“You can’t understand what it’s like to be completely different until you’ve done it”
Developing Cultural Awareness in Initial Teacher Education through International Placements.

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Abstract:
This paper explores the experiences of a group of UK-based trainee teachers, specialising in Primary French, and their development of cultural awareness having been involved in teaching practice placements in France. The second in a series of papers, this work follows on from an earlier paper presented in 2007 that examined student experiences in terms of their professional and pedagogical learning whilst engaged a bi-lateral student exchange. This earlier paper concluded that such international placements were pivotal in students developing different analytical lenses through which they were able to view and reflect on their professional practice. Furthermore, in exploring what were opportunities to engage in professional, critical conversations, it raised a number of implications concerning the organisation and development of initial teacher education (ITE).

Turning our attention to those messages contained within the research about cultural awareness further extends the value of this work in its ability to speak to the field of ITE about connecting the worlds outside and inside of the classroom. Key agreed expectations of the bi-lateral European collaboration between the Teacher Development Agency and Higher Education Institutions in England, and the French Ministry of Education and CDIUFM (Conference des Directeurs des Instituts Universitaires de Formation des Maitres), contained within their document “The Common Reference Framework”, are those related to developing intercultural awareness. This is considered as being a key aspect in language learning, as well as contributing to what might be considered to be the globally aware educator.

Adopting a qualitative methodology, the research provides a case study of a group of ten students, examining their expectations, experiences and personal evaluations of their month-long teaching placement in a group of French Primary schools in southern France. A phased programme of data collection was implemented, utilising: a series of semi-structured group and individual interviews (pre- and post-placement); a series of classroom observations within their host schools in France; and a meta-analytical thematic assessment of a final course assignment (focused on cultural awareness and professional development). All data was then analysed thematically, drawing out areas of similarity and difference in the ways in which students talked about their expectations and placement experiences, and utilising observational data to contextualise their responses.

In this paper we foreground the student voice in a timely examination of how such international experiences contribute to the development of intercultural awareness and reflective approaches in the professional learning of beginning teachers.

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Introduction:

The importance of an international component in the education of children and young people has gained impetus in recent years (DfES 2004; DfES 2005a). Whilst these governmental expectations have been clearly voiced they represent complex educational challenges for teachers, their schools and those engaged in Initial Teacher Education (ITE). For teacher educators and student teachers, a key document in the development of partnerships between France and the UK has been the “Common Reference Framework” (DfES, 2005b), written and published through collaboration between the Teacher Development Agency (TDA), Higher Education Institutions in England, and the French Ministry of Education and CDIUFM (Conference des Directeurs des Instituts Universitaires de Formation des Maitres). With its introduction in 2005/6, there is very little systematic research into student experiences.

In the interests of extending research knowledge and informing future development, we as authors of this paper considered it timely to examine student experiences of a bilateral exchange programme between France and England. In particular we were interested in their perceptions of its value in terms of their own professional learning. In doing so, our research aimed to contribute to a currently limited field of knowledge and inform further strategic and practice development working from this student perspective.

In the following paper we focus particularly on students’ development of an intercultural awareness and how they talked about the international placement changing them personally and professionally. We start with a review of current literature and policy, in order to situate these student experiences. Against this backdrop, we then explore some of the experiences and development of a group of ab initio educators, training to become Primary school teachers. As this paper also has a specific emphasis on those aspects of development that could be identified being about cultural or intercultural awareness, it is helpful to briefly examine some of the complexities associated with such terms.
Cultural and Intercultural Awareness: Making Sense of ‘Savoir’:

The terms such as ‘cultural awareness’ and ‘intercultural awareness’ are very much apparent within UK and European policy documentation (DfES, 2004; Council of Europe, 2001). Within this context much of what is written considers these terms as ‘competencies’, and thus we are given the sense that the role of professionals in teacher education is in some ways associated with facilitating the development of such an awareness within their trainees. We will see in later sections how this cultural dimension is a key aspect of the approach adopted in language acquisition pedagogy.

