

# Enhancing Intercultural Sensitivity through Group Investigation — a Co-operative Learning Approach

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This paper presents a two year research project that addressed the ways teachers observe, implement and experience the development of student intercultural sensitivity through co-operative learning activities and especially through utilising the Group Investigation strategy. The study also sought to understand to what extent the combination of an intercultural competence model such as the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) (Bennett, 1993) and the use of qualitative measures, such as critical incidents and questionnaire data, can be instrumental in identifying students' viewpoints and 'competence' in relation to cultural diversity. The scope of this paper places limits on the publication of detailed results of the research; however, key findings are shared and discussed. The analysis of the quantitative data gathered, demonstrated that students became more receptive to issues of diversity. These results were consistent with the analysis of comments related to critical incidents and with the qualitative data gathered through teacher interviews and student focus groups. The study indicates that co-operative learning and in particular the group investigation strategy, can be effective in triggering positive intercultural sensitivity.

## Theoretical Background: Co-operative Learning and Intercultural Education

The reason for the choice of the main focus of the research was our observation of an increasing uneasiness among groups of teachers who were responsible for the implementation of intercultural education activities in Verona secondary schools. In recent years these teachers have noticed numerous 'closed attitudes' exhibited by their students during class activities in relation to diversity, especially cultural diversity.

We consider that co-operative learning, together with active and participatory teaching and learning methods, heterogeneous and multicultural classes, and democratic education, is an essential contemporary educational approach for effective intercultural education. In addition for teachers, as well as for students, the co-operative educational dimension is a particularly effective way of addressing present-day issues of complexity, uncertainty and lack of self-confidence. Co-operative learning provides the opportunity for collaboration, dialogue and negotiation; these are core elements of any learning process focusing on narrative exchanges motivated by attitudes of respect and mutual understanding (Aquario et al, 2008:274). Through co-operation in small groups where members work together towards a shared aim, participants from different backgrounds and with different competences improve their learning about themselves and they tend to be more receptive to issues of diversity.

In particular, co-operative learning seems to be an appropriate pedagogical approach for promoting intercultural learning, as previously explored in Europe in the 1990s by the Co-operative Learning in Intercultural Education Project (CLIP) (Batelaan, 1998). In addition, various studies have pointed to a relationship between the implementation of co-operative learning and the reduction of prejudice (Shachar and Sharan, 1995; Sharan, 1990; Johnson and Johnson, 1989; Sharan et al, 1985; Weigel et al, 1975).

Group Investigation (GI) is a co-operative learning strategy that involves groups of four or five students researching a topic co-operatively together. The six steps involved can be seen in

Figure 1. The process supports the development of abilities that focus on sharing resources and ideas, on active listening, and on negotiation. As they work on a shared project it is expected that students will appreciate the importance of these abilities and through this, enhance their appreciation of diversity. In this way, some modelling of the basic principles of a democratic society — such as collaboration, active listening and negotiation — can be put into practice within a formal education setting.

Step 1	Class identifies sub-topics and organises research groups
Step 2	Groups plan their research work
Step 3	Groups implement their research work
Step 4	Groups plan their presentations
Step 5	Groups present their research work
Step 6	Teachers and students assess presentations

Figure 1: The six steps of GI (Sharan, 1998: 97-121).

GI focuses on and attempts to integrate two processes: students' interaction and communication, and their learning approaches to curriculum content. The more students work in small groups which aim to mutually enhance their motivation, the more likely it is that co-operative behaviours and cross-cultural interactions will occur. The teacher's task is to create equal participatory conditions for all the students involved. In this way, the role of the teacher shifts from that of providing guidance to facilitating of the individual and collective learning process. Within such an interdependent framework, diverse and complementary groups are able to achieve different tasks within a common goal-setting scenario (Aquario et al, 2008).

In secondary schools, such co-operative learning activities require appropriate planning, as they need to be based on an equal exchange model (Cohen et al, 1999). This happens when group members identify needs and opportunities for the exchange of ideas, knowledge, practice and resources in order to achieve shared objectives. This approach means that the teacher does not have to divide up tasks beforehand, but rather is able to focus upon the group understanding of what is necessary for its own functioning, including the roles and functions to be agreed by the students themselves.

## Research Questions, Methods and Models

The overall research project investigated how teachers observe, trigger and experience the development of intercultural sensitivity by their students through utilising the GI strategy.

