). The data was collected by conducting semi-structured interviews and was analysed using Thematic Content Analysis. Results were categorised in 5 relevant themes that emerged from participants' responses: relevance of other people; problems faced with other people; communication as a relevant skill; attitudes' changes as a result of participation in the exchange programme; and general cultural knowledge about Colombia. The results of this study show that relationships with others, developed attitudes, communication and cultural knowledge were crucial in increasing their IC whilst the influence of external, contextual and subjective factors also affected their perceptions of their time abroad.

Table of Contents

Introduction

AFS Intercultural Programs is one of the largest international organizations that provide intercultural experiences for their participants through a variety of exchange programs. It is a non-governmental, voluntary and non-profit organization that dates back to the First World War. It is described as a "world-class intercultural education organization; a global movement to develop and activate global citizens" (AFS, 2017a). In 2016 thanks to this high school exchange program, 8,500 families hosted 12,000 individuals around the world (AFS, 2017b).

Colombia is one of the 94 countries in which AFS operates. It has over 49.000.000 inhabitants across 32 regional departments (DANE, 2017). The official language of Colombia is Spanish which AFS students learn during exchange programmes. However, in Colombia there are 65 indigenous and 2 creole languages spoken by indigenous groups and other communities (Cancillería, 2017).

In Colombia, international students have the chance to experience, along with their host families, local traditions such as fairs and festivals, religious and national celebrations, and typical food, folklore and lifestyles depending on the region where they stay, since Colombia's diversity lies in the geographical uniqueness of each department. During the past few years, Colombia's popularity as an educational destination has increased: for example, only in June 2017 a total of 1,155 international students arrived in Colombia to study (Migración Colombia, 2017).

International youth exchange programs promote global citizenship by developing various competences, attitudes and abilities in their students (AFS, 2017a; Arnold, Davis and Corliss, 2014; Walton et al., 2015). These are of potential interest to the field of Intercultural Competence (IC), as studies in this area investigate communicative and behavioural processes that students deploy in intercultural encounters. The study of IC in this context might also explain how

successful intercultural relationships are maintained and what factors play a role in overcoming challenges that arise in exchange programmes (Deardoff, 2009b).

The purpose of this research is to analyse the experiences of five international students who visited Colombia for a high school exchange program, in light of the concept of Intercultural Competence by focusing on their perceptions of interactions with others, the relationships they established, the difficulties they faced and how they solved them.

Intercultural Competence

Definitions and Features of IC

Defining Intercultural Competence is complex since there are over 20 different models that describe, list and explain what it means to be "interculturally competent"; there is no single or shared definition (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009; Fantini and Tirmizi, 2006; Deadroff 2009a). However, it is worth noting that the concept's complexity and diversity is linked to understanding of culture; as society, human nature and culture differ and evolve, so does the understanding of IC (Byram, 2009; Deardoff, 2006).

In spite of the challenges in conceptualising IC, it is a relevant concept for situations involving intercultural contact, since it provides an understanding of what effective and appropriate communication styles and action-taking behaviours are involved in any given intercultural context or relationship (Trimble, Pedersen and Rodela, 2009; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009; Odağ et al., 2016).

The Process Model of Intercultural Competence by Deardoff (2006) is described as developmental and causal due to the relationship and mutual influence among the elements; it has also been widely cited and used as reference in academic research and educational and training

programs (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009; Odağ et al., 2016). Thus, for the purposes of this study IC is understood as follows:

"A lifelong process involving the development of skills, knowledge, and attitudes needed for effective and appropriate communication and behaviour in interactions with those from different backgrounds" (Deardoff, 2016, pp. 133).

In this definition, *effectiveness* in communication and behaviour refers to the achievement of personal goals and *appropriateness* has to do with how those personal goals fit into the context (Deardoff, 2016). Also, effectiveness and appropriateness rely on people's thinking and acting "interculturally", which means the understanding of others' perspectives and world views in favour of relating successfully with them (Deardoff, 2009a)".

This model contains the following components: *attitudes* of respect (valuing other cultures), openness (no judgment) and curiosity (tolerating ambiguity); cultural *knowledge* related to sociolinguistic and self-awareness; and *skills* (listen, observe, evaluate, analyse, interpret and relate). These 3 components facilitate *internal outcomes* (adaptability, flexibility, ethnorelative view and empathy). These internal outcomes then facilitate, through interaction, *external outcomes* (effective and appropriate communication and behaviour in an intercultural situation) (adapted from Deardoff, 2006, pp. 256).

However, there is a number of factors that are key to understanding of IC. Firstly, what should not be relevant is whether or not an individual possesses IC components (i.e. attitudes), but rather how a person makes use of them when coping with new challenges and situations (Egekvist et al., 2016). Secondly, the understanding of IC should include commonalities within the definitions, instead of the "overemphasis" and "fixation" on cultural differences (Dervin and

Gross, 2016). Thirdly, there is no final point at which a person becomes entirely interculturally competent because it is a life-long process that is developed within different life stages and contexts (Dervin and Gross, 2016; Deardoff, 2009a; Deardoff, 2016). Finally, competence in a foreign language is required, but is not sufficient for becoming interculturally competent (Deardoff, 2016).

