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17

Isolde Malmberg, Thade Buchborn, Lauren Steinmetz (Eds.)

Future-making, Mobility and Networking in Europe

Impulses for Music Education in School, Teacher Education and Professional Development

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Future-Making, Mobility and Networking in Europe

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Lauren Steinmetz & Smaragda Chrysostomou

Crossing Borders, Shaping Professional Selves

Preservice Music Teachers in School Internships Abroad

Abstract

School internships abroad (SIAs) are increasingly promoted in teacher education as opportunities for developing intercultural competence. This chapter examines the experiences of ten European preservice music teachers who participated in SIAs designed within the Erasmus+ project *TEAM – Teacher Education Academy for Music*. Using a design-based research framework, the study drew on preparatory conversations, voice memos, and post-internship interviews to explore how students navigated unfamiliar educational contexts and how these experiences shaped their emerging identities as music teachers. Deductive analysis based on the *Intercultural Development Inventory* (*IDI*) orientations, combined with inductive qualitative coding, revealed that participants often minimised or downplayed cultural differences, despite implicitly engaging with them. While students rarely described their learning in explicitly intercultural terms, they demonstrated qualities associated with intercultural competence – such as openness, adaptability, and flexibility. Across all cases, SIAs fostered increased confidence, resilience, and clarity about the kind of music teacher they wished to become. The immersive and intensive nature of these placements afforded focused opportunities for reflection that contributed meaningfully to teacher professionalisation. The chapter concludes by discussing the benefits and limitations of SIAs and outlining directions for future research and implementation.

Keywords: School internships abroad, music teacher education, intercultural competence, teacher professionalisation, teacher identity, design-based research, Intercultural Development Inventory

Introduction

In recent years there has been a discernible emphasis on the importance of international experience and transnational exchange in teacher education, prompted by the need to respond to an increasingly interconnected world and growing cultural diversity in the classroom (Auni et al., 2022; Bartleet et al., 2020). School internships abroad are designed to help preservice teachers become adept at engaging thoughtfully and effectively with diverse student populations (Çakmak et al., 2018; Miller & Gonzalez, 2016). The potential impact of such transnational internship experiences on developing teacher identity is also significant in music teacher education, as students immersed in diverse educational settings are often spurred to reconsider their beliefs, values, and professional roles, which can result in a more flexible, reflective and globally minded approach to music education (Ballantyne et al., 2012; de Bruin, 2016; Triantafyllaki, 2013), as well as increased intercultural competence.

This chapter examines the experiences of preservice music teachers as they navigated unfamiliar school environments during school internships abroad. The findings draw on a study conducted within the large-scale *Erasmus*+ co-funded project *TEAM – Teacher Education Academy for Music: Future-Making, Mobility and Networking in Europe*,[1] carried out by the working group *Work Package 5 (WP5): School Internships Abroad and Mentoring*[2], which aimed to support mobility in music teacher education by improving the accessibility and quality of school internships abroad and the mentoring structures that support them.

Considering that school internships are a central element in student teacher identity development, international placements may provide distinctive opportunities to develop teacher identity, advance professionalisation and strengthen intercultural competence. This study therefore investigates whether and how such professional learning processes were evident in the participants' experiences, aiming to identify features that may more consistently support these forms of learning in school internships abroad.

This text begins with a review of relevant literature, including findings on school internships, both domestic and international; theories and models that seek to characterise dimensions of intercultural competence and its development; and the impact of student teacher (hereafter ST) mobility on intercultural competence. Insights into the

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1 *TEAM*, the *Teacher Education Academy for Music: Future-Making, Mobility and Networking in Europe* aims to provide mappings of European music educational systems, foster mobility (*Erasmus* semesters as well as Internships Abroad), and offer future-making OERs and a set of European-wide Learning Outcomes for Music Teacher Education. https://teacher-academy-music.eu/
TEAM is funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.

2 For more information about the work of *Work Package 5* within *TEAM*, see Steinmetz et al., 2026, in this volume.

methodology used in the study are then given, followed by a presentation of selected results, with a particular focus on findings related to STs' intercultural competence, professionalisation, and developing teacher identity. The chapter concludes by considering the benefits and challenges presented by school internships abroad, as well as an outlook on their further development and implementation.