The research was organised at two levels:

- Classroom-based action research involving practising teachers.
- Meta level researcher activity.

The research questions were:

- Does GI promote co-operation among secondary school pupils?
- What factors influenced pupils' receptiveness to issues of cultural diversity?
- Does GI have the ability to influence student attitudes towards diversity?
- What educational conditions help students develop an interest and open mindedness towards diversity?
- How can teachers provide students with curricula that provide a 'diversity advantage' through embedding learning about diversity issues within the teaching of their specific discipline (question developed together with the teachers involved)?

## Classroom-based action research involving practising teachers

The study involved 18 secondary school teachers from Verona (Italy) who taught a variety of subjects. They volunteered to participate as action researchers as part of the overall research project. During the school year 2010-11 these teachers were involved in eight classes totalling 175 students from five different schools. The action-research approach they adopted was founded upon that developed by Lewin (1946; 1958) and involved three phases. These were (a) planning, (b) action, and (c) reflection on the impact of the action.

- **Planning phase**

At the beginning of the project, the teachers who participated were invited to find a common definition of intercultural sensitivity and they agreed upon the required key core abilities. Their short definition of intercultural sensitivity was “Intercultural sensitivity enables you to interact both effectively and in a way that is acceptable to others when you are working in a group whose members have different ethnic and/or cultural backgrounds”.

We explored this definition in relation to recent theoretical modelling in this field. Among the various models provided by different authors we identified the dynamic model suggested by Deardorff (2009) as the one most closely related to this definition. While we found Deardorff’s model useful in providing the teachers with a common intercultural sensitivity reference framework, Bennett’s DMIS (1993) proved a useful tool to map and read changes in students’ attitudes. Based on these models, teachers discussed and identified key descriptors in relation to the development of intercultural sensitivity and turned them into a grid to observe students’ attitudes and behaviours in the classroom and to share relevant information during the focus group interviews. On the basis of this work, a self-observation grid was developed to enable students to reflect upon their own attitudes concerning diversity.

- **Action phase**

In the ‘action’ phase of the project, teachers implemented GI units with their students and jointly agreed on the minimum number of these to be scheduled during the school year. Through monthly training sessions, teachers learned the basic principles and approaches of co-operative learning and in particular the GI model. Once familiar with them, they started to plan GI projects together, to be used with their students. Four GI units based on the teachers’ respective subject areas (Italian, English as a Foreign Language and Agricultural Sciences) were developed that involved student investigations based upon the following questions:

- How can we open a shop at our school that is run by students? (Vocational School)
- How can we start and implement a fertilisation plan? (Vocational School)
- How can we make Manzoni’s book *Promessi Sposi* accessible to 15 year old pupils, including pupils of foreign origin? (Technical Institute)
- How is English seventeenth century literature affected by the scientific revolution? (Foreign Languages Lycée)

- **Reflective phase**

As part of the project’s final reflective phase, the difficulties faced by teachers in implementing the GI units were discussed during the monthly training sessions, along with the impact that the approach was having. Additionally, at the end of the first school year, two teacher focus groups and eight student focus groups of self-selected volunteers (one representative from each participating class) were held in order to gain a better understanding of teachers’ and students’ intercultural sensitivity and to elicit attitudes towards the use of the co-operative learning approach. The details of this are explained further below.

## Meta level researcher activity

Alongside this activity, the researcher's meta-level research adopted a mixed-methods approach (Steckler et al, 1992; Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003). This involved:

- (a) The repeated use of a questionnaire (Hesse and Göbel, 2007).
- (b) The use of 'critical incidents'.
- (c) Focus groups with teachers and students.
- (d) Student interviews.

Methods (a) and (b) were specifically adopted with the aim of identifying changes in student attitudes to cultural diversity and to relate any shifts concerning intercultural sensitivity to the DMIS model (Bennett, 1993). This considers the development of intercultural competence as a matter of acquiring enhanced intercultural sensitivity. It has been tested with German students using critical incidents by Hesse and Göbel (2007). Developed between 1986 and 1993, DMIS is not a model of attitude change or of skill acquisition; rather, it is a model of the development of a worldview. It is structured in six stages: the first three stages are labelled 'ethnocentric' and the latter three stages are labelled 'ethnorelative'. In Bennett's definition, ethnocentric means that one's own culture is experienced as central to reality in some way. The 'ethnorelative' stage is where one's own culture is experienced in the context of other cultures. The 'ethnocentric' stages can be viewed as ways of avoiding the acceptance of cultural difference by denying its existence, by raising defences against it, or by minimising its importance, while the 'ethnorelative' stages are ways of seeking cultural difference by accepting its importance, by adapting one's perspective to take it into account, or by integrating the whole concept into a definition of one's identity. From an educational perspective it seems appropriate to refer to the DMIS (or similar models) more as a potential intercultural strategy than as a rigid linear progression from one development stage to another. Yet the DMIS can be instrumental in aligning people's attitudes (and in our study, students' attitudes) towards cultural diversity to specific world views.