Yet, at the same time, the use of such terms perhaps belies difficulties in definition. Some writers such as Neulip (2000) draw on the communicative purposes of language, seeing culture as both a verbal and non-verbal system of symbols. Taking this line, we can infer that intercultural awareness in this sense could be seen as being a state where an individual is knowledgeable of such symbols from different cultures, can recognise difference and can perhaps read the meaning of cultural exchanges with understanding of their situated contexts. Here, the work of Michael Byram and his co-writers is particularly useful in unpacking the possible layering of cultural awareness and competence.

Byram’s conceptualisation of intercultural and communicative competence has been widely reported in academic spheres (Driscoll, 1999; Guillerme, 2002), and has been influential in the framing of key strategic policy documents such as the Common European Framework for language teaching, learning and assessment (Council of Europe, 2001). Byram and Doyé provide an excellent summary of their five *savoirs* in their chapter for Driscoll (1999), and it is not our intention to re-examine these in any great detail. However it is useful to restate them and offer some illustrative examples.

Drawing from Byram & Doyé (1999, p142):

1. **Savoir être – relating to attitudes to difference.** Byram & Doyé give the example of ‘the kind of learner who notices and asks questions, who expresses wonder and interest in other people’s behaviours and beliefs, rather than rejection and disgust’.

2. **Savoirs – relating to knowledge.** Here Byram & Doyé offer the example of having a ‘knowledge of different eating habits or work practices and how the differences can lead to misunderstandings and rejection’.

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(3) **Savoir Comprendre – relating to interpretive skills.** Important here is the definition of ‘interpretation’ that is not simply used in the sense of *interpreter* (i.e. translator). Rather, Byram and Doyé make clear that this is more about the learner being able to recognise contextual significance and how something relates to other aspects of the ‘cultural’ context. An example here might be the ability to ‘locate’ the significance of a particular teaching approach (e.g. the use of synthetic phonics in reading to a wider national policy emphasis on skills-centred training, and notions of literacy in crisis).

(4) **Savoir Apprendre/Faire - referring to skills of discovery and interaction.** Here Byram and Doyé stress the individual’s ability to ask questions that enable deeper insight to be gained that perhaps constitute implicit cultural knowledge.

(5) **Savoir s’engager – relating to a critical cultural awareness.** Byram and Doyé’s descriptions suggest that this layer of competence is greatly significant in educational terms in that it involves a critical, evaluative and perhaps reflective engagement.

In the later analysis of students’ responses we draw on these five components of intercultural competence to illustrate how students’ awareness was multi-layered, sometimes operating simply in the realms of an openness and recognition of difference, and, at others, being deeply reflective. In particular, we focus in on the fifth savoir (s’engager) and interrogate student experiences of the placement abroad that are illustrative of the dispositional changes that are reflected in their discussions and reflective writing. We now turn to a review of the policy-related literature that gives a sense of the expectations and priorities that are evident and that shape current and future professional landscape associated with the intercultural aspects of language learning in UK primary schools.

*Policy Expectations and Internationalising the Primary Curriculum:*

“Putting the World into World-Class Education” (DfES, 2004) set out the vision of a strong international dimension across the education system in the UK, forged by developing international partnerships to enable people of the UK to have “the knowledge, skills and understanding they would need to fulfil themselves, to live in and contribute effectively to a global society” (DfES, 2004, p1). As it stated:
‘One cannot truly educate young people in this country without the international dimension being a very significant and real part of their learning experience’ (DfES, 2004, p1).

Furthermore, in 2005, “Developing the global dimension in the school curriculum” (DfES, 2005a) considered how a global dimension could be incorporated into the National Curriculum. The Government envisaged that by 2010 every school in England would be partnered with a school overseas via an internet Global Gateway.

