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Development of Intercultural Competence among Students in The International Department of Peking Academy

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ABSTRACT

The significance of fostering intercultural competence and global skills among young individuals has been emphasized by countries worldwide, especially for high school students aspiring for international higher education. This study examines the development of intercultural competence among students in the international department of Peking Academy (Beijing Huiwen Middle School). Through introspective interviews, creative writing, and writing reflections of three students, this research identifies critical factors that contribute to high school students' intercultural competence development. These case studies also offer qualitative data on the formation of cultural identities, a crucial aspect of intercultural competence for high school students. The study concludes with recommendations for curriculum design and development, extracurricular activities, and orientation to enhance students' intercultural competence and facilitate their adaptation to diverse cultures.

Keywords: intercultural competence; cultural identity; high school students.

I. Introduction

As the world becomes more multipolar, economically globalized, socially digitized, and culturally diverse, countries are increasingly recognizing the importance of cultivating intercultural competence and global capabilities among young people. Such competencies are crucial for young people to take the initiative in international competition and cooperation. In China, many families are preparing their children for access to international higher education by enrolling them in the international departments of public high schools. These institutions integrate Chinese and Western educational modes to offer a holistic education that aims at cultivating all-around students. At Peking Academy's International Department, intercultural competence is viewed as a core quality of student holistic development and an essential direction for curriculum development. While previous research on cultivating intercultural competence has focused on university students, this paper aims to identify essential factors for developing intercultural competence in high school education through life

narratives and case studies. The findings of this research will provide a foundation for the development of the intercultural competence curriculum at Peking Academy in the future.

II. Literature Review

1. Definition and Components of Intercultural Competence

The discussion of intercultural competence can be traced back to the 1970s (Barna, 1976; Hammer, 1978; Ruben & Kealey, 1979) and the 1980s (Bennett, 1986; Wiseman & Abe, 1986; Hammer, 1989; Imahori & Lanigan, 1989; Martin & Hammer, 1989) when intercultural communication competence was examined based on the need for cross-cultural adaptation. Bennett conceptualized dimensions of “intercultural competence” in his developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (DMIS), which is an influential framework for understanding and developing the skills necessary for effective communication and interaction across different cultures. Gertsen (1990) popularized the term “intercultural competence” and defined it as the ability to function effectively in another culture in the context of expatriates working overseas. Lambert (1994) emphasized the ability to demonstrate skills in intercultural environments. Byram defined intercultural communication competence from a developmental perspective, the “knowledge of others; knowledge of self; skills to interpret and relate; skills to discover and/or to interact; valuing others’ values, beliefs and behaviors; and relativizing one’s self (1997: 34).” Byram highlighted the importance of language proficiency. Then, Byram (2003) and colleagues (2001) proposed an influential model of intercultural competence which highlighted the role of intercultural speakers as mediators across cultures (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). Byram’s theory is applied by numerous scholars in language teaching and students’ language development (e.g., Gao, et al., 2002; Sercu, 2006; Li, 2016; Mede & Cansever, 2016; Shaules, 2019; Liu & Da, 2022).

Fantini and Tirmizi defined intercultural competence as “a complex of abilities needed to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself (2006: 12)”. They emphasized four dimensions, namely knowledge, attitude, skills, and awareness operating within three domains of relationships, communication, and collaboration. Deardorff conducted a groundbreaking study identifying the definition and components of intercultural competence. In her research, Deardorff synthesized the data provided by 23 intercultural experts and found three prevalent themes, including “the awareness, valuing, and understanding of cultural differences; experiencing other cultures; and self-awareness of one’s own culture (2006: 247)”. Deardorff’s achievement has been widely referenced by subsequent studies that aim to develop and assess students’ intercultural competence in foreign language teaching (Chen, 2022; Bon, 2022; Zheng, et al., 2022). By building on Deardorff’s foundational research, these studies have contributed to the ongoing development of intercultural competence theory and practice.

UNESCO has built upon the theoretical framework established by former scholars to expand the meaning and purpose of intercultural competence into the pursuit of culture diversity and human rights. UNESCO referred to intercultural competencies as having “adequate relevant knowledge about particular cultures, as well as general knowledge about the sorts of issues arising when members of different cultures interact, holding receptive attitudes that encourage establishing and maintaining contact with diverse others, as well as having the skills required to draw upon both knowledge and attitudes when interacting with others from different cultures (2013: 16)”. UNESCO also adopted Deardorff’s (2011) minimal requirements for attaining intercultural competencies which include respect; self-awareness/identity, seeing from other perspectives/world views, listening, adaptation, relationship building, and cultural humility. These components set a foundation for UNESCO’s operational plan to cultivate intercultural competence around the world.