School Internships and Mobility in Teacher Education

School internships are a particularly impactful part of teacher identity development, giving students supervised opportunities to practise thinking, feeling, and acting like teachers (Heinz, 2024; Zeichner, 2012). In teacher education – and more particularly music teacher education – there is broad consensus that meaningful field experiences are essential to a music education degree programme and have a positive effect on student teachers' perceptions and confidence (Chrysostomou, 2009; Chrysostomou & Triantafyllaki, 2020). During their placements, STs gain understanding about themselves and their pupils (Ballantyne & Packer, 2004). The pedagogical exchange of ideas fosters significant professional learning and enhances STs' teaching practices, as do the reflective problem-solving and continuous self-assessment taking place during these internships (Conkling, 2003). This process not only strengthens student teachers' pedagogical efficacy but also facilitates the construction of their professional identity (Auni et al., 2022; Egeland, 2016).

At the same time, growing global interconnectedness and increasing cultural diversity in classrooms have made the integration of global perspectives into teaching practices – and thus into teacher education – essential in Europe and beyond (Cheng & Huang, 2023; Huang et al., 2023). This shift reflects a growing awareness of how educational systems relate to and influence one another globally, as well as the insights gained through cross-cultural exposure (Westerlund et al., 2020). As Westerlund et al. (2020) argue, there is a need for inter-institutional and transnational collaboration in teacher education that challenges participants to step outside their comfort zones in the co-creation of new knowledge. Through collaboration and learning within and beyond institutional and geographical borders, future teachers can "develop various levels of consciousness of their own taken-for-granted boundaries" (Westerlund et al., 2020, p. 4).

According to a meta-analysis by Huang et al. (2023), prior studies on studying abroad show varying but generally positive influences on preservice teachers' learning, attitudes, and identities, although differing goals and implementations lead to inconsistent findings on programme effectiveness. The literature consistently highlights that intercultural experiences challenge preconceptions, foster adaptability, and enhance pedagogical and musical skills, while also presenting difficulties related to cultural adjustment, language barriers, and professional expectations (Barry & Durham, 2017). Williams et al. (2023), for

example, found that exposure to diverse cultural contexts positively influenced teacher candidates' cultural responsiveness and their ability to engage effectively with students from different backgrounds. Collectively, the literature argues for the benefits of mobility in teacher education programmes, as these experiences may equip them to better work in culturally diverse educational settings.

School Internships Abroad

Mobility in teacher education may extend beyond study abroad programmes to include practical teaching experience, usually in the form of an internship undertaken in a school in the host country. Immersion in diverse settings while teaching has been shown to elicit deep reflection on teaching practices (Altiparmak et al., 2025), increase self-awareness, and support the development of critical skills such as improvisation, classroom management, and intercultural communication (Ballantyne et al., 2004; Westerlund et al., 2015).

Moorhouse and Harfitt (2019) investigated preservice and in-service teachers' professional learning during a teaching-abroad experience and concluded that the pedagogical exchange of ideas fostered significant professional learning, enhancing participants' teaching practices. Similarly, Yang, Zheng, and Wang (2024) found that an integrative approach combining diverse teaching methodologies, cross-cultural exposure, and self-reflection supported interns in developing resilience and competency for navigating globalised educational contexts. Borbon et al. (2025), examining teachers' lived experiences of international macro-exposure, also concluded that such experiences translated into cross-cultural competencies. Intercultural understanding can be fostered when preservice teachers critically reflect on biases and assumptions, build cultural knowledge, develop cultural reflexivity through perspective-taking and empathy, and engage in direct contact experiences that promote positive interpersonal and intergroup collaboration (Walton et al., 2013). Intercultural encounters such as SIAs thus allow individuals to view their own and others' identities relationally. It is in this self-reflective space that one can move beyond stereotypical identities and recognise that identity is not limited to "nationhood, ethnicity, or language(s) spoken" (Holmes et al., 2015, p. 17). SIAs can support professional learning and the development of intercultural competence primarily by combining pedagogical challenge with cross-cultural dissonance, prompting deeper reflection and identity work.

School Internships Abroad in Music Education

There is a scarcity of literature focusing specifically on SIAs in music teacher education. One example is a study conducted by Bayley and Mio (2020), who investigated Canadian music education students' perceived personal and professional experiences during a teaching internship in China. Their findings suggested the STs experienced intellectual, social and personal growth as a result of their placement, but with no evidence that these effects would be sustained.