How the development of cultural and international awareness should be central to education provisions for children and young people has been further emphasised by the Languages Strategy - “Languages for All: Languages for Life” (DfES, 2002), which has. As it states:

“In the knowledge of the 21st century, language competence and intercultural understanding are not optional extra, they are an essential part of being a citizen.” (DfES, 2002, p5)

Looking to International Partnerships in Initial Teacher Education:

What is also clear is that the role of the professional educator is undergoing fundamental change. National commitments to the development of internationalisation require a corresponding investment in the professional learning of students of Initial Teacher Education. Furthermore, as Persson (2004) identifies, this is not something particular to the UK. Rather, at a European level the impact of internationalisation is a significant influence, manifest in a strong obligation to identify vital competences for the future teachers of Europe.

Meeting the needs of children, young people and their communities, requires professionals that have a highly developed awareness of social, educational and welfare needs; that have close inter-professional relations that facilitate knowledge-sharing and professional working. Furthermore, if schools are to become central to education and welfare provision for children and young people, arguably, they will need to develop further as social and culturally inclusive communities, and be institutions that facilitate globally educative experiences. These challenges are ones that extend to Higher Education and particularly for those engaged in initial teacher
education (ITE). As Bash, Shallcross and Stewart (2007) highlight, the Universities Council for the Education of Teachers (UCET) make this association clear.

“...if education is to make an authentic, critical and productive response to these issues in the future, the international and global dimension must figure much more prominently in teacher education programmes.” (Bash, Shallcross & Stewart, 2007, p1)

Similarly, the draft Common European Principles for Teacher and Trainer Competencies and Qualifications (European Commission, 2004) further emphasises the need for new knowledge, developed through research and evidence-based practice; the facilitating of mobility projects for teachers and trainers that is integral to professional learning; and fostering of initial and continuing professional development programmes that ensure that teachers and trainers have the knowledge and expertise of European co-operation to enable them to value and respect cultural diversity and to educate learners to become EU citizens.

The expectations at social, cultural and educational levels are obvious. As stated in the Common reference framework (DfES, 2005b, p9):

“The trainees are at the forefront of a Europe-wide vision, via teaching and learning modern languages, for the entrenchment of intercultural respect among sovereign nations. The children in European primary classrooms are the vehicles for the realisation of this vision and these teacher trainees are the inspirational catalysts in the development of the children’s cultural understanding.”

Byram et al (2002) similarly recognise that the importance of developing the intercultural dimension, “has a lot of implications for the priorities in teacher training” (Byram et al, 2002. p27). What is also explored is the inter-relationship between pedagogical approaches, knowledge, skills and values “to help them [learners] to see that such interaction is an enriching experience.” (Byram et al, 2002. p6)
Clearly then, the expectations of government and the challenges associated with the development of an intercultural understanding within the curriculum are significant. At the same time, our knowledge of student experiences of international placements in Initial Teacher Education is, at present, limited. What do these experiences contribute to their professional learning?

The Study: Focus and Methodology:
It was with these questions in mind that we set out to examine the student experience of international placements and how they perceived its value in terms of their own professional development. Whilst the professional development of in-service practitioners has been the focus of significant, little research has specifically set to capture the professional learning of what could be considered as nascent professionals. Furthermore, research that has focused on the association between international teaching placements and professional learning for trainees has been limited. The study adopted a case study approach that utilised a range of qualitative methods of data collection. There was clear rationale for such an approach: Focusing as we were on the experiences of student teachers undertaking placements in France, we wanted to capture what were their own frames of reference through which they made their assessments of value and challenge. Not satisfied with obtaining a largely descriptive account through more quantitative means, such as the use of survey-based attitudinal scales, from the outset the study was designed to yield a richness of data. In accordance with Bryman (1993) and Walker (1988), we thus considered a qualitative approach essential to being able to examine students’ experiences with this rich contextual data intact.