2. Intercultural Identity As an Essential Factor

The exploration of intercultural competence was also integrated with the discussion of identity since the formation of identity is a continuous process that could be influenced by intercultural encounters. Intercultural identity, “an achieved self-other orientation that an individual develops over time”, is also an essential factor in the quality of intercultural encounters (Kim, 1988). Kim’s later work expanded on this concept and identified two transformative processes within it: individuation and universalization (Kim, 2001, 2005). Kim (2009) underlined two facets of the core dimension of intercultural competence: identity inclusivity and identity security. Identity inclusivity refers to “a less stereotypical and more personalized way (Kim, 1992)” with which to perceive self and others from different cultures. Identity security includes risk-taking, self-confidence, self-esteem, hardiness, and self-efficacy. Kim analyzed evidence in memoirs, essays of self-reflection, and stories and concluded that an inclusive and secure identity is crucial for meaningful interpersonal relationships and that identity orientations can be cultivated (Kim, 2009). UNESCO (2013) discussed different perspectives of identity and emphasized the importance of people’s recognition of the multiplicity and fluidity of identity. According to developmental psychology, identity development is a crucial part of adolescents which lies a foundation for cognitive and social development. Thus, this study emphasizes intercultural identity as a factor of high school students’ intercultural competence.

3. Assessment of Intercultural Competence

Researchers also seek practical applications and assessments of intercultural competence. In the context of higher education, Fantini (2001) identified four dimensions of intercultural interlocutor competence: awareness, attitudes, knowledge, and skills. Fantini (2009) also stressed the fundamental role of language proficiency. The assessment tool “Your Objectives, Guidelines, and Assessment (YOGA)” form was designed by Fantini (2000, 2001) to monitor intercultural competence. Additionally, Fantini and Tirmizi (2006) conducted a research project for the Federation of the Experiment in International Living (FEIL) – “exploring and assessing intercultural competence”. Deardorff (2006) visualized two models of intercultural competence emphasizing desired internal and external outcomes, providing a foundation for intercultural competence application and assessment. Wu, Fan, & Peng (2013) designed an intercultural competence assessment for Chinese undergraduate students by adapting and synthesizing the intercultural communication competence model of Byram (1997), the YOGA form of Fantini (2000, 2001), the assessment tool of FEIL, and opinions of intercultural experts. These assessment tools have been widely used in Chinese higher education, and minor adjustments were made to assess high school students’ intercultural competence (Shi, 2020).

ETS research report on intercultural competence drew the definition of intercultural competence by Earley and Peterson (2004) and proposed a conceptual model of the *approach, analyze, and act* intercultural competence framework (Griffith, et al., 2016). The corresponding assessment, including task type and response option formats, consists of subjective self-report, intercultural scenario-based items, nontraditional behavioral skills tests, and conditional reasoning to focus more heavily on higher education students’ cognition and behaviors. These assessments offer valuable insights and guidance on how to cultivate the cognitive and behavioral perspectives of students’ intercultural competence.

4. Developing Intercultural Competence in Education

UNESCO (2013) discussed intercultural competence development from a macroscopic perspective and proposed two institutions to address intercultural competence: education systems, and legal systems. UNESCO also outlined an operational plan with five essential steps to cultivate intercultural competence: clarify (elaborate set of skills), teach (provide formal teaching or training), promote (spread ideas related to intercultural plurality through education and social media), enact (become a part of daily social life), and support (provide policy and adequate resource). Thus, education is crucial for developing students’ intercultural competence. However, it is essential to understand that

intercultural competence development goes beyond merely acquiring intercultural knowledge and communication skills. It requires a deeper understanding of different cultures, values, and beliefs, as well as a willingness to adapt and learn from others. In terms of curriculum design, scholars have proposed various curriculum development suggestions and practiced multiple techniques to enhance intercultural competence among students. Manara (2011) conducted narrative-based inquiries with learners who majored in English as a foreign language and found that personal narratives vividly displayed the process of forming the intercultural self. Andenoro et al (2012) addressed storytelling and narrative as a means to develop self-awareness and foster intercultural competence from a theoretical perspective. "Role-play can be served as a technique for students to practice real-life scenarios of intercultural communication (Reid, 2015; Banjongjit & Boonmoh, 2018). Barrett et al. (2014) suggested that experiential learning, project work, and cooperative learning pedagogies are effective in developing students' intercultural competence. Furthermore, diverse activities could also be used in education, such as those emphasizing multiple perspectives, role plays, simulations, drama, theatre, poetry, creative writing, and ethnographic tasks.

Gregersen-Hermans (2016) proposed that students' personalities, communication skills, and the desire to engage in intercultural interaction as well as their personal history of traveling abroad and language proficiency form the foundation of their current level of intercultural competence. Deardorff (2019) emphasized the use of "story circles" as a practical intercultural tool for developing and practicing intercultural competencies even among those who may not have a strong background in intercultural knowledge. The process of telling personal stories facilitates self and group reflection on intercultural identity, awareness, attitude, knowledge, and skills.

5. Summary and Research Questions

Previous studies have proposed intercultural competence models from diverse perspectives and reached agreements on key components, including an awareness of cultural differences, an awareness of one's own culture, and the experience of other cultures based on intercultural experiences from intercultural employees and university students. However, there has been a lack of research on high school students, who are in a crucial stage of self-identity formation. It is widely accepted that intercultural competence can be cultivated and developed, making it important to study the specific factors that influence high school students' intercultural competence.

This paper aims to expand on these ideas by exploring the following questions:

- Question 1: What are the essential factors for high school students to develop their intercultural competence?
- Question 2: How does the student's intercultural identity develop?
- Question 3: What strategies can be implemented in education to develop high school students' intercultural competence?