Music itself can play an influential role in enhancing future music teachers' experiences and knowledge: Barry and Durham (2017) describe the insights student teachers gained about themselves and their growing confidence in teaching music, while also recognising the importance of music for children's development; they also present music as a catalyst for transcending language barriers in culturally diverse environments. Similarly, Phillips et al. (2023) found that placements in various music academy settings were considered by all stakeholders to be highly important – and sometimes pivotal – in the development of musical identities. There is still much opportunity to explore the potential of intercultural experiences in music teacher education; research conducted within the *TEAM* project makes a contribution in this area, including not only this chapter, but also others in this book: Jenssen & Steinmetz, Knigge et al., Malmberg et al., Steinmetz et al., and Triantafyllaki & Knigge (2026, in this volume).

Finally, Emmanuel (2005) argues that intercultural skills are vital for music teachers because music is an expression of cultural identity. Within a music classroom, different cultural identities are expressed and shared; therefore, it is essential that they are valued within an atmosphere of acceptance, respect, and safety created by an interculturally competent music teacher.

Developing Intercultural Competence

There are numerous theoretical models that seek to conceptualise intercultural competence, a prominent theme across much of the research related to intercultural educational settings, and to assess how it develops. An early and well-established exemplar is Bennett's *Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity* (DMIS; 1986, 1993), which categorises intercultural competence broadly into ethnocentricity and ethnorelativity. These two categories contain three stages each through which individuals traverse on their way to intercultural competency: the ethnocentric stages are *denial*, *defence* and *minimisation*, and the ethnorelative stages are *acceptance*, *adaptation* and *integration*. Frequently drawn upon by researchers to explore aspects of intercultural learning in international education experiences, the DMIS has also been criticised for oversimplifying a complex, nuanced phenomenon, as well as for its linearity, which critics argue represents a Western bias (Bennett, 2017). Ichikawa and Kim (2025) express appreciation for the model's usefulness in understanding individuals' development of intercultural competence, but acknowledge that a lack of nuance makes its application difficult when dealing with transnational people, and that its assumption of (Western) individualistic notions of culture limits its usefulness in non-Western contexts.

A contrasting, non-linear model is found in Deardorff's *Process Model of Intercultural Competence* (Deardorff, 2006, 2009). In contrast to Bennett's linear conception of intercultural competence development, Deardorff's model is cyclical and is portrayed as

a continuous process with no fixed endpoint (Ichikawa & Kim, 2025). According to this model, intercultural competence is based on the requisite attitudes of *respect*, *openness*, and *curiosity* (Deardorff, 2006, Figure 3).

In her 2020 *Manual for Developing Intercultural Competencies*, Deardorff suggests that a consensus definition has been reached of intercultural competence as "communication and behavior that is both effective and appropriate across difference" (Deardorff, 2020, p. 5). She goes on to propose a further composite definition: "intercultural competencies in essence are about improving human interactions across difference, whether within a society (differences due to age, gender, religion, socio-economic status, political affiliation, ethnicity, and so on) or across borders" (Deardorff, 2020, p. 5). Mu et al. (2022) define intercultural competence as "the abilities that people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds employ to communicate effectively and appropriately so as to transcend their differences and build and maintain relationships" (p. 30). Taken together, these frameworks and definitions paint a picture of intercultural competence that is communicative and relational and that requires curiosity and engagement – and that is indeed a competence, a skill, that can be used to mediate in culturally diverse contexts.

For this study, the research team drew upon the *Intercultural Development Inventory* (*IDI*) framework to gain insight into the evolving intercultural competencies of the STs participating in SIAs through *TEAM*. Though proprietary, the *IDI* is well represented in academic literature as a means of conceptualising and measuring intercultural competence and sensitivity (e.g., Kruse et al., 2014; Crystle et al., 2024), and its reliability and validity are regarded as well-established (Paige et al., 2003; Hammer, 2011; Ichikawa & Kim, 2025). Based on the *DMIS*, the *IDI* continuum adapts the stages of the earlier model and progresses from monocultural to intercultural orientations across five stages: *denial*, or failure to notice deeper cultural differences; *polarisation*, or viewing cultural differences from an oppositional stance; *minimisation*, or emphasising similarities while overlooking deeper differences; *acceptance*, or recognising and appreciating cultural differences and commonalities; and *adaptation*, or the ability to shift between cultural perspectives and behave in culturally appropriate and authentic ways. The criticism of the *IDI* is similar to that of its predecessor, with Western-centrism and oversimplicity being common concerns (Ichikawa & Kim, 2025). Mindful of those limitations, we determined that the *IDI's* linear structure would provide a suitable framework for observing the development of intercultural competencies during SIAs, and anticipated that it would lend itself more readily to deductive coding than Deardorff's process-oriented cyclical model, as the stages themselves also provided sufficient structure while still accommodating sub-codes, leaving room for the nuance the framework is sometimes said to lack. This is particularly true in the early stages of analysis; ultimately, however, Deardorff's model proved more compatible with our interpretive findings, as we discuss later.