Relevant Research in IC

For the past decades, IC has been the focus of a large body of research. Deardoff (2016) explains that there are over 100 assessment instruments, from which Fantini (2009) revised in detail at least 44. All of these are suitable for different contexts and research settings but quantitative approaches dominate the research in IC.

However, quantitative methods are not very effective in measuring the actual preformed skills and gained knowledge and attitudes (Bloom and Miranda, 2015) among participants of intercultural encounters. Qualitative approaches to the study of IC give researches the opportunity to explore the concept from multiple perspectives and in depth, since the focus relies on participants' experiences and perspectives, instead of focusing on the measurement of levels of IC. In addition, qualitative data might provide insights into what occurs during interactions (Deardoff, 2016).

For instance, the analysis of reflective diaries and essays written about experiences abroad, show the acquirement of cultural knowledge about specific elements of the host country, improved language skills, but more importantly, elements of awareness and comprehension of cultural values and attitudes (Root and Ngampornchai, 2012). Moreover, the description of specific intercultural situations led the individuals to reflect upon their attitudes and action-taking behaviours and to

explain how those experiences made them more tolerant and aware of cultural differences (Mendez, 2017).

Czerwionka et al. (2015) analysed the development of cultural knowledge, as a specific component of IC. Pre and post interview results show how themes of cultural knowledge changed over time: in the beginning, participants focused on city life and schedule differences in their accounts of intercultural experiences, but by the end of the program, there was more interest in culture, history, values and politics of the host country.

Bloom and Miranda (2015) assessed the development of IC on a group of international students. Their qualitative data showed how acquiring IC is not a linear process, but rather subjective and situational according to personal experiences.

Another study focused on the definitions of IC that university students came up with based on their personal intercultural experiences. The main components in students' definitions included awareness, engagement and knowledge (Giovanangeli and Oguro, 2016). In contrast, the results by Odağ et al. (2016) show how interaction, communication and harmony are crucial in understanding of IC. On the other hand, this study also emphasised the importance of understanding of the other's culture and having attitudes of tolerance, openness and respect towards it. Lastly, other participants describe being interculturally competent in terms of two categories: acquiring cultural understanding and respecting cultural differences, in order to accomplish effective and appropriate behaviours and communication (Daliba et al., 2014).

On a further note, case studies about international students' experiences have also been insightful in analysing IC. For instance, Peckenpaugh (2012) analysed two case studies and demonstrated how the definition of competence might be subjective as both individuals present different insights, perceptions, and views of their experiences in relation to the components of IC.

On the other hand, Jackson (2011) explored the impact of an experience abroad, showing how experiential learning, along with training and guidance, creates a great impact on IC if the individual is committed, motivated and receptive to the general experience.

A common conclusion held by most studies regardless of their approach, is that IC is neither acquired nor developed through the mere intercultural contact or exposure to a different context: some kind of training, guidance or learning before, during and/or after the experience is necessary to develop IC (Root and Ngampornchai, 2012; Jackson, 2015; Jackson, 2011).

Youth Exchange Programs: Characteristics and Research

The main feature of youth exchange programs is the "total immersion" status, in which participants integrate with the local community through living with a host family and attending a local school (Cushner, 1994; Walton et al., 2015). In this process they build relationships with others and participate in activities that allow them to learn the language and experience the culture of the country they are visiting.

One of the general objectives of this type of programs is to enhance and develop intercultural awareness. However, increasing IC is a result of preparation, constant social interactions with others and reflection upon the lived experience (Walton et al., 2015). Research shows how exchange programs are highly favourable, as they impact on behavioural, cognitive and attitudinal characteristics from the teenage years into adulthood (Bachner and Zeutschel, 2009). Such experiences might also influence key life stages such as higher education and career related decisions (Arnold, Davis and Corliss, 2014).

However, it is not only the formal education that impacts students' experiences in exchange programs. Host families have a vital role during in acquisition of IC. Whilst coping with the academic responsibilities, the student is expected to participate in daily activities and follow

family's norms and rules. On the other hand, the family takes on a number of responsibilities as well: these include providing support with language learning, helping gain appropriate cultural knowledge and, most importantly, replace the actual family for the student (Cushner, 1994). Then, the role of the family is crucial in how a participant develops their IC, as it is through learning from the routines and appreciating family values that participants are exposed to and learn about the local culture (Arnold, Davis and Corliss, 2014).

It is worth mentioning that this experience also enhances the family's cultural awareness: like the exchange student, they also find themselves in an intercultural encounter, as they face new cultural practices that might challenge their knowledge and understanding of culture (Egekvist et al., 2016). Some of the cultural differences perceived by host families include communication styles, politeness, family life and customs, extra-curricular activities and, importantly, ways of building relationships (Gisevius and Weber, 2009). Nevertheless, one of the most salient features of the homestay experience is the mutual sharing of cultures, since the family and the student are positioned as equals within the intercultural learning process (Gisevius and Weber, 2009; Arnold, Davis and Corliss, 2014).

Methodology

Qualitative data for this study was obtained through semi-structured interviews as it suits the exploratory nature and purposes of this study (Gibson and Hua, 2016). The main objective of this research is to explore participants' past experiences and relationships, taking into account their insights, thoughts and feelings related to intercultural situations (Bryman, 2016). It is through the interviews that researcher can shed a light on the following issues: how participants situate themselves within the specific context of their exchange program and how they make sense of it.