III. Methodology

1. Life Narrative

Clandinin and Connelly proposed that narrative is "both the phenomenon and the method of social sciences (2000: 18)", as it allows us to understand and construct meaning from our experiences and interaction with the world. Life narrative is a way for individuals to interpret, evaluate, and reconstruct their personal stories and identities, which can have positive impacts on their development. Bruner (2002) also viewed narratives and stories as a pathway to construct people's self-images. To study the intercultural competence of high school students, we use retrospective interviews and culture-themed creative writing to collect and analyze their narratives of intercultural experiences. By examining these narratives, we identify essential factors for intercultural competence in high school students based on previous theoretical studies.

Our methodology involves selecting 3 samples of high school students who experienced intercultural interactions; and were exposed to different cultures, languages, or experiences that contributed to their enhanced intercultural competence. We collected culture-themed creative writing and conducted retrospective interviews with these students, asking them to recount their experiences and reflect on their intercultural encounters.

Using a narrative analysis approach, we examined the stories shared by the participants and identified themes that emerged across their narratives. These themes were then compared to previous theoretical studies on intercultural competence to identify essential factors that contribute to the development of intercultural competence in high school students.

2. Participants

In a life narrative conducted at Peking Academy, three students are chosen from grades 10 and 11 as the interviewees. These students show a higher level of intercultural competence than their peers, based on a previous intercultural competence assessment of 122 students from grades 10 and 11 in the international department of Peking Academy. Additionally, these selected students possessed unique intercultural experiences that set them apart from their peers. The purpose of the study is to explore the students' life experiences and how they relate to their intercultural competence.

Name	Characteristics of Intercultural Experiences			
	Gender	Elementary school	Secondary school	Intercultural experiences
Ivan	male	public school	public school	Has lived and studied abroad in the US twice (more than one year in total)
Kiki	female	international school	public school	Studies English literacy and composition with foreign English teachers for 10 years; practices debate for 8 years
Eric	male	public school	public school	Has international travel experience; his parents study and work intercultural

IV. Narrative Accounts of High School Students

The retrospective interviews and culture-themed creative writing provided by our four participants formed the foundation for examining their learning and life experiences, intercultural encounters, self-identities, intercultural identities, and reflections on a range of issues. Through their incorporation of intercultural competence into their personal lives and perspectives on the world, they offered narratives that were both rich and complex. These narratives will be further analyzed and restoried to gain a more comprehensive understanding of their relevance to the development of intercultural competence.

1. To Think and To Debate: Kiki's Story

Kiki is one of the most outstanding students among her cohorts not only in academic achievements but also in extracurricular activities. Accustomed to her current level of maturity and goal-oriented mindset, we were surprised to learn that she described herself as a rebellious student in the elementary public school. A tense interpersonal relationship between Kiki and her teacher hindered her interest in studying and learning, which even turned into her aversion to going to school. The strict,

controlling approach of public schools may work for some students, but for others like Kiki, a more relaxed and self-directed approach is more suitable. Thus, her parents supported her to choose an international primary middle school where she adapted well. Drawing upon her personal experiences, Kiki contended that the most prominent contrast between public and international schools with respect to education lies in the concept of examinations.

In western education systems, the concept of examinations is that it's definitely a test of your knowledge and what you know, but you have to be honest with it. You should go through the exam to present your current level, rather than saying "I've practiced all these questions and I can dominate the exam." I don't have any personal bias. I just think that in my understanding, this is how they think. And we have to repeat these questions to have a deeper understanding. It's a different cultural concept leading to a different attitude toward exams.

Although Kiki has never studied abroad before, she reflected on her experiences and highlighted a difference in cultural preferences and attitudes toward examination, which in part also influenced her learning experiences. With no personal bias, Kiki understood and made the most of the advantages of each system. Thus, personal experiences and self-reflection inspire an awareness of intercultural comparison which might lead to in-depth thinking.

When talking about intercultural encounters, Kiki also compared the teacher-student relationship between Chinese and foreign teachers. She noted that in China, teachers are often more accommodating and willing to reschedule classes if a student has to miss one. However, in foreign cultures, teachers are more likely to be strict about their time and planning, and may charge students for missed classes. One of her foreign teachers once told her: "there is still a line between teachers and students," whereas, this boundary may be more flexible in some cases when interacting with Chinese teachers. Kiki seemed to be accepting of these differences and respect the way of dealing with time management of everyone she interacted with, but a more accommodating teacher would naturally lead to a closer relationship. Therefore, Kiki demonstrated openness and a critical perspective on her opinions about her interpersonal experiences in educational contexts.

Kiki's introspection and passionate pursuit of new knowledge also led us to ask what contributed to her in-depth analysis of intercultural differences. "Debate is the activity that I would recommend first. It gave me the opportunity to explore myself and gain self-confidence," she answered. Debate played a pivotal role in honing her critical thinking skills and fostering her metacognitive ability.

You feel a sense of value when expressing your own opinions, and you are proud of yourself. At this time, you are actually exploring yourself, feeling that you are valuable and being seen. This feeling is very important for self-exploration, and it also helps a lot in academics. For example, debating will definitely improve your oral skills, and if you really do in-depth investigation, your reading skills and knowledge will also improve significantly. If you want to write a really good argument, you definitely need writing skills. So, it really is a thread that connects all activities, not just a tool for winning awards.