Methods for obtaining data included the use of semi-structured group interviews, classroom observations and set pieces of reflective writing. Adopting this range of data collection methods was important in a number of ways: Firstly, the combination of focus group interviews and observations enabled the researchers to probe student answers to questions concerning classroom experiences with reference to specific examples. This was useful in establishing a level of shared contextual knowledge about their schools, their classrooms and significant others (such as host teachers). Secondly, this combination further supported our interpretation of students’ responses and the subsequent understanding of their experiences in context. Finally, using a
combination of methods enabled us to establish trustworthiness in our data analysis through a process of triangulation. (Flick, 2004, p180/1; Bryman, 1993, p131).

The research was subject to strict ethical considerations through formal University practices. A research protocol/ information pack for participants, risk assessments and consent procedures and associated documentation was submitted to an independent University Ethics committee. These documents set out the purpose of the research, its recruitment, consent, data collection and analysis procedures, and arrangements for data protection. Such procedures were devised in consultation with the British Education Research Association’s professional guidelines, as well as those more specific to the University’s own regulations. Participation in the research was wholly voluntary and informed consent was obtained from organizations and individuals involved. Information about the research focus and procedures was presented to the students during the pre-placement preparation and they were asked to provide written consent if they were happy to be involved. Particular attention was paid to any concerns that there might have been in terms of their participation in the research study and any formal involvement and assessments that were integral to their academic progression. Care was taken to make clear that their participation in the research had no bearing on the academic progression of their qualification, and most importantly, that in exercising their right to withdraw from the research, fully or in part, would not affect any academic judgements or formal assessments.

The following analysis provides an account of one aspect of their experiences, namely their professional learning. Drawing from the data obtained from three cohorts of trainee teachers from England teaching in France – it provides a rich account of their experiences, their assessment of the value of international exchanges and comments on how such placements enrich professional learning in teacher education.

Findings: Culture ‘Shocks’, Pedagogical Reflection & Professional Learning: Perhaps most apparent in the responses of participants were their comments about the classroom contexts in which they taught. Alongside descriptive commentary on these experiences, more significant was the degree to which their accounts contained
reflective and self-analytical statements about their professional identity. Here we share Boud et al.’s (1985) view of reflection as being:

‘…a generic term for those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to a new understanding and appreciation.’ (p. 19)

All participants in the study explored their experiences with a range of analytical, reflective lenses. It was clear from pre and post-placement focus group work, classroom observations and students’ later reflective writings, that the teaching placement in France represented a major challenge. Unsurprisingly, concerns about their own linguistic competence figured significantly in their considerations of what this challenge involved.

[UK Student A]: I think the problem is though that I think we’re all, well I am, I’m quite worried that I’m going to get over there and I know how to teach and I have you know strategies in place to do everything but the language, I’m just going to be so busy concentrating on thinking of the right words to say….

[UK Student D]: And also our teacher, the first kind of two weeks she was speaking so fast and she kept going “I speak really fast”, but she didn’t really make the effort to slow down!

At the same time, the ‘culture shock’ effect to which Byram et al (2002) refers also seemed to give participants a different lens with which to make sense of their experiences and their professional development. Being located within a different educational context provided opportunities for the comparison of professional and pedagogical approaches. In doing so, they were often reflecting on and analysing their own practices. Moreover, in the following analyses we can also identify examples of the ways in which culture, language and identity intersect in their reflections.

Re-orientation and Knowing Difference:

The experience of ‘culture shock’ was something that all participants referred to and it is worthy to note how such experiences were common to UK students going to, and French students coming to teach in UK primary schools. A further facet of their experiences was evident in the ways in which they talked about getting to know and respect cultural difference. As one UK student reflected:
Immediately I entered my school [in France] I sensed the cultural differences that surrounded me. Every face was different and I knew that the children knew I wasn’t someone who had the same cultural background. Approaching the classroom I was extremely nervous… scanning the classroom, I could see and feel the immediate similarities and differences between a classroom in England and [one] in France.’