Research suggest that it might also be possible to capture elements of their own world view (Chowdhury, 2015; Miller and Glassner, 2004).

Regarding the study of IC in particular, interviews can help reveal contextual and situational factors that might affect the communicative and behavioural processes in participants' interactions and in situations of intercultural challenge (Deardoff, 2016; Deardoff, 2009a; Gibson and Hua, 2016).

Thematic Content Analysis is one of the most widely used methods for analysing qualitative data; it is known for facilitating the identification, description and analysis of patterns within the data (Gibson and Hua, 2016; Braun and Clarke, 2006). For this reason, this method was employed to identify categories within the collected data in light of relevant literature and theory of IC (Bryman, 2016).

Coding of data was used to facilitate the analysis of subjective qualities of human experience, such as emotions, values, conflicts, judgments, beliefs or attitudes. Coding helped researcher to identify and categorise those in order to make sense of the data (Saldaña, 2013).

Some limitations of semi-structured interviews related to participants' openness and researcher's paradox: students do not always feel comfortable to discuss certain topics openly or might not be entirely objective in their responses as they attempt to please the researcher (Gibson and Hua, 2016). In addition, one limitation of the coding process was the loss of context in interviewees' accounts. However, this was minimised as the researcher created narratives for each theme and contextualised the quotes from the data (Bryman, 2016).

This is an exploratory study of experiences of adolescent international students who participated in a high school exchange program in Colombia. The focus of this research lies in

narrated experiences in which elements of IC might have been used or gained. This study aims to answer the following research questions:

(i)   How did high school exchange students in Colombia face intercultural encounters and relationships with host family and friends during the time abroad?

(ii)   Which behaviours, attitudes and/or skills were needed to overcome challenges?

(iii)   Are those behaviours, skills and/or attitudes needed in order to overcome other type of intercultural challenges?

Procedure

a.   Participants and Sampling. As participants reside in different countries, the five of them were interviewed via video call. Three participants were contacted directly by the researcher and the other two were recruited using snow ball effect. All participants were 18 years old; four of them learned Spanish during the exchange (except for 1 who previously studied the language); all of them speak English but not as their L1.

Recruitment of participants and logistical arrangements were held in Spanish. Three out of the five interviews were conducted in Spanish, and two were conducted in English. Table 1 presents participants' background information relevant to this study.

Participant	Nationality	Gender	Time in Colombia	Time back home	City in Colombia
P1	Brazilian	F	6 months	11 months	Large
P2	Thai	F	11 months	6 months	Large
P3	Thai	F	11 months	6 months	Medium
P4	Thai	M	11 months	6 months	Large
P5	Thai	F	11 months	6 months	Small

Table 1. Demographic Information

The subjects of this study took part in six to eleven months AFS exchange program in Colombia. Upon their arrival to Colombia, by the middle of the program and at the end, they participated in two to three day group workshops for the purpose of intercultural training. In Colombia, they all resided with host families and attended local schools. AFS allocated each participant to a committee formed by local volunteers who were responsible for finding and training host families, providing support and guidance and organising recreational activities.

b. *Instrument and procedure:* Interview questions were designed in order to explore participants' experiences during the exchange program. These included perceived cultural differences, challenges in intercultural encounters and their solutions, relationships with host families and peers at school (see Appendix for complete interview guide). The interview lasted about 30 minutes.

c. *Data Analysis:* Data was audio recorded, transcribed and coded. Codes were assigned considering repetition, speech force, and relevance for the participants. Topics that emerged in the interviews included the following: Colombia, family, friends, cultural differences, challenging situations, exchange outcomes and problem solving. Codes were grouped by similarity, recurrence and relevance, which helped identify five major themes that were the focus of analysis. Findings are presented in the following section alongside with quotes from the data.

Results

The five themes identified in participants' accounts are interrelated and here are presented in the following sub-sections: importance of other people, difficulties with other people, communication as a relevant skill, developed attitudes and knowledge about Colombia.

Importance of other people

When talking about their experience in Colombia, all participants prioritised the relationships with others including host family, school peers and other people involved in the exchange program.

Host family was the first relationship mentioned by all participants. Either in a positive or negative way, family was salient and vital for their overall perception of the experience. Positive descriptions of family relationships were related to the following factors: (1) feeling as a family member; (2) families taking care of them and helping solve problems at school; (3) helping them to learn Spanish and (4) sharing quality time together.

"Everything is so good, I can feel I'm their daughter, I'm part of their family, we eat outside, we talk, we do everything together".

"They taught me a lot of things, my mom was open to me, she gave a lot of advice"

However, some participants had negative perceptions of some family rules which could have affected their overall experience; these relate to families having strict norms and schedules, and having high expectation of participant's language learning. In spite of these perceived negative aspects, participants recognize and value the positive side too:

"I think it was regular, not everything was bad because she took care of me, she always asked me about how was school"

"My family was good to me, my mom always took care for me and everything but she was very strict to me, she wanted me to be very good at Spanish so she sometimes forced me a

lot to learn Spanish and have a perfect Spanish". "They were very kind to me but sometimes I think like they were not… like I was not part of their family".