After practicing debate in both Chinese and English for approximately 8 years, Kiki made cultural comparisons regarding debating styles. In English debates, such as British Council, Public Forum, or World School, the logical reasoning of the impact of an argument was considered an essential part of a debater's statement, with empirical analysis and deductive thinking being favored. In contrast, Chinese debates placed more emphasis on the use of stylistic devices and language flow to enhance emotional rendering. When echoing a debater, Kiki found herself emotionally inclined towards the argument, without considering the argumentative logic. These distinctive debating styles enabled Kiki to learn language features and practice language expression skills in diverse contexts. Thus, Kiki recommended debate as an activity to improve students' critical thinking and intercultural awareness, facilitating their development of intercultural competence.

Furthermore, through practicing debate and studying with foreign coaches, Kiki gradually developed “edges” in her personality, which means, in her words, “being able to say ‘I don’t care.’” She first considered this argument as an impolite abruptness when her debate coach taught her, as opposed to the social-communicative habits she was brought up with that we need to show our concern for everything. She did not oppose her coach’s suggestion and on the other hand, she reflected on why she felt weird about this statement in the first place. When considering herself as a cultural being, Kiki mentioned she learned the wisdom and ultimate goal of being a well-rounded person guided by traditional Chinese culture and the social-communicative habits of Chinese culture. This value orientation of pursuing being well-rounded influenced her in a way that in a debate, she was used to minimizing the impact of the argument of the opposing debater instead of just saying ‘we don’t care’. Then, Kiki learned the wisdom and attitude of saying ‘I don’t care’ both in a debate and in her perception of the world around her. She said:

Before I became aware of this, I had never realized that I was pursuing being well-rounded. Maybe it was because everyone around me was doing it. But upon further reflection, having edges is not necessarily a bad thing.

Being able to confidently express “I don’t care” allowed Kiki to focus on her priorities and not feel guilty about letting go of things that were not important to her. This assertiveness empowered her to clarify her goals and be honest with herself about what truly mattered to her, which integrated into her intercultural identity. Through her experiences with diverse styles of language expression and the culture behind them, she learned to appreciate the unique qualities of each culture she encountered and found ways to incorporate those elements into her own life, allowing her to grow into a dynamic person. Kiki’s sensitivity to cultural differences, openness and tolerance to new ideas, and active and critical reflection all played roles, when analyzing the process of how she realized the cultural influence on her or became aware of a portion of her identity. Her identity encompasses her cultural and social background, intercultural experiences, as well as her personal values. This complex set of factors shapes her perspective and communication style, making it essential to navigate intercultural interactions effectively.

When I’m thinking about my life experiences and my culture, I’m really thinking about who I am as a person. It’s important for me to reflect on that because it helps me understand how I fit into the world around me, and how I should interact with people from different backgrounds. Sometimes it can be confusing, but in the end, it’s really beneficial. After all, we can’t truly understand ourselves unless we understand the context we’re in and the people we’re interacting with.

Therefore, we have discovered a virtuous cycle in which the intercultural identity of Kiki leads to additional positive results in her cross-cultural interactions. This, in turn, facilitates the formation and integration of her intercultural identity.

Intercultural identity is built upon cultural identity because cultural identity refers to a person’s sense of belonging to a particular culture, whereas intercultural identity refers to an individual’s sense of identity that is formed through interactions with people from different cultures. Our next step was to explore Kiki’s cultural identity which shapes her communication patterns, worldview, and sense of belonging, all of which impact her interaction with her culture and background. Kiki demonstrated her cultural identity and her understanding of Beijing, the city she grew up in, in her creative writing and storytelling of prose:

She was caressed in warmth by the light aglowing with crimson hue; the majestic repose of the Forbidden City lives in the harmony of the pale grey morning. I, who live in the very vein of Her body, was summoned to the harbinger of the new day. I peeked at the window containing the sky of Beijing, which has long since unveiled from the haze. I have seen the glassy blue sky of the Bay of Naples, but Beijing’s sky is livelier, more profound, and more reserved. It is like the windows to the soul, knowing smiles, indignation, sadness,

and joy. Supposedly it was the nourishment by 'wind and water' – ancient Chinese geomancy – that harmonize individuals with the land.

Stepping on the familiar aisle and footpath, I was on my way to being toted around the historically rich palace settled in the central axis of Beijing. Over the time that I grow from an obnoxious kid to an agreeable teenager, I probed in various realms of the city that I possibly could know. I was a conquistador, but rather than searching the land for El Dorado, I scoured tales, snacks, and lanes sealed in history.

In this prose, Kiki expressed a deep emotional attachment to Beijing where she was born and bred, and explored its historical sites and cultural treasures, such as the Forbidden City and the Hutongs. Instead of a static image, she perceived Beijing as a charismatic person. Her admiration for Beijing is apparent throughout the prose. The author's appreciation for the "ancient Chinese geomancy" and the interplay of "human and nature, the moral disciplines and virtue" also reflect a deep respect for traditional Chinese beliefs and values. She also used words like "majestic," "harmony," "wonder," and "awesomeness" to describe the architecture and history of Beijing. The satisfaction of immersing in Beijing she expressed at the end of the prose also echoed her strong emotion toward this city. Kiki's respect for Chinese values, combined with her appreciation for the beauty and majesty of Beijing, suggests that she is comfortable and confident in her own cultural identity.