(UK Student, reflective writing 2008)

Another student’s reflection was indicative of how many participants attached a great significance to the process of becoming aware of different cultures, and most importantly, being able to respect different communities. Indeed, there were indications that these students returning from their international placement saw these challenges as brought about by global development.

‘Intercultural contact is bigger today than ever before… the development of communication which is faster and more available, [and] transportation which allows face-to-face contact with people from different cultures…If children can develop a greater intercultural understanding, it is hoped that they will grow up having an attitude which encouraged a mutual respect [ ] for people of other cultures and which [acts] against racism and ethnocentric behaviour’ (UK Student, reflective writing 2008)

Furthermore, other students were clearly committed to ‘being open to what is new while remaining aware of where we come from’, seeing a balance between:

‘a celebration of [children’s] own cultures and enlightenment about others [that makes] certain that children accept differences as normal examples of the diversity that is present in human beings’ (UK Student, reflective writing 2008).

Participants’ reflections suggest that part of the whole international teaching experience for them required a great degree of re-orientation – moving from a position of identifying difference to understanding its significance. In such ways we could argue that, through engaging in critical reflection, students’ experiences were deeply complex, shifting through the different layers of Byram’s savoirs. Whilst a number of their reflections started in recognising difference and being curious, even in those examples above, there are indications that students began to ‘decode’ the meaning of these experiences, to situate them and make sense of their wider meaning. What was also interesting was the significant degree to which participants, through
their reflection, projected a sense of ‘becoming’, a vision of their professional and personal identities and intentions.

Culture, Identity and Critical Reflection:
Using Byram’s typology of intercultural competence, we were also struck by the close connections that students made between culture, language and their reflections on their own professional identities. Much of their responses showed how in their engagement with critical reflection on these international teaching placements they envisioned change in themselves as professionals. At one level, students were very keen to make a strong connection between what might be seen as their developing intercultural ethos and their in-practice pedagogy. As one student reflected:

‘Immersion in the foreign culture is the key principle in the [intercultural culture] strand of the [Common Reference] Framework, and ‘acculturation’ is the primary objective for the first week of placement... this was extremely important... I made a great effort to work towards it as I was aware that ‘acculturated learners’ are likely to be more successful at learning the language’. Through my interactions with staff and through my attendance of an Epiphany party outside school, I feel that I was successful ...to initiate and organise cultural interactions and activities. I feel that I would be able to introduce a European dimension into my future teaching, perhaps setting up a French themed day, built on the concept of Epiphany and including customs such as eating ‘la gallette des roi’ and choosing a king and queen for the day. [Such] activities I feel would increase children’s enthusiasm in learning about French culture’ (UK Student, reflective writing 2008).

Another student, characteristic of the majority of participants, drew attention to the importance of culture as being at the core of people’s identities and that intercultural understanding required one to recognise that ‘we are shaped by our own culture just as others are shaped by theirs’ (UK Student, reflective writing 2008).

Interestingly, in concert with the work of Byram and Doyé (1998), students also expressed a sense that they were sitting between cultures and in their professional capacity this transcending of cultural boundaries was important.
‘[In] sharpening children’s curiosity while making cultural comparisons, I began to achieve this by becoming a sort of mediator between two cultures, through the use of a scrapbook about myself, my family and where I live and through discovery about the children’s cultures and backgrounds in comparison.’ (UK Student, reflective writing 2008).

Students talked about ‘mediating’ and about ‘finding bridges’, echoing Driscoll & Frost’s (1999) work. Others visualised their futures as practicing teachers and the practices they would take into the learning environment of their classrooms. Here they talked practically about creating ‘language corners where there would be books available for the children to read about different countries, languages, traditions and ways of life’ (UK Student, reflective writing 2008). There was also a real sense of these future opportunities being experiences felt at many levels, talking of ‘arousing children’s interest’ through dedicated cultural days that used role-play and artefacts to stimulate. In such ways their sense of themselves as future practitioners and what they would do to promote intercultural understanding mirrored their own experiences as individuals abroad. These too were stimulating experiences on many levels. As one student expressed:

‘I feel excited at the prospect of bringing an intercultural dimension into my future teaching and I hope that I can be an enthusiastic and stimulating teacher who can help develop the children’s appetite for learning through teaching in a creative and stimulating way. By using my experiences, I hope I can be an “inspirational catalyst” to future learners’ (UK Student, reflective writing 2008).