The second most salient relationship was with friends from school. In the cases in which the relationship was good, participants experienced support, some received help with learning language. However, most participants perceived a general sense of camaraderie and a space for having fun:

"Nowadays I still talk with them [friends from school] I wouldn't change anything about my relationship with them, it was one of the best things I had there"
"It was very good [relationship with friends], they always helped me with everything, like when I didn't have a pencil o things like that, or when I had problems they would help me… I always hang out with them, not every week but we did go out a lot, we went dancing a lot"

Some participants established close friendships with other exchange students or with young Colombians who were about to go abroad on the same program (AFS sometimes arranges activities for both groups as an opportunity to interact with each other). Consequently, for some participants, these were the only friendships they established during the exchange since they had difficulties getting along with peers at school. The importance of these friendships is based on mutual understanding and sharing the same intercultural experience.

Participants openly discussed the importance of these relationships. For instance, one participant said that having a good relationship with the family and having positive environment

at home make a successful exchange experience. Others stated that it is thanks to other people that they had had a good experience as they had "friends and a good family". Support from others was also crucial: one participant shared that from the beginning her family implemented strategies that facilitated language learning and made her feel at ease, like placing post-it notes with the names of things in Spanish around the house.

On a further note, relationships affected each other to a certain extent. For instance, if the family was strict about norms, it impacted the time spent with friends as the example below demonstrates:

"I didn't really have lots of friends because my host family they were very strict... he was very strict about going out so I didn't really hang out with my friends so it's very hard for me to get along with them".

Difficulties with other people

When participants were asked about what kind of challenging situations or difficulties they experienced, they gave examples of problems related to host families, peers at school or both. Since the relationships with other people seem to have had a major impact on development of IC, it is reasonable to think that the perceived challenging situations had to do with building relationships with other people. This section briefly describes these examples.

Regarding host families, one participant experienced an "uncomfortable" period of time when she did not inform to her host parents about a plan she had with friends. Her host parents were angry, did not speak to her for a couple of days and reduced the time she could spend with

friends. In the participant's opinion this situation caused a change in family dynamic and host parents became much stricter:

"Whenever I think about Colombia I think about the beautiful things I lived there because there are many beautiful and nice things there, but this is a point about my experience that I wished I had never lived like that"

Another participant experienced a difficult relationship with her family as they were strict about her time with friends and had high expectations of her Spanish. Her insights on this situation reflect how this situation affected her perception of the exchange experience overall:

"And sometimes she said some bad things to me like I didn't try hard enough to learn so I felt really bad because I went there to have some experience too ... I mean I didn't go there only to learn the language, there was a lot of pressure from her that made me feel really bad about this situation"

Difficulties school peers were diverse. For instance, one participant felt like she "couldn't talk with them" or that they were "not really close", in some situations they "made fun" of her when she "said something wrong in Spanish" which led her to feel embarrassed and afraid when attempting to practice the language in front of them. Similarly, another participant experienced an uncomfortable situation when one classmate bothered him frequently, but thanks to his host family's help they managed to solve this situation.

Despite the wide range of problems faced by the participants at school, one similarity emerged from all responses: these problems occurred during the exchange experience but did not tend to occur in their home countries. For instance, both participants who lived with strict host families expressed how their actual families are more flexible, do not pressure them with academic or language related achievements and have an open relationship in which they feel free to talk about problems.

Participants who experienced problems with peers at school also expressed how they were respected by friends back home: there was no bullying and, in general, they had close friendships. In addition, they stressed that in their home countries they had closer relationships with others and were able to solve conflicts:

"It is easier to solve here [home country], there [Colombia] can't be solved… there I can't do that because there I am very small… I am only a very small part [of their lives], there they all have a big relationship and for them I am a very small part… And besides I didn't want to cause more problems so I let it pass"

Communication as a relevant skill

Communication emerged as a salient theme in interviews as all participants mentioned the act of talking with others in their accounts of their experiences in Colombia; sometimes it was a solution to problems and the way of maintaining positive relationships whilst in other cases communication represented the source of problems. Some participants were unwilling to discuss problems with others which resulted in prolonging conflicts:

"*No I didn't do it* [tell host mother what bothered her] *I think that I didn't want to fight I was a little bit afraid and didn't want to fight*"

Also, the overall experience would have been different if this participant would have attempted to talk more with peers at school:

"*I think it's also my fault that I didn't try hard enough to talk with my friends, because my Spanish was not that good so sometimes I felt afraid that I was going to make mistakes and they were not going to understand me... So I really didn't talk anything to them*".

Participants who engaged in conversations about problems were able to solve them:

"*I am very much like this… when something is happening I can't let it remain like that, so I usually think that we need to talk about what's going on 'I am staying at your home we need to talk about this'*"

Another participant reflected on how she would have solved a problem with her host mom if she would have talked about it with her:

"*I think I should tell more, say something more about it so she could understand because I didn't really tell her about my feelings*".

When asked about what they thought maintained the positive relationships with others, most participants mentioned "talking" as a relevant aspect:

"As difficult as it might be one must talk, is not like talking angry at others, but one must talk little by little and understand what's happening"

"Talk with each other, communication, like after lunch or dinner we sat down and talk about everything… Thai children don't like to talk or it's better to stay quiet and just listen… But with my host brother I saw him telling everything to the parents, so after that I had to try to speak more, to talk more with them"

"In general you have to be with the family because Colombian families are very close… you have to talk… interact with people"

Lastly, after being back home, some participants have realized that now they can easily engage in conversations with others, probably as an outcome of their exchange experience:

"I speak more… I wanna speak with people, I speak with whomever and feel more confident."