Beyond Kiki's admiration, she also anticipated "the readers to feel the power of culture to the philosophical and how it is a universal thread within all of us that stitches humanity together". The ancient philosophers whose ideas became part of the culture and the historical figures who have come and gone illustrated how culture has nurtured her thoughts and endowed her with the uniqueness of intercultural communication. These depictions illustrated Kiki's awareness of how Chinese culture, philosophy, history, values, and beliefs influenced her perception of the world. Such awareness facilitates the reflection and formation of one's cultural identity.

Kiki's personal experiences and memories in Beijing contributed to her cultural perspective. In the prose, she built an intersection of ancient and modern times in Beijing, a city where generations of her family lived and inherited. During her development, her grandparents always took her from one end of the city to another, on foot or by bus. This memory integrated into the fondness for exploring the "tales, snacks, and lanes sealed in history" and the "gravelly aisles" of Hutong. In the intersection of ancient and modern times in Beijing, the inherited attachment across generations in her family was merged with her strong attachment to the city's cultural heritage. As a result, Kiki's family's education and in-person city exploration have cultivated her cultural identity and shaped her cultural confidence. This prose served as further evidence of Kiki's strong intercultural competence, as it showcased her well-defined cultural identity, which serves as a foundation for her intercultural identity.

In conclusion, Kiki's life narrative offers valuable insights into the benefits of cultivating strong critical thinking skills through debate, which is essential for respecting cultural differences and developing intercultural competence. Her experience of integrating elements of different cultural values into her identity emphasizes the significance of understanding and appreciating differences, possessing an open-minded approach, and having a critical perspective. The discussion of her formation of cultural identity through education and in-person experience lays a foundation for intercultural identity. Overall, her reflections underscore the pivotal role of language proficiency in both Chinese and English in facilitating effective intercultural communication.

2. To Challenge and To Embrace: Ivan's Story

Ivan's two study abroad experiences in the US, once in 3rd grade for 8 months and again in 7th grade for 5 months, offer a unique perspective on analyzing cultural differences, intercultural encounters, and conflicts in communication. Living and studying in a context different from his home country provided Ivan with valuable personal experiences that contribute to a deeper understanding

of intercultural communication, differences between Chinese and American cultures, and conflicts in communication.

When Ivan first went to the US with his mother in 3rd grade, his English proficiency did not support him in fully understanding his classmates and teachers. Instead of being scared by the unfamiliar people around him, the brand-new environment, and his new classmates' proficiency in their native language, Ivan described his experience as both "fun and interesting". Meeting people with different colors, different facial expression rules, and more exaggerated style of speaking, his curiosity and openness helped him communicate and interact with American students and teachers successfully. His confidence also made his classmates and teachers willing to communicate with him and speak more slowly to ensure that he understood them. For a 3rd grade student, Ivan's positive attitude towards a new culture and environment was commendable. His open mindset and positive attitude towards another culture and its people contributed to his intercultural competence and helped him have an enjoyable experience studying abroad.

During his second study abroad experience, Ivan had the opportunity to explore and experience a wide range of resources and curricula offered by American middle schools. One significant difference he noticed was the emphasis placed on physical education in American schools. With five sports fields that served multiple functions and a gym equipped with various types of equipment, it was clear that physical education was an important aspect of American schools. In contrast, Ivan noted that physical education in Chinese schools tended to focus more on developing physical skills. Additionally, he observed that American physical education placed a greater emphasis on team sports, which allowed for greater enthusiasm, competitiveness, and the opportunity for students to express their characteristics through sports competition. This provided Ivan with a unique perspective on sports competitions that differed from what he had previously experienced in China:

Ivan: The P.E. teacher said in class that "You just need to come and participate. If you participate, you will discover the joy that comes from the experience, regardless of whether you finish in first, second, or third place." That's what he said. And then when they were at the game, they invited all the parents to come and cheer for their children. The cheerleaders also cheer for you. The overall atmosphere is so different from that in China.

Researcher: What do you think causes the differences?

Ivan: I think it's the (student) management system that causes this difference. I think their system is more open that allows children to expose their nature.

Ivan's statement suggested that the American education system valued individualism and encouraged children to be true to themselves. This approach could help children develop a strong sense of self-awareness, self-confidence, and self-expression, which could be valuable not only in sports but in all aspects of their lives. By immersing himself in a new culture, Ivan was able to see firsthand how the American education system differed from the one he was used to in China. By being exposed to different cultural values and practices, individuals can learn to be aware of intercultural differences, and respect and reflect on diverse perspectives. Thus, Ivan's experience demonstrated an effective way of cultural immersion to develop intercultural competence.

Although Ivan enjoyed studying abroad, there were also frictions and conflicts in intercultural communication. When his American classmates watched him writing, one of them asked him "Do your Chinese people hold a pencil like this? It is so weird!" Ivan was pissed off and had a verbal conflict with that classmate. He shared that it was the word "weird" to describe Chinese people that made him angry. Driven by his anger, he lightly shoved that classmate. In Ivan's perception, minor shoving between boys is normal. If boys are really angry and want to fight, they may throw punches directly. However, it was considered a serious problem and aggressive behavior by their teacher. The conflict with his classmate and the subsequent events prompted Ivan to reflect on the varying cultural perspectives on

the same behavior, which could result in misunderstandings or consequences. Therefore, to develop students' intercultural competence, we should educate them to comprehend these cultural differences in perceptions of the same behavior and help them prevent such misunderstandings.