## The questionnaire

The questionnaire addressed opinions about diversity issues and was administered to all students involved in the project at the start (October 2010), at the mid-point (October 2011), and then at the end of the project (June 2012). This involved 6 classes (one foreign languages secondary school; two secondary technical schools and three vocational schools). Between 129 and 141 students completed the questionnaire at different times.

## Use of Critical Incidents

Students were invited to work with critical incidents at different stages of the project; at the beginning (ie before taking part in any GI units), half-way through and again after completion of GI activity.

From an intercultural perspective, critical incidents usually reflect a communication where a misunderstanding occurs owing to different cultural practices. In this project, three critical incidents focusing on cultural diversity were selected. They portrayed, usually in a few lines, a misunderstanding due to cultural diversity. One example explored the feelings of frustration felt by a young Italian student when he was confronted with a different understanding of the timing of an evening dinner when visiting a Danish family in Copenhagen.

A questionnaire was employed in order to be able to compare students' understandings and responses to the critical incidents. Students were asked to read the description and then respond to three questions: (a) what happened? (b) what did the people involved in the incident think and feel? and (c) how would the students themselves behave in such a situation? The students ranked five possible answers to each question which reflected different viewpoints,

each of them formulated to be as close as possible to the DMIS stages (Bennett, 1993). For each of the three questions there were five possible responses, reflecting different viewpoints. Each was formulated to be as close as possible to the DMIS stages (Bennett, 1993). First, the students were asked to rank the five responses to each of the three questions. They were then asked to choose a response to each of the three questions that most represented their views and rate these using a seven point Lickert-type scale to indicate the degree of probability of selecting that answer to the question on a scale ranging from “It seems highly likely to me” to “It seems highly unlikely to me”.

## **Focus groups and student interviews**

Qualitative data were gathered from student interviews and also from focus group interviews, organised at the end of each research year, involving a group of voluntary students from each participating class. The transcribed interviews allowed the identification of recurring themes in the data, which were then used to identify meaningful categories (Guba, 1978). The interviews and focus groups allowed the analysis of teacher and student attitudes. Key questions helped to facilitate diachronic ‘linear’ analysis (Krueger, 1994: 56) and to compare teacher and student views.

The leading questions of the focus groups related to the co-operative elements of the project and were informed by previous studies undertaken by Gillies (2008) and Gillies and Boyle (2006) which indicated, among other issues, that teachers experienced difficulties in implementing co-operative learning. We were particularly interested in how the teachers dealt with these difficulties because we believe that this information is relevant to teachers’ decisions on whether to implement this pedagogical approach in their classrooms (Gillies and Boyle, 2010). In particular, students and teachers were invited to outline what types of opportunities and challenges were linked to the use of co-operative learning methods especially in relation to issues of diversity. Such issues were also explored through the use of critical incidents and the analysis of the answers to the questionnaire.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **GI and intercultural sensitivity**

Statistical analysis of the quantitative data gathered through the repeated administration of the questionnaire was carried out. Unfortunately it is too detailed to be described in depth here. This analysis indicated that the students became slightly more receptive to issues of diversity. These results were consistent with the analysis of their answers to the critical incidents as well.

Teachers’ observations and student focus group reflections specifically referred to GI as a process that contributes to changing students’ attitudes towards diversity in secondary schools. We found that within this co-operative learning framework, the use of critical incidents can become a powerful transformational tool as their use can legitimatise shared, in-depth reflection on the basis of common experience. When focusing on cross-cultural issues, such critical incidents can play a pivotal role in triggering reflection about cultural diversity issues and the learning that can be gained from them. Their use as an assessment tool requires further research work, especially with regards to the facilitation of the selection of narratives that elicit adequate understanding of the relational context by the students involved.