"Before going to Colombia… I was shy but not anymore now I can speak and am not shy"

"Now I can talk with everybody… before going to Colombia I barely talked with men at my school but now we talk a lot"

"The first day I arrived to school [in Colombia] I couldn't adapt very much because I didn't know how to communicate with women there… but now I feel more confident talking with women in Thailand"

Developed attitudes

When asked about their opinions on what makes a successful exchange program and what advice they would give to future participants of exchange programs in Colombia, all participants referred to certain attitudes needed in order to adapt and establish meaningful relationships. To have an open mind was one of the most common responses:

"They should be more open minded because there are lots of things that are very distant from their country, and they should be more open minded to try and understand the culture or everything"

"They should be open minded, people are the same but we think they are different… Colombia is just one country like Thailand, like USA, like Mexico but whatever… everywhere we have good things and bad things… And they don't have to be afraid or scared of things they don't know about… They should be open minded"

Also, the attitude of *respect* and *no judgment* was salient among their responses:

"Also respect cultural things because I think that this is the most important, there are people that are gonna think different from me and at the end I must respect it and can't fight it"

"Because they are also different people and one can't impose what one thinks to others"

"Like maybe Thai people judge other people all the time, I don't know why but in Colombia is not like in Thailand, Thai people judge other people all the time"

"I think I'm more open minded to people, like I don't really judge them because I saw lots of different people there so I feel like I can't really judge them from like appearance or

other things… I think we should talk more to them and know more about them before we judge them"

Other participants expressed how after this experience, they changed their overall attitudes towards problem solving and the way they see a complicated situation:

"Also the way I look at a problem because before I went there when I had some problem I think it was very big for me that I can't really solve that problem, I always kept thinking 'no I can't solve that problem'… but when I was there I was alone and when any problem came to my life I need to solve this myself"

"I can manage more situations like something that I used to see as very difficult now it is more easy"

"We can manage time and manage priorities"

A category of "other attitudes" was created for a group of responses that differed thematically. One participant expressed how this experience taught her to dismiss criticism and opinions of others about her regardless of where she is, in Colombia or in her home country:

"There are gonna be people there [Colombia] that they won't like you even if you are a very good person because if they don't like you they might say something bad to you, so just don't care about what they say"

"When I came back I dress I little bit more sexy [as in Colombia], some people they looked at me and judge but I don't really care"

A different participant gained more appreciation for her family after this experience:

"Now after almost a year [being back] I want to spend more time with my family… and I usually did not do this here in Brazil… before the exchange I used to go out a lot but because I lived there with a family that liked to spend a lot of time together, now I want to spend more time with my family in Brazil, this is very important"

In terms of the factors that led this participant to maintain a positive and meaningful relationship with friends, she expressed her willingness to understand other people's world and show interest in what they considered important:

"I always was interested about the topics they were talking about, because they were in senior year so they were always talking about ICFES [senior year exam] and universities but this was not a reality for me but either way I would ask them so I could understand their world because it was very different from mine, so this interest I had was very important for my experience"

Finally, one participant expressed her insights about the strategy she used for making her exchange successful; she generally paid more attention to her life in Colombia rather than reminiscing or constantly missing her home country:

"I think that one must forget a bit one's country and must really live this new life… because I forgot a lot about my country and I think this was it [what made a successful experience] because I made a lot of friends and learnt the language"

Knowledge about Colombia

In most interviews, participants constantly made references to the acquired cultural knowledge about Colombians, local traditions and general information about the country. The most salient comments were related to the elimination of stereotypes about Colombia:

"First I tell people that Colombia is not what they think it is, because I don't know what happens but Brazilians have a very bad image of Colombia with all that stuff about drug trafficking, but now this is changing… I tell them that people are very kind, and food is very good and Colombia is a country that is not bad… is a lot like Brazil, is very similar I felt like at home"

"For Thai people Colombia is dangerous, they know about drugs and alcohol… but in reality is not like this, there are many beautiful places"

"When I came back from Colombia people asked 'why Colombia?' and 'where is Colombia?' but also in Colombia people asked 'where is Thailand?'"

A different salient feature about Colombian culture is the presence of dancing and music in social and family contexts: most participants referred to learning how to dance popular dances when asked about differences with their home countries:

"I think that dancing… Before going to Colombia I barely danced… at school [in Brazil] I didn't have dancing lessons but now I even dance alone at every school party … I dance alone reggaeton [Latin American musical genre] because here nobody knows how to dance… I think Colombians like to dance"

"The dance reggaeton it was very new to me because we don't have that type of dance in Thailand…it was very amazing"

"Dancing… they have to dance, it's like this"

"In Thailand they don't dance like in Colombia, is very different"

Participants also found similarities between countries in terms of cities' infrastructure and heavy traffic:

"I think that structure is not very well but this also happens in Brazil… here in Latin America is not like Europe… sometimes there was trash in the streets and heavy traffic"

"Like schools, houses and things like this are very similar [with Thailand]"

However, differences relied mainly on perceptions about people, communication styles or relationships. For instance, this participant explained how she perceived Colombians' communication style as indirect since they did not say negative things or at least wouldn't show discontent:

"I don't know if it's a thing about Colombian culture but they never say things directly… they always make a face or something like this"