We inquired about what Ivan would do if he had another chance to resolve the conflict. Ivan replied, "I think I would understand his question as being curious about my posture of holding the pencil. I would calm down and explain to them that it's easier to control the pencil in that posture." His response illustrated his acceptance of intercultural misunderstandings and his willingness to embrace cultural differences. These abilities were developed through his experiences, a deep understanding of various cultural perspectives, and self-reflection, all of which intertwine to enhance his intercultural competence. These abilities were cultivated through his diverse experiences, a deep understanding of various cultural perspectives, and thoughtful self-reflection. Together, these elements significantly enhance his intercultural competence.

Additionally, Ivan shared how his perception of African people evolved through his communication with a university exchange student from Mali. After speaking with the student, Ivan gained insight into his hometown of Mali, his pursuit of a master's degree, and his drive to bring the Chinese e-commerce model to Africa to improve the lives of its people. This experience was a wake-up call for Ivan, revealing his own lack of knowledge about African culture and highlighting the impact of limited exposure to diverse backgrounds in shaping stereotypes.

Now, Ivan could string together his study abroad experiences in the US and communicative experience with the African student in China, and recognize the importance of intercultural competence. Experiencing different cultures and backgrounds firsthand is crucial in breaking down stereotypes and building understanding and respect for diverse communities. Through these experiences, Ivan has developed a deep appreciation for cultural differences and has become more open-minded and accepting of people from around the world.

He now understands that building intercultural competence requires continuous learning, active listening, and a willingness to challenge one's own biases and assumptions. Therefore, Ivan wrote an original intercultural communication play to propose a tentative strategy to clear up misunderstandings in order to achieve intercultural effectiveness. The play centered around three characters: Safari, an old African woman, Komani, an African student who had been living in China, and Dun, an African American visiting his family in Africa for the first time. As they met on a street in an African town, conflicts arose due to cultural differences, specifically regarding punctuality and self-expression. Through their interactions, the play explored the challenges of navigating cultural differences and understanding one another.

Ivan's life narrative of his immersive study abroad experience and intercultural communication, especially his reflection on these experiences highlighted the openness of embracing cultural differences and the attitude of respecting diversity. When we view other cultures as "the other," we tend to see them as separate and different from ourselves, which can lead to misunderstandings, stereotypes, and even prejudice. However, it's important to recognize that we are also "the other" from their perspective and that our own cultural beliefs and values may be different from theirs. Thus, opposing an open mind and curiosity about other cultures and learning from people who have different perspectives benefits the development of intercultural competence, which further facilitates intercultural communication.

3. To Introspect and To Investigate: Eric's Story

Unlike Kiki, all of Eric's past educational experiences have been in public schools. Eric shared his comprehensive opinions on the distinctions between eastern and western cultures, as well as the differences between Chinese and Japanese cultures, and the origins of differences. We discovered that

three factors played significant role in his intercultural competence development: his parents' intercultural study and work experiences, his international travel experiences, and his extensive readings.

Both of Eric's parents studied and worked in Japan for over ten years. They relocated to China before Eric was born, but his mother continues to work for a Japanese company as an enterprise expatriate. Therefore, Eric has visited Japan six times and has had numerous opportunities to observe Japanese daily habits, visited Japanese universities, and engaged in conversations with locals. He even got permission of visiting his mother's company and observing the working environment in Japan. He provided a detailed description of the working states of employees in Japanese companies which embedded his understanding of the workplace culture:

Unlike what I observed in the United States, Japan's office culture is characterized by a clear division between the upper and lower classes. In America, during non-working hours, employees still engage in jokes and friendly banter with each other. However, Japanese employees exhibit a high level of respect towards their superiors, regardless of whether they are at work or after work. In the office, everybody tends to be reserved and focused solely on work, avoiding any discussions unrelated to work.

The differences of workplace cultures in Japan, the US, and China and the culture behind them aroused his curiosity, leading him to delve into books about Japanese culture and society. One of the books that enlightened him most was *Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, a famous research work on Japanese culture and society. Then, he combined his observations, extensive reading, and deliberate thinking to develop an in-depth cultural awareness. Such awareness is relatively deeper than in-person intercultural communication and experience merely in a way that Eric got to understand the essence of a culture, which could only be brought by works of social study and anthropology. He articulated his own understanding and appreciation of the nuances of Japanese culture and society.

When comparing the Japanese to the Chinese, one can observe that the former is more reserved and wilder. However, I do not believe that Japan can be categorized as a typical Asian society. Instead, I believe it is more closely related to the societies of Pacific Island countries, but with many layers of civilization added on top. In my opinion, Japan is a unique society with a primitive tribal type of spiritual culture.

Out of all the students we interviewed, Eric was the only one who openly expressed his sharp opinion on a particular culture and had the ability to articulate his cultural understanding using relatively professional and categorical language, such as "*Pacific Island countries*". While some may consider his views and understanding to be somewhat one-sided, his age and level of cultural awareness were noteworthy. Eric went beyond subjective feelings and took the initiative to read sociology books, demonstrating his commendable efforts to expand his knowledge and understanding of other cultures.