Student teachers also were seen to use imagery and metaphor as means of expressing the cultural challenges and aspects of personal growth that they experienced. A good example of this comes from a student commenting on the value of modern foreign language learning. She wrote:

‘Modern foreign languages have the potential to be hugely enjoyable for children, as for children, it is like gazing into another world, their noses pressed up against a window to see the lives of other people, and it really opens up doors for children to be truly global citizens... what could be more vivid and real for children than to engage with real people from across the globe, with different beliefs to them?’ (UK Student, reflective writing 2008).
Perhaps most significant in their responses was the sense of professional and personal change, alongside an expressed feeling of mutual exchange. These were, as we reported in an earlier paper, life-changing experiences. Here the connectedness between language and culture was very much in evidence as students grappled with the challenges of communication. Realisation that expressions of language and culture could be significantly non-verbal saw many students developing a high level of self-awareness and, in turn, effecting subtle changes. As one student reported:

‘I had to adopt the language, habits and patterns of behaviour and refrain from using my first language, which Fennes and Hapgood (1997) refer to as assimilation. I taught in the target language and after having observed several lessons, began to adopt similar gestures and greetings in order to function effectively with another culture…I empathised with the culture and incorporated the new behaviour through my interactions [though] I could never fully internalise the underlying factors as cultural values and beliefs’ (UK Student, reflective writing 2008).

This is, indeed, interesting and these modifications of behaviour, manner and demeanour were evident in many reflections. Perhaps the best example of these dispositional changes that occurred on professional and deeply personal levels was that of a student who likened her growth to that of a sunflower:

‘During my intercultural experience in France, I feel that I have grown as a person and professionally. My confidence and linguistic skills have improved as a result and I am thoroughly proud of my achievement because it is something that I felt was totally unachievable. Metaphorically thinking, before my experience in France, I felt like a sunflower seed.. I was extremely nervous and lacked confidence. However, by the end of my [placement] I could sincerely relate myself to a sunflower, because I felt so confident and proud of myself...After considering the value of my experience in France, I feel that I have developed as a professional by fulfilling the requirements of the TDA standards.’ (UK Student, reflective writing 2008).

Most notable in this student’s reflection was that these changes were as much about personal change, perhaps more so. She went on to say:

‘My intercultural experience has given me so many happy memorable memories that I will keep with me forever. The outcomes of the international exchange for me are unreal because I am quite a timid person but I was given strength and confidence by my [host] tutor and I
achieved everything that I thought was unachievable. Furthermore, the experience has taught me to believe in yourself and always take life-changing opportunities because you may never get a second chance.’ (UK Student, reflective writing 2008).

Another student, commenting on the formalised expectations represented in the Common Reference Framework, considered that:

‘It’s the development in yourself that is more important, not what people want you to do (Student, interview response, 2007)

The significance of the international teaching placement in terms of intercultural awareness is arguably profound for all involved. Whilst perhaps these reflections have an immediacy to them and thus may contain some residuum of cultural ‘shock’ and amplified value, there is some indication that the dispositional nature of these experiences may have longer reaching currency in empathic terms. Many of the interview responses from students made this point:

‘I’ve broadened my own knowledge to teach about difference in cultures. As well the fact that we’ve been and seen it as an outsider and we’ve been that different person. Like when you’re teaching about the kind of [cultural] differences and stuff, it’s the fact that we…I can’t seem to explain it properly: You can’t understand what it’s like to be completely different until you’ve done it. It helps you in that way because at least you understand in a very small way how they [children coming from other cultures] must be feeling. I suppose in a way you’ve gained from that as well because we’ve very much been an outsider.’ (Student, interview response 2007)