Method

This research was conducted within the *TEAM* working group *School Internships Abroad and Mentoring*, which designed and facilitated school internships abroad (SIAs) for ten music education students from four European countries. The internships took place in three additional European countries, with supervision from three mentor music teachers (hereafter MTs). An open call was distributed via email through the institutions represented in the *TEAM* consortium, informing music education students about the SIA opportunity. All students who expressed interest and met their institutions' eligibility requirements were invited to participate, and those who agreed to join the accompanying research provided informed consent.[3]

During the SIAs conducted within the *TEAM* project,[4] STs observed music classes taught by multiple teachers and, in some cases, classes in other subjects. The STs also taught, either individually or together with a MT or a peer, planned lessons, received feedback, and engaged in reflection. Additionally, some STs attended faculty meetings and participated in professional development sessions, fully immersing themselves in the culture and activities of the school and experiencing broader aspects of the teaching profession.

The Design-Based Research Framework

The research team followed a design-based research approach (DBR; Bakker, 2018; McKenney & Reeves, 2012, 2019), characterised by iterative cycles in which theoretical understanding is developed and practical tools are refined. In this study, practical tools collaboratively developed by practitioners and researchers included the SIA formats and the self-reflection materials, all of which were prototypes intended for future publication as open educational resources[5]. Some tools also functioned as data-collection instruments, including a preparatory conversation guide, voice-memo prompts, photo-journal prompts, and a debrief conversation guide.

Theoretical insights developed through the DBR process were characterised in emerging Design Principles (Appendix A; Euler, 2017; McKenney & Reeves, 2019), which capture understandings gained from each cycle and support their transfer to other contexts. While the interventions (designs) were refined after each cycle, the design principles were specifically revisited after Cycles 2, 5 and 7 to capture substantive developmental shifts. This practice aligns with the DBR approach, in which cycles may vary in scope (McKenney & Reeves, 2012).

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[3] Ethics approval for this study was obtained through the researchers' home institutions, and data collection complied with the ethical and data protection regulations of the *TEAM* project. Participation in the research component of the SIA was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all student teachers, and all data were pseudonymised for analysis.

[4] For a comprehensive account of our sample, methodological process and internship formats, please see Steinmetz et al., 2026, in this volume.

[5] To access these materials, now available as OERs, please go to https://oer.mdw.ac.at/oer/collections/3ba78ede-a4b7-4177-9205-d8fd3ea3939b

This DBR study comprised seven cycles. Each cycle included three internship phases: preparation (pre-departure), fieldwork (during the internship placement), and post-internship. The ten STs were distributed across the seven cycles; four cycles were completed by a single ST and three cycles by pairs, creating opportunities for peer learning. The design of the first cycle was informed by empirical findings from a pilot survey on domestic school internship practices in eighteen European countries (Steinmetz et al., in review), a literature review, and the professional experience of the research team. After each cycle, data were analysed by the research group to refine the SIA intervention and to contribute to a growing body of theoretical understanding.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection occurred at three points in each DBR cycle: before, during and after the internship placement. The introductory conversation (Appendix B) took the form of a dyadic interview (Morgan et al., 2013) between ST and MT, with observation by a researcher and, in two instances, participation by a university teacher educator (TE). This conversation provided an opportunity for MT and ST to become acquainted, reflect on their goals and expectations for the SIA, clarify organisational and structural details, and ask questions.

Researchers asked STs to record short voice memos multiple times a week throughout their placements, responding to self-reflective prompts developed by the research team (Appendix D). The goal of these voice memos was to support the STs' reflective practice; they also allowed for real-time documentation of their evolving experiences. After returning from their placement, the STs participated in a debrief interview with a member of the research team (Appendix F), reflecting on their time abroad, the impact of their internship on their developing teacher identity, and the intercultural aspects of their SIA.