### **GI and co-operative learning**

What emerged from the analysis of the qualitative data gathered through interviews with the teachers and the student focus groups is that GI can be considered a suitable approach to promote co-operative attitudes and behaviours amongst peers; this concurs with the work of Sharan (2010). According to both student and teacher feed-back, GI triggers and strengthens co-operative behaviours (such as a willingness to listen to and be influenced by peers and a



commitment to each other's learning) brought about by the increased collective engagement in a common project that is based upon shared decision making.

We found that the choice of GI learning tasks was a key issue in the motivation of students. They had to be sufficiently relevant for them as well as sufficiently complex in order to allow each student to provide his/her own specific contribution.

Students and teachers agreed that from their experience the following four factors influenced the effectiveness of GI:

- That groups of students were given the opportunity to choose the topic to be investigated through their group work and the possibility of implementing individual, in-depth, preparatory work prior to the group assignment.
- That group work was structured and scaffolded by teachers, to allow student collaboration to occur without time pressure and in relation to clearly defined objectives.
- That clear roles were defined within the group(s), preferably identified by the students themselves on the basis of an awareness of their respective competences and ability to contribute to group work.
- That monitoring and evaluation should be a multidimensional approach and based on teacher-student collaboration. It should not only happen at the individual level, focus only on cognitive learning or only take into account the results of group work.

In reviewing their professional approach throughout the project, teachers remarked on their commonly shared experience of sharing GI activity planning with colleagues and whenever possible, with students. Several teachers observed and reflected upon the fact that co-operative behaviours among students seemed to develop as the teacher gave up playing a 'central' role in the classroom and the students took more control of their own learning. For the teacher, this implies a change from their traditional role. As highlighted by Cohen et al (1999), this is not a matter of giving up leadership, but rather the facilitation of shared leadership, by adopting the role of 'director' of the co-operative process (Sharan, 2010). Such a role implies both an explicit sharing of the responsibility for what happens within the classroom, as well as undertaking a 'facilitator' role in order to promote students' social and intellectual development (Gillies and Boyle, 2006). During interviews teachers reported that this is actually a difficult step as it involves a different way of conceptualising their profession.

Teachers and student feed-back showed that well-structured GI enhanced co-operative behaviour, essential to face the challenges posed by a complex and multidimensional task as noted by Cohen, (1994) Cohen et al, (1999) and Sharan and Sharan (1992). This is reflected in interpersonal relations that show an intrinsic motivation towards positive interdependence. In turn, this helps students appreciate the opportunities to learn together with other students and it encourages them to enrich their perception of their fellow students and of diversity in general beyond the school environment. The challenge is to turn such acknowledgement and recognition of diversity within a local educational experience into an opportunity to develop more general 'open-minded' attitudes.

So far, on the basis of this two-year study, only relatively modest steps towards such a general open-minded direction can be claimed. A relevant question to ask in future research is whether student open-mindedness could be further enhanced with the use of more frequent and well-structured co-operative learning strategies.

### **The action research process**

From our experience we consider that the action-research methodology provides reflective opportunities that may respond to teachers' needs to make significant changes in their educational activities. As a result of our observations we propose that teachers often feel

isolated when they seek to go beyond the purely instructional aspect of their roles with the aim of improving educational outcomes, especially in relation to issues concerning the acknowledgment, respect and valuing of diversity.

## Conclusion

This project presented the opportunity to address the ways teachers observe, implement and experience the development of student intercultural sensitivity through co-operative learning activities and especially through utilising the GI strategy, and to understand to what extent the combination of an intercultural competence model such as DMIS and the use of qualitative measures, such as critical incidents and questionnaire data, can be instrumental in identifying students' viewpoints and 'competence' in relation to cultural diversity. Although not able to report and discuss all of our results in this paper, we hope to have given some insights into our findings.

We found the use of GI and critical incidents contributed to trigger changes in students' and teachers' attitudes towards diversity and to enhance co-operation among secondary school students. In addition, the use of the DMIS model was useful in tracking students' changes in attitude in relation to intercultural sensitivity. From a practical perspective, the DMIS model helped to focus teachers' attention on students' 'sensitivity' in relation to diversity issues, recognising the 'cognitive' dimension of acknowledging diversity and taking it into account in analytical, reflective and communicative tasks. A key issue for motivating students is that learning tasks should be sufficiently relevant for them as well as sufficiently complex in order to allow each student to provide his/her own specific contribution. The project opens the way for further research on a number of levels.

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