Or this other participant who sees Colombians as unpunctual:

"About time…Colombians almost always arrive late to everything so now sometimes I arrive late to plan with friends"

Positive aspects of Colombians' personality were also reported in the interviews:

"If they are suffering they always smile, they always see the good things"

"In Colombia we enjoy all things and don't take things so seriously, I can speak with everyone, I can do whatever I want, we are more free in Colombia than when we are in Thailand"

Interestingly, there was one salient difference mentioned by all the participants from Thailand, which was related to closeness, body contact and greetings. They showed awareness of their country's social norms in terms of distance and physical contact:

"In Thailand we have more space… Is not that good that boy and girl are too close… like if they hold hands they are just friends [in Colombia] but in Thailand they would think 'oh they are like boyfriend or girlfriend or they are couple'… And it's not that good that you do that in school because of our culture… I don't know how to explain that but some people are gonna look down at you"

"I was very shocked because they kiss the boy in the cheek like for greet them so it was very shocking for me because in Thailand we cannot do that with the friends specially with boys, we can't do that"

"The first day at school everyone kiss the cheek and I just thought 'what? Why they do that?' Is a little weird"

"But men and women relationship is very different… In Thailand we cannot touch each other in public like hold hands… But in Colombia almost everybody touch each other like the arms or something like this"

In spite of experiencing a cultural shock at first, these participants emphasized how much they enjoyed the closeness and greeting norms in Colombia; it was easy for them to adopt to these behaviours. Some responses even demonstrate how exchange students miss these social norms in their home countries.

Discussion

Overall, participants had a positive exchange experience in Colombia. Their interview responses show positive outcomes such as changes in attitudes and willingness to interact with different people. On the other hand, most participants engaged in meaningful relationships and acquired some knowledge about the country. Nevertheless, each experience was unique as they faced different challenges and had different perspectives on their intercultural encounters.

Specifically, for the participants who evaluated their experience as positive, engaging in meaningful relationships based on mutual respect, willingness to learn from others and create profound interactions, rather than brief encounters, was one of the crucial factors that mediated the perception of success of their exchange program (Walton et al., 2015). In contrast, the one participant who did not make meaningful friendships at school and felt left out of host family dynamics, constructed a somewhat negative perception of the exchange experience. For this reason it could be argued that perceptions of relationships with others are linked to the overall perception of the experience abroad (Bachner and Zeutschel, 2009).

However, relationships are built by both parties, which implies that it is not only the participant's responsibility to create a positive relationship. The host family should also create a supportive, welcoming and inclusive environment, without exercising excessive pressure in terms

of language learning, as these factors potentially help to enhance the participant's adaptation and wellbeing (Arnold, Davis and Corliss, 2014). In addition, it worth mentioning that exchange program students are expected to create the relationship with the host family fairly quickly but this requires considerable time and energy (Cushner, 1994).

In terms of difficulties experienced by all participants, it is not accurate to state that those problems were due to the lack of participants' IC; external and situational factors might have also affected the development of IC. For instance, the lack of IC skills and attitudes among local Colombians, such as family and peers at school, might have had influence in intercultural situations. In many cases only the sojourn's IC is taken into account and not that of the others. It should be taken into account that successful intercultural communication and behaviours depends on and is created by all the people involved in the interaction (Deliba et al., 2014; Egekvist et al., 2016; Weideman and Blum, 2009).

On the other hand, differences in perceived power relationships might have led exchange students to feel "less powerful" in comparison the local people, which relates to how one of the participants saw herself as a very "small part" in the hosts' worlds (Dervin and Gross, 2016). It should also be taken into account that intercultural learning is not free from conflict. Some situations might be difficult and frustrating due to the complexity of human interactions but the acquired intercultural knowledge can be traced in participants' awareness of what caused the conflict and the solutions they proposed (Egekvist et al., 2016; Dervin and Gross, 2016).

The attitudes developed by the participants during the time abroad, or as an outcome after the experience, are consistent with research about IC in this context. Studies show how participants acknowledge the importance of being tolerant and avoiding prejudice towards others in intercultural encounters (Odag et al., 2016). Self-confidence and self-awareness were also

recognized by individuals as outcomes of participating in an exchange program (Arnold, Davis and Corliss, 2014). However, these outcomes would be impossible without participants' willingness to interact with others (Byram, 1997; Jackson, 2011).

Participants gained culture specific knowledge about the interactional norms and traditions in Colombia. This knowledge was important for building their relationships with others. Whilst what they learnt is important, how they used this knowledge is even more revealing. For instance, knowledge about greetings, communication styles and family dynamics provides contextual understanding of the host culture, which facilitates their general adjustment and relationships with locals (Czerwionka et al., 2015). The development of cultural knowledge might have been facilitated by participants' evaluations and comparisons of their home country's traditions and norms with those of the host country (Barker, 2016; Root, 2012).

It could be stated that participants from this study showed development of some components of IC when facing challenges and building relationships with others. However, demonstrating a number of elements of IC and being proficient in the host language does not necessarily mean being interculturally competent: what is crucial is the understanding of how to use those attitudes, knowledge and skills in complex interactions with others in various contexts (Bennett, 2009; Deardoff, 2009a). The exchange students interviewed in this study showed awareness of elements of IC and how they used them when solving problems and creating meaningful encounters. They also reflected about what could have been done for a more successful experience. In addition to this awareness of attitudes, communication culture specific knowledge about Colombia were crucial for guaranteeing positive outcomes of the exchange program, ensuring personal growth and developing IC in this exchange program.