All data were independently coded by two to three members of the research team using MAXQDA (VERBI Software, 2022); any discrepancies were resolved through consensus discussions with the broader research group (Barbour, 2001). The data were coded both deductively and inductively using qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz, 2019), enabling the application of pre-existing concepts to the data while simultaneously allowing new categories to emerge entirely from the data (Williamon et al., 2021).

Deductive coding was informed in part by the *Intercultural Development Inventory* (www.idiinventory.com) framework. The flexibility with which the *IDI* framework can be applied, along with its fairly simple and open structure, made it well-suited to the hybrid deductive-inductive coding approach adopted by this transnational, intercultural DBR study. The *IDI* is a standardised questionnaire with fifty items that assesses where individuals or groups fall along a developmental continuum of intercultural competence. The questionnaire was not administered to the STs in this study; rather, the orientations found in the framework were used to guide deductive data analysis.

Findings

In this section, we present student statements from voice memos and interviews across all seven cycles,[6] examining coded segments categorised under the *Intercultural Development Inventory* (*IDI*) orientations as well as inductive codes related to intercultural experiences, professionalisation, and teacher identity development.

The *IDI* orientations informed deductive category development in this study, enabling the research team to identify how STs navigated the intercultural aspects of their SIA placement and how their intercultural learning may have been impacted. In this section, findings are presented according to these categories.

Denial, Polarisation and Minimisation

When given the opportunity to engage in cultural self-reflection before the internship, STs reported having no concerns about the intercultural aspects of their placement beyond potential communication challenges and teaching in English. This held true during post-internship reflections, in which STs tended to downplay cultural differences when asked about them directly. However, in voice memos and interviews the students expressed thoughts and feelings which indirectly revealed they were indeed aware of differences, such as contrasting approaches to pupil assessment and different conceptions of the teacher role. Still, the STs did not necessarily identify the differences they encountered as being cultural in nature and these responses were therefore categorised using the *IDI* orientations of *denial* – a general dismissal of the presence of differences – and *minimisation*, an acknowledgement that differences were present, but denying or downplaying their impact.

Two possible explanations for this emerge from the data: First, European students were interning in European schools, and they may associate cultural differences with more far-flung locations, attributing instead the differences they encountered to the culture of the specific school in which they were interning (Malmberg et al., 2025).

> *'I found it very difficult to find very big differences.* […] *Yeah. It's not like I was on the other side of the world'* (ST6).

Second, it is noteworthy that two of the three host schools had multicultural student bodies. One was an international school without a single dominant national culture, while the other was located in a major city characterised by a culturally diverse community.

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[6] Because the research was conducted in multilingual contexts, many STs used English as an additional language. To ensure readability while retaining the meaning and character of participants' speech, quotations have been lightly edited for clarity, but their intent and substance were not altered.

The impact this had on the STs' perceptions of their intercultural learning compared with working in more homogeneous groups is not evident from our data. However, STs did mention the diversity of the student body when minimising cultural differences.

> *'I think I didn't pay so much attention to it other than the language barrier. I think it's more, like multi-country,* […] *all these different countries just in one school'* (ST3b).

Polarisation is characterised by judgment, becoming overly critical either of other cultural groups or of one's own culture (*Intercultural Development Inventory*, n.d., 1:43). Although they tended to minimise or deny cultural differences, the STs did nonetheless compare and contrast their home and host countries. Much of what was said comparatively is better categorised in the *IDI* orientation *acceptance*, because the students acknowledged differences but often withheld the judgment that characterises the *polarisation* orientation. There were, however, a few exceptions.

The allocation of resources for music education in the host country versus the home country was a frequent comparison made by the STs, as well as the standing of music education in the respective societies. All of the STs commented positively on the resources available in the host schools, such as instruments in the classroom, sound equipment, music software and other digital resources.

> *'It's also cool just to see all the music equipment they have. That's not common to see. It just shows that if* [you have] *all of this equipment, there* [is] *so much you can do, so much you can learn'* (ST3b).

> *'I didn't* [see] *any lessons where they used the Boomwhackers or the sound bellows, but I was just surprised about how many they had, because in* [home country], *you always have to fight to have it'* (ST6).

In these examples, students moved beyond noticing differences to judging them, especially in relation to the perceived support of music education, which aligns with the polarisation orientation in the *IDI*.