Eric has visited the United States twice, first at the age of 12 and again at 13. During his visits, he explored both the eastern and western regions of the country, staying for over two weeks each time. Despite the short duration of his visit, Eric managed to visit several American universities and high schools. He utilized every opportunity to engage with local students, teachers, and even fellow passengers on his flights. As a result of these interactions, he developed a strong desire to pursue his studies at a university in the United States in the future. During our interview, Eric shared his observations and reflections:

I have had opportunities to visit universities in China, Japan, and the United States. In particular, during my two visits to the US, I was able to visit a total of 16 or 17 prestigious schools in the east and west. Whenever I visit a university, I make it a point to observe the various situations in different colleges. I am always struck by the strong academic atmosphere and the diversity of student activities. For instance, I noticed many posters in the universities showcasing various student pursuits. During my visit to Yale University, I saw two students discussing something about programming passionately, even though I

couldn't understand what they were talking about, the intensity of their focus and passion is palpable to me. Similarly, at Harvard Business School, I observed a professor answering questions from several students. Despite it being summer vacation, I still fully felt the academic atmosphere of these schools and the freedom and progress of the students. Based on my visiting experience, I feel that American universities may be a better fit for me. Therefore, I have made the decision to pursue my studies in the United States in the future.

After returning to China, I delved into various materials to clarify the differences and gaps between Chinese and Western education. I read extensively on the development history of Chinese and Western universities, the educational philosophies of both cultures, and the differences between Chinese and Western educational systems. This research gave me a deeper understanding of the disparities between the two education systems. It also helped me identify what I want to achieve and what mindset I should adopt to face these differences.

When comparing differences in sports culture and national spiritual culture between cultures he observed, he mentioned that:

I believe that sports are ingrained in American culture. It is a means of deep and spiritual communication for them. When we observe the NBA and other American leagues, we cannot help but notice the electrifying atmosphere that surrounds the games. This is because everyone is fully immersed in the game, and both teams compete fiercely against each other... However, in China, when we watch the CBA, we notice a lack of this intensity and enthusiasm from players and the audience. I personally believe that this is due to cultural differences, both in sports culture and national spiritual culture.

During our retrospective interview, Eric demonstrated a strong inclination towards cultural comparison from a multitude of perspectives. However, we noted that our open-ended questions did not specifically emphasize this comparative aspect. Upon further analysis, we hypothesize that one of the reasons Eric focused heavily on comparison could be attributed to his relatively brief intercultural experiences in other countries. It is possible that short-term travel and learning experiences may not have fostered an inclination towards integrating into foreign cultures, but rather encouraged an observer's perspective, leading him to examine and compare the differences between his own culture and those of others. Thus, short-term travel and learning experiences facilitate awareness of cultural differences, while preparing for long-term studying and living tends to yield students' inclination to integrate into other cultures.

Eric has made the resolute decision to pursue higher education in Mathematics. While many of his peers limit their engagement with the subject to problem-solving, Eric derives pleasure from the process of studying Mathematics, its abstract beauty, and the mode of mathematical thinking. He reached beyond the solving problem to extensively read works on the history and philosophy of Mathematics, both from China and the Western world. his creative writing was surrounding the topic of math across cultures to express his understanding of math from humanity's perspective.

Math is, currently, one of the most "multinational" subjects, which means that people around the world are learning the same knowledge system constructed on ancient Greek's axiomatic system. Thereafter, math has developed separately in different civilization, hence its development reflects the distinctive characteristics and logic of different civilization.

However, there are some similarities of math among all civilization. As is known, math originated from daily life. For example, geometry was developed initially to divide lands between individuals and algebra to count and do business. The daily application of numbers in human activities nurtures math. Additionally, math was related to beliefs of universal principles, philosophy and astronomy. In China, the famous book Chou Pei Suan Ching (《周髀算经》) not only proved Pythagorean theorem, but also purposed Chinese understanding of the universe and the philosophy of astronomy. Instead of proving astronomic rules with strict calculation, the author purported his belief of the climate and stars: the two opposing principles of the universe---Yin and Yang--- could transfer to each other. This belief itself was

one of the vital traditional Chinese philosophical rules. In Ancient Greek, philosophical beliefs were profoundly promoted by Pythagoras and others. These mathematicians not only developed rational system and basic geometric principles, but also proposed philosophical belief about integers. They believed that integers are the origin of the world and any number could be expressed as the ratio of two integers. They also believed that human soul could reach the origin of the universe after they understood the truth of numbers.

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Eric's writing demonstrated math not solely as a technical subject but also a philosophical, cultural, and historical production. It provided a thoughtful analysis of how math has developed separately in different civilizations, reflecting the unique characteristics and logic of each culture. From the perspective of understanding other cultures, the essay illustrated how exploring one's own culture's history and beliefs in math can aid in comprehending the math of other cultures. For instance, the author describes how the book *Chou Pei Suan Ching* not only proves Pythagorean theorem but also conveys Chinese understanding of the universe and the philosophy of astronomy. By knowing the beliefs and principles behind the math of another culture, one can gain a deeper understanding of their overall worldview and values.