Conclusion

Overall, after partaking in AFS program in Colombia, participants of this study demonstrated development of relevant elements of IC, such as attitudes (like being open minded and respectful towards differences and others). They also gained some specific cultural knowledge about Colombia and showed awareness of cultural norms that differed from their home countries. At the same time they managed to have successful intercultural relationships with others. Their experiences differed from one another. One key feature of this research project lies in evaluation of those elements of IC that were important for participants themselves and those that they used in intercultural contexts. This study tried to provide an understanding of IC in light of external, contextual and subjective elements that mediate interactions and the general development of IC.

Limitations of this study are in its sample size. Potentially, a bigger sample of participants, from different backgrounds could provide richer findings in terms of their insights into IC and their experience abroad in general. Also, interviewing their host families and/or their peers at school could help triangulate the information and produce a more complete picture of the situations, dynamics and elements of IC. Therefore, for future research it can be recommended to use a multi-perspective approach in order to triangulate participants' responses. Finally, including participant observation might be useful to evaluate participants' IC in action.

References

AFS Intercultural Programs. (2017a). *About AFS*. Available at: http://afs.org/about-afs/ (Accessed 13/08/2017).

AFS Intercultural Programs. (2017b). *Annual Report*. Available at: http://afs.org/about-afs/annual-report/(Accessed 13/08/2017).

Arnold, M. E., Davis, J., and Corliss, A. L. (2014). "From 4-H International Youth Exchange to Global Citizen: Common Pathways of Ten Past Program Participants", *Journal of Youth Development,* 9 (2), pp. 85 – 98. DOI 10.5195/jyd.2014.62

Bachner, D., and Zeutschel, U. (2009). "Long-term effects of international educational youth exchange", *Intercultural Education*, 20 (1), pp. S45-S58. DOI: 10.1080/14675980903370862

Barker, G. (2016). "Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Intercultural Communication Competence", *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 45 (1), pp. 13-30, DOI: 10.1080/17475759.2015.1104376.

Bennet, J. M. (2009). "Cultivating Intercultural Competence. A process Perspective", in Deardoff, D. *The SAGE Handbook of Intercultural Competence*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, pp. 121-140.

Bloom, M., and Miranda, A. (2015). "Intercultural sensitivity through short-term study abroad", *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 15 (4), pp. 567-580.

Braun, V & Clarke, V. (2006). "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology", Q*ualitative Research in Psychology*, 3 (2), pp. 77-101.

Bryman, A. (2016). *Social Research Methods.* Fifth Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Byram, M. (2009). 'Intercultural Competence in Foreign Languages. The Intercultural Speaker and the Pedagogy of Foreign Language Education' in Deardoff, D. *The SAGE Handbook of Intercultural Competence*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, pp. 321-332.

Cancillería (2017). *Símbolos Patrios y Otros Datos de Interés*, Available at: http://www.cancilleria.gov.co/colombia/nuestro-pais/simbolos (Accessed 13/08/2017).

Chowdhury, M. (2015). "Coding, sorting and sifting of qualitative data analysis: debates and discussion", *Quality and Quantity,* 49, pp. 1135–1143.

Czerwionka, L., Artamonova, T., and Barbosa, M. (2015). "Intercultural knowledge development: Evidence fromstudent interviews during short-term study abroad", *International Journal of Intercultural Relations,* 49, pp. 80–99.

Cushner, K. (1994). "Cross-Cultural Training for Adolescents and Professionals Who Work With Youth Exchange Programs" in Brislin, R., and Yoshida, T. *Improving Intercultural Interaction. Modules for Cross-Cultural Training Programs.* Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, pp. 91 – 108.

Daliba, S., Harunb, M., and Yusoffa, N. (2014). "Reconceptualizing Intercultural Competence: A Phenomenological Investigation of Students' Intercultural Experiences", *Social and Behavioral Sciences,* 155, pp. 130 – 135.

DANE. (2017). *La Población Proyectada de Colombia.* Available at: http://www.dane.gov.co/reloj/ (Accessed 13/08/2017).

Deardoff, D. (2006). "Identification and Assessment of Intercultural Competence as a Student Outcome of Internationalization", *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 10 (3), pp. 241-266.

Deardoff, D. (2009a). 'Preface' in Deardoff, D. *The SAGE Handbook of Intercultural Competence*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, pp. xi-xiv.

Deardoff, D. (2009b). 'Synthesizing Conceptualizations of Intercultural Competence. A Summary and Emerging Themes' in Deardoff, D. *The SAGE Handbook of Intercultural Competence*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, pp. 264-269.

Deardoff, D. (2016). "How to Assess Intercultural Competence" in Hua, Z. *Research Methods in Intercultural Communication. A practical Guide.* London: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 120 – 134.

Dervin, F., and Gross, Z. (2016). "Introduction: Towards the Simultaneity of Intercultural Competence", *Intercultural Competence in Education. Alternative Approaches for Different Times*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 1 – 10.