The STs also reflected on the role and societal standing of music education in the home versus the host country. Several of the STs expressed frustration about the lack of resources allocated for music education in their home countries:

> *'Being proud of singing is a big thing there* [in host country]. *And just being proud of having music. Like, for us* […] *especially the money of the government, it's not going there anymore. It's like we have to keep quiet and hopefully they don't see the music schools. Because otherwise they will take money from them. But there* [in host country …], *music is such a big thing. It's like, so important'* (ST4a).

The STs made very few negative statements about the host schools and the host teachers' pedagogical practices. However, when criticism of the host country was found, it tended to centre around the relationship to and assessment of pupils. This was particularly true for two students, who completed their SIA together.

> *'It's not that they* [teachers at host school] *don't care* [about the pupils]*, they are quite warm, but it's much less than what we're used to* […] *I don't want to teach like that* […] *the way in how they are around students, I would not want to end up like that'.* (ST3a).

Acceptance and Adaptation

The STs' responses largely demonstrated openness, curiosity and respect toward the host context. They expressed appreciation for different approaches to music and to teaching music, and generally accepted differences in setting musical goals (e. g., product vs. process orientation; emphasis on music-theoretical and music-historical knowledge vs. creative expression). Importantly, this *acceptance* did not result in a negative judgment toward the common music-pedagogical approaches in their home context, but rather supported reflection on their own attitudes as well as openness toward trying new ways of dealing with music.

> *'And it's also a cultural thing or just the focus of the school to really work towards a product and to improve the product and get a high quality …* [My] *background says the process and interactions between the people are also so important* […] *This is what interests me,* […] *the wider focus of the school'* (ST4a).

Many ST statements reflected attitudes associated with early *adaptation*, where individuals begin to adjust their behaviour to operate effectively across cultural contexts. In the statement below, the ST considers how they can implement approaches, methods and materials in their future teaching practice:

> *'I think that's really important for me as a teacher, just to learn from the other systems and sit down, compare it. I've got a lot of activities or tasks and worksheets and everything – we need to just translate it. And now we can use it in* [home country's] *schools. And I see it works because I'm just understanding like, why is this working? Like if I had done this in* [home country]*, this would I just know that this will work'* (ST3b).

While the *IDI* framework provided a useful lens for understanding how STs perceived and navigated cultural difference, the inductive analysis revealed additional themes that extended beyond intercultural orientations to broader aspects of professional learning. These findings include reports from STs about how they understand their SIAs to have shaped their emerging teacher identity and professional development.

Confidence and Resilience: "I did it and I can do things."

Increased confidence in their teaching ability and confirmation of their decision to become music teachers were conveyed by each ST, either directly or by indicating how much they had enjoyed teaching in the classroom or by expressing assurance in their abilities as a teacher. While open about challenges they faced, particularly regarding communication and dealing with the language barrier, the STs reported overall that they were excited about all they were learning and looked forward to implementing what they had learned in their own (future) teaching practice.

> *'I have more self-confidence, like, okay, I did it and I can do things. And I saw a lot in* [host country]*, a lot of things that I want to try in my own lessons* […] *I will take it with me to do in my lessons in the future'* (ST6).

Although the language situation did present some challenges, most STs indicated that this ultimately bolstered their confidence in their ability to be an effective teacher. Several STs reported that these linguistic challenges actually improved their teaching by reinforcing the importance of giving clear and concise directions – and of simply not talking too much. They also expressed that teaching in English was a challenging, yet significant and positive, aspect of their SIA: even without the familiar phrases or vocabulary that they would normally rely on while teaching, they were nonetheless able to teach effectively.

> *'*[We're taught that] *you should do more, talk less. But it's always easier to just say.* […] *But here, but here, I got, got forced to, like, do it, because I couldn't use my words'* (ST3b).

> *'When I become a teacher in* [home country] *probably it would seem to me like easier, like okay I handled, I managed to teach in English so what could go wrong in my home country, you know?'* (ST7).

Beyond language issues, completing an internship in an unfamiliar environment provided the STs with particular challenges and opportunities for self-reflection. For example, one student noted that lesson planning was difficult early in the internship because not only was the specific group of pupils unfamiliar, but the ST also had no idea what to expect from the various grade levels in that educational system. Although some relevant information had been discussed in an introductory conversation with the MT, the unfamiliarity of the situation made reacting flexibly and spontaneously in the classroom even more urgent, as was the ability and willingness to receive feedback and reflect on the lessons they had given.

> *'I also had a lesson that didn't go well, and I really felt bad afterwards, but I think I also learned probably the most out of it* […] *It's not knowing students. Um, that's also a bit a difficulty in the context of international internship, I think* […] *And afterwards I thought,* [..] *what do I really want from the students? Or what is the end goal of the lesson?'* (ST4b).

Developing Teacher Identity

One ST described the SIA as a chance to *fill the teacher suitcase*, where they learned many new things that would inform and shape their future teaching practice. This was echoed by all STs who participated in the study. Indeed, STs indicated that their placement had had a significant influence on their emerging professional identity, due not only to skills or pedagogical approaches acquired during their SIA, but because their understanding of the role of teacher had been profoundly impacted. Some also reported beginning to appreciate the necessity of developing their professional skills and knowledge, realising that teacher professionalisation is an open-ended process with continuous opportunities for growth, resilience, development and engagement.

> *'And that made me realize as well, like, to become a teacher, you have to do it. Just do it a lot, a lot, a lot. And the first years I don't think I would be a good teacher. I'll try, of course, but you could see, like the teachers who are teaching here for long years. You could see they do well because they're trying and trying and they make mistakes and try again'* (ST4b).

> *'Because every child is different* […] *we as teachers* […] *must find a way to teach children and not have children adapt to our own way of teaching, and we must always be open to new ways of teaching that we may not have thought of or been taught either at university or elsewhere but must constantly evolve so that we can help children evolve* […] *I really believe that I have started to choose and take from each one the elements that I think suit me and the way I want to teach, as well as the elements that the teacher must have to help the children'* (ST5a).

These realisations shaped the way the STs see themselves as teachers; they expressed a commitment to the teaching profession and to honing their skills and deepening their professional knowledge, and showed intention to work with engaged persistence. Most STs also expressed a desire to pursue their professional development with the aim of increasing their flexibility and adaptability, and finding the approaches that work best for them while centring the pupil. Importantly, multiple STs reported that the MTs at their host schools modelled this behaviour for them by expressing their own desire to be continuous learners and through openness about their own growth and reflection processes (see also Malmberg et al., 2026, in this volume).

Discussion

The STs universally reported increased confidence and resilience as a result of their SIA, and findings suggest that they grew in their ability to cope with uncertainty and adapt to unfamiliar surroundings. No ST explicitly reported that their intercultural competence had been strengthened through navigating an international teaching placement, nor that intercultural learning had occurred as a result of the SIA. Rather, they tended to minimise the intercultural dimensions of their experiences, emphasising instead the impact of the SIA on their emerging teacher identity, such as increased confidence, strong conviction in their desire and ability to become teachers, and a wish to develop their adaptability and flexibility. They also expressed openness to many of the approaches to music teaching encountered during their placements. Yet it is precisely these qualities – adaptability, flexibility, openness – that appear in many definitions of intercultural competence. This tension highlights the complexity of distinguishing between perceived versus actual intercultural learning and engagement, as STs often downplayed the intercultural nature of their experiences. It also underscores the difficulty of assessing phenomena related to culture and identity, as these and other related terms are frequently loaded with expectations, preconceptions, and (mis)understandings.

The *IDI* model can be applied flexibly and was useful in categorising the data in this study, despite not having administered the *IDI* questionnaire to STs. However, some aspects of the STs' experiences that could arguably be understood as dimensions of intercultural competence – such as flexibility or the ability to cope with uncertainty – do not always fit neatly into the IDI orientations, raising the question whether the IDI's stage-based model as applied here was fully capable of capturing forms of intercultural learning that manifest differently than the model expects. This further demonstrates the challenges of measuring culture, identity, and even learning. Broader, more open definitions of intercultural competence provide a more comprehensive framework for interpreting such qualities – such as, for example, Deardorff's cyclical and open-ended model (2006, 2009) or Mu et al.'s understanding of intercultural competence as a range of abilities employed to communicate effectively and appropriately across linguistic and cultural differences in order to build and sustain relationships (2022, p. 30). When the *IDI* is used as an analytical framework, it may therefore be advisable to draw on broader conceptualisations of intercultural competence to inform interpretation of the orientations and to support greater nuance in identifying intercultural learning.

The STs portrayed their SIAs as having a positive influence on their development as teachers. They indicated a deepened appreciation for and renewed commitment to the teaching profession, and considered what type of teacher they want to be. The challenges they faced were by and large viewed positively, having strengthened their resilience and confidence. Furthermore, the STs were exposed to new, unfamiliar approaches toward

music education, leading them to question – though not necessarily negatively evaluate – the ways in which music is taught in their home context. This, too, contributes to the building of their own teacher identity, as they decide which elements they will leave behind and what they will integrate into their future teaching practice, and what their core values are. Still, specifically musical aspects of the SIAs were rarely foregrounded by participants in data collection; STs tended to mention music obliquely as part of the context they were in, rather than discussing music as the focus. When music was mentioned, STs most often noted contrasting foci on product versus process orientation, and the value of speaking less when leading practical musical activities, which they realised due to the communication challenges they encountered while teaching in English.

While the content and structure of SIAs may not differ substantially from typical domestic school internships, and although the internships were comparatively short, lasting from just 10 days to 10 weeks, the SIA context appears to have had a significant impact on the way STs experience the placement:

> […] *the only thing I had to do here was my internship. And when you're home, you have to do this and this and this and this and this. So, I could really focus on the internship and I could put all my energy in there, that made it very valuable.* […H]*ere you can really focus on it and, uh, let it sink in.* (ST4a)

Being situated in a new environment grants more singularity of focus than might typically be given a school internship, providing particular opportunities for teacher professionalisation and the development of teacher identity (Malmberg et al., 2025). The immersive and intensive nature was a clear theme in the data, as STs were removed from their everyday surroundings, including their university environment. Importantly, this intensity was not described as burdensome; rather, the STs portrayed it as conducive to self-reflection and learning. This aligns with Selby's (2008) assertion that international student experiences accelerate student maturation due to their immersion in other points of view and the subsequent necessity to come to terms with who they are and what they value (p. 2).

SIAs, then, appear to contribute significantly to teacher development and to competences that are advantageous in the classroom, including intercultural competence, although the intercultural dimensions were not necessarily highlighted by participants. Indeed, the most significant feature of the SIA may be its intensity; the immersion in unfamiliar surroundings, viewpoints, and ways of doing school and teaching music creates conditions that may prompt reflection. This potential can be strengthened when university teacher educators and MTs provide opportunities for both guided and self-reflection, as well as tools that support these reflective practices.

Limitations

SIAs are not yet well-established. In contrast to more traditional study abroad programmes, such as an *Erasmus* semester, international internships are less common in European music teacher education. A pilot survey conducted within the *TEAM* project revealed that in many higher education institutions that educate music teachers, there are no clear procedures and practices for setting up an SIA, and students may not know that this possibility – and funding – is available to them. Where it is more widely known, students do not often choose to participate. This is in alignment with findings indicating low participation among music education students in mobility programmes generally (see Knigge et al., 2026, in this volume).

The small sample size was a further limiting factor in the study. As participants responded to an open call, the sample comprised only those with interest and motivation to undertake an SIA. These students were particularly open to participating in the reflection exercises, and several STs also expressed enthusiasm about contributing to the research project; this may have impacted the research results.

Furthermore, the study took place within Europe, which seemed to contribute to the students' minimisation and denial of intercultural dimensions ('*It's not like I was on the other side of the world.*'). While a relatively broad geographical spread within Europe is represented in the sample, on a global scale the geographical scope of the study remains quite limited.

The small sample size also applies to the MTs; all three were previously known by members of the research team and two were highly involved in the *TEAM* project – though only one was a member of this particular research team. The tools developed for these SIAs have not yet been tested with further MTs. Additionally, the internships only took place at secondary schools (grades 5+) with strong specialist music teachers; the tools were not tested in other school forms or with generalist teachers.

Assessing dimensions of culture and identity was challenging. Though the *IDI* framework and further theoretical foundations found in the literature aided researchers in data categorisation, the inherent complexity of interpreting individuals' perceptions of culture, identity, and learning persisted, and elements of researcher judgment inevitably shaped analysis.

Outlook

Building on the limitations identified above, we see several reasonable next steps for expanding this research. First, as the SIA formats and accompanying tools[7] resulting from this DBR research project have thus far only been tested in European schools of general education, and exclusively in secondary schools, possibilities for expanding SIAs beyond European contexts could be explored, examining how STs' emerging teacher identity and intercultural competencies develop in even more varied educational and cultural environments. Furthermore, implementing the formats and tools in elementary schools