Through communication with Eric and through his creative writing, we discovered that he was skilled in observation. However, he did not simply stop there. He read a lot of relevant works and materials and internalized information into his own understanding. By exploring the history, beliefs, and values that shaped one topic in one's culture, he can gain a more profound insight into the topic of other cultures and build bridges of understanding and cooperation. His willingness and ability to explore, think, and analyze diverse cultures composed his strong intercultural competence. Eric was also strong in metacognition as an observer of diverse cultures, which entails recognizing and comprehending cultural concepts, identifying their manifestations, and comparing cultural differences. We gained insight into different perspectives students might take when traveling or studying abroad short-term or long-term.

V. Results and Discussion

The case studies presented in this paper demonstrate the importance of several key factors that contribute to the development of intercultural competence. The first key factor identified is the recognition of cultural differences. Effective intercultural communication occurs when students are aware of and sensitive to the cultural differences that exist between them and others. This indicates understanding how cultural differences affect communication styles, values, beliefs, and behaviors. Without this awareness, misunderstandings and miscommunications can occur, leading to a breakdown in intercultural relationships. Thus, cultural awareness is a fundamental component of high school students' intercultural competence development.

Secondly, an open-minded approach, critical thinking, and a willingness to challenge one's assumptions are crucial in developing intercultural competence. Individuals who are willing to learn and adapt to new cultural perspectives are more likely to succeed in intercultural interactions. Critical thinking skills are essential in analyzing cultural differences and understanding their impact on communication. Moreover, individuals must be willing to challenge their own assumptions and beliefs to develop a more nuanced understanding of other cultures. A respectful attitude towards diversity is another critical factor that helps break down stereotypes and prejudices. This means accepting and appreciating the differences that exist between cultures and avoiding making generalizations or assumptions based on cultural stereotypes. A respectful attitude fosters an environment of trust and mutual understanding, promoting positive intercultural communication.

The cases also emphasized the importance of language proficiency in intercultural competence development. Language proficiency goes beyond linguistic competence and encompasses

understanding cultural nuances and nonverbal communication. Effective intercultural communication requires being able to speak the language and understanding how language is used in different cultural contexts. A limited language proficiency may prevent learners from grasping the nuances of cultural values and norms, making it difficult for them to navigate intercultural communication effectively. Conversely, individuals with high language proficiency are better equipped to understand and interpret the meaning behind certain cultural practices and behaviors, which allows for more nuanced and effective intercultural communication. Ultimately, developing language proficiency is a crucial step in fostering intercultural competence and building meaningful relationships across cultural boundaries.

Furthermore, intercultural identity is an important aspect of intercultural competence. Our cases illustrated how students' appreciation and comprehension of their own culture facilitated the formation of their intercultural identity. Kiki's appreciation for Chinese values reflects her cultural confidence. Eric demonstrated Chinese people's understanding of the universe and the philosophy of astronomy. Their awareness of how Chinese culture, philosophy, history, values, and beliefs influenced their perception of the world facilitates the reflection and formation of their cultural identity. One of the most significant influences on their cultural identity is our family, and it plays an essential role in shaping their beliefs and values. Through family education, parents instill cultural values, norms, and beliefs in their children. Additionally, native cultural exploration provides an opportunity to immerse oneself in one's culture, learn about the traditions and practices, and better understand their roots. Extensive information searching and reading also contribute to an individual's cultural identity as they learn about different cultures, their beliefs, and practices. Critical thinking plays a crucial role in analyzing and understanding cultural information and helps individuals make informed decisions about their cultural identity. For adolescents, cultural identity is a crucial aspect of development and helps them understand their place in society. Understanding and embracing one's cultural identity can help adolescents develop a sense of belonging, self-esteem, and confidence. Therefore, family education, native cultural exploration, extensive information searching and reading, and critical thinking all contribute to the formation of an individual's cultural identity, particularly for adolescents in the developmental stage of identity. Understanding one's own cultural identity will then provide a foundation for understanding and appreciating other cultures.

The strategies suggested by the cases to develop high school students' intercultural competence include a range of activities. Debate is a popular strategy for promoting intercultural competence as it allows students to engage with diverse perspectives and understand how different cultures view the same issues. In-person intercultural communication, whether through organized events or informal conversations, is also an effective way for students to develop intercultural communication skills by engaging with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Intercultural-themed reading, including novels, essays, and articles, provides students with an opportunity to learn about different cultures and perspectives through literature. Role-playing in a play is another approach that can help students develop intercultural competence by allowing them to experience and understand different cultural perspectives.

In addition to the strategies mentioned above, creative writing and introspective interviews can also help students develop intercultural competence. Personal narratives and storytelling allow students to reflect on their own cultural background and experiences, as well as understand the experiences and perspectives of others. This process of reflection and metacognition helps students develop empathy, self-awareness, and a deeper understanding of cultural diversity.

The strategies suggested by the cases provide a range of opportunities for high school students to engage with different cultures and develop intercultural competence. These approaches not only foster understanding and respect for cultural diversity but also promote critical thinking,

communication, and problem-solving skills that are essential for success in today's interconnected world.

In conclusion, this paper highlights the importance of various factors in intercultural competence development, including cultural awareness, critical thinking, language proficiency, and intercultural identity. The strategies and approaches suggested in this paper can provide useful insights for educators and curriculum developers seeking to improve intercultural competence in high school students. Developing intercultural competence is crucial in today's globalized world and is essential for building positive and effective intercultural relationships.

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