Egekvist, U., Lyngdorf, N., Du, X and Shi, J. (2016). "Intercultural Competence in Host Students? A Study of Danish Students Facing China at Home", in Dervin, F., and Gross, Z. *Intercultural Competence in Education. Alternative Approaches for Different Times.* London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 31 – 50.

Fantini, A., and A. Tirmizi. (2006). 'Exploring and Assessing Intercultural Competence', World Leading Publications. Available at: http://digitalcollections.sit.edu/worldlearning_publications/1 (Accessed 30/11/ 2016).

Fantini, A. (2009). 'Assessing Intercultural Competence. Issues and Tools' in Deardoff, D. *The SAGE Handbook of Intercultural Competence*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, pp. 456-476.

Gibson, B., and Hua, Z. (2016). "Interviews" in Hua, Z. *Research Methods in Intercultural Communication. A practical Guide*. London: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 181 – 195.

Giovanangeli, A., and Oguro, S. (2016). "Cultural Responsiveness: a framework for re-thinking students' interculturality through study abroad", *Intercultural Education*, 27 (1), pp. 70-84. DOI: 10.1080/14675986.2016.1144328.

Gisevius, A., and Weber, R. (2009). "The Transatlantic Orientation Exchange Project", *Intercultural Education*, 20 (1), pp. 103-111, DOI: 10.1080/14675980903370995.

Jackson, J. (2011). "Cultivating cosmopolitan, intercultural citizenship through critical reflection and international, experiential learning", *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 11 (2), pp. 80-96.

Jackson, J. (2015). "Becoming Interculturally Competent: Theory to Practice in International Education", *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 48, pp. 91-107.

Méndez García, M. (2017). "Intercultural reflection through the Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters: students' accounts of their images of alterity", *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 17 (2), pp. 90-117. DOI: 10.1080/14708477.2016.1159693

Migración Colombia (2017). *Boletín Migratorio Junio 2017.* Available at: http://migracioncolombia.gov.co/index.php/es/entidad/control-interno/auditorias-internas-de-calidad/327-boletines-migratorios-2017/5033-06-boletin-migratorio-junio-2017 (Accessed 13/08/2017).

Miller, J., and Glassner, B. (2004). "The 'inside' and 'outside', Finding Realities in Interviews" in Silverman, D. *Qualitative Research. Theory, Method and Practice.* Second Edition. London: Sage Publications, pp. 125-139.

Odağ, O., Wallin, H., and Kedzior, K. (2016). "Definition of Intercultural Competence According to Undergraduate Students at an International University in Germany", *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 20 (2), pp. 118-139.

Peckenpaugh, K. (2012). "Intercultural competence: meeting the bar and falling short in Short-term study abroad", *Proceedings of Intercultural Competence Conference,* 2, pp. 143-162.

Root, E., and Ngampornchai, A. (2012). "'I Came Back as a New Human Being': Student Descriptions of Intercultural Competence Acquired Through Education Abroad Experiences", *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 17(5), pp. 513-532.

Saldaña, J. (2013). *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Research*. Second Edition. Dorchester: SAGE Publications.

Spitzberg, B., and Changnon, G. (2009). "Conceptualizing Intercultural Competence" in Deardoff, D. *The SAGE Handbook of Intercultural Competence*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, pp. 2 – 52.

Trimble, J., Pedersen, P., and Rodela, E. (2009). 'The Real Cost of Intercultural Incompetence. An Epilogue' in Deardoff, D. *The SAGE Handbook of Intercultural Competence*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, pp. 492-503.

Walton, J., Paradies, Y., Priest, N., Wertheim, E., and Freeman, E. (2015). "Fostering intercultural understanding through secondary school experiences of cultural immersion", *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 28 (2), pp. 216-237, DOI: 10.1080/09518398.2014.891772.

Weidemann, A., and Blüml, F. (2009) "Experiences and coping strategies of host families in international youth exchange", *Intercultural Education*, 20 (1), pp. 87 – 102**.**

Appendix. Interview Guide

Initial and "Ice-breaker" questions:

- How would you describe your experience in Colombia?

- What did you like about Colombia? The city?

- Where there things you did not like about Colombia? The city?

Intercultural Competence Questions:

- Did you experienced or watched anything that you consider to be unusual or different?
    - (e.g. Food, daily activities, ways of interaction, clothes, greetings, touching).
    - Explore:
        - Why was it unusual for you?
        - Did you do anything about it?
        - How did you feel about it?

- Do you consider to have experienced *"difficult" situations* or *problems* with others?
    - (e.g. fights, differences, or felt uncomfortable, or didn't understand the host family or friends)
    - Explore:
        - What happened?
        - What did you do?
        - What did they do?
        - How was it solved?
        - What do you think about it?
        - How did you feel about it?

- In a different context, what would happen if the same *problem* arises again?
    - Would you solve it in the same way?
    - Does that *problem* occur in your home with your family and/or friends?
- *Relationships:* What do you consider maintained a "good" relationship with your host family? With your friends?

- Are you still in contact with them?

- *Language:* Did you study or learn Spanish before going to Colombia?
- What do you think about the language?

Concluding/ closing questions:

- Now that you are back home, do you consider that this experience in Colombia had any kind of effect or impact? It changed you?
- Did you take something with you about Colombians?
- What do you consider makes an exchange experience successful?
- Would you recommend this experience to others?
- What advice would you give to future AFS students who will go to Colombia?
- Would you go back to Colombia?