‘Before going to France I would only be able to teach about the differences at a basic level…..what it looks like and then go through the stereotypes basically what, ask the kids what they know about France like blah, blah. But now there’s a lot more I can teach with regards to like the cultural side of things, because I’ve experienced it so I can teach through my own experience.’ (Student, interview response 2007)

‘As an educator, I feel more confident in the way that I could teach, not just French, just having a more rounded view of things.. seeing differences and similarities and bringing them back over to England… I’m a little bit more open to ideas… spending four weeks in France will undoubtedly make you a better teacher because of all the experiences… you can read and look at research, but you need first-hand experiences.’ (Student, interview response, 2007)
Conclusion:
This paper has provided a brief insight into the ways in which a group of student teachers experienced and evaluated an international teaching placement. The challenge for them, particularly teaching across the curriculum for seventy-five percent of the time in the target language, was immense. Yet linguistic factors represent only one aspect of how they assessed their development. Clearly, their personal and professional development figured greatly in their reflections and the ways in which they considered the international experiences as meaningful. Other researchers have suggested that international exchange programmes change perceptions and that student teaching abroad programmes can make a long-term difference (Swiniarski & Breitborde, 2001).

Culturally, these experiences stand as examples of how involved and multi-layered these exchanges are and how the relationship between Byram’s five *savoirs* is equally complex and non-linear. In amongst all our discussions with students there is a real sense of movement between these strands that seek to understand intercultural competence. There is, for instance, a dialogic relationship between recognition and respect of difference; acting as a mediator, an interpreter making sense of these cultural ‘exchanges’ in terms of meaning; and being an active ‘practitioner’ of the intercultural. We would argue that the fifth *savoir*, s’engager is indeed most significant, perhaps containing a strong sense that the individual undertakes a dispositional change. Such change is transformative at both personal and professional levels, representing a re-layering and shifting of many aspects of identity. This dispositional quality takes us beyond the learning exchange being about the simple transmission of skills and knowledge to one that is enabling, as Byram (2002) summarises the implications for priorities for teacher education:

‘The issues that need to be given priority are not the acquisition of more knowledge about a country or countries, but how to organise the classroom and classroom processes to enable learners to develop new attitudes (savoir etre), new skills (savoir apprendre/faire and savoir comprendre) and new critical awareness (savoir s’engager)’ (Byram, 2002, p27)
Interestingly in the reflections of this group of student educators was the parallel between their own dispositional change, and their envisioning of themselves as mediators and catalysts of similar changes in their learners. In this sense, their professional knowing drawn out of these intercultural experiences enabled them to act as a portal through which learners could view difference and engage in dialogue of ideas around expressions and representations of peoplehood. Furthermore, the immediacy and proximity of such experiences was of significance. As one student responded:

‘Having first-hand experience is in my opinion the be way of teaching [intercultural understanding]’ (Student, Interview response 2007)

What is more, we can find significant value in considering the relationship between educator and learner in parallel. Our research has suggested that, in the experiences of all those involved in reciprocal international teaching placements such as this one, the relationship between active agents is necessarily dialogic. For us as professional educators engaged in teacher education, it is significant that this international placement provided an opportunity for students, as nascent professionals, to develop a range of critical, reflective lenses – both culturally and pedagogically. Drawing conceptually from Loughran (2006) and Hayes et al (2006), we would argue that the encouragement of such critical dialogue lies at the heart of real, productive partnership, professional learning and the co-construction of knowledge. As one student intimated, perhaps, they also recognise their role in this:

‘But coming back I can see what they [ ] are trying to get across. Like my views, now I suppose I’m kind of thinking and talking more positively about France, about a different country...so in some respect, I could talk to students who are going next year about my experiences, my attitudes, things like that. So in some respect they may see me as a bit of a student ambassador’ (Student, interview response, 2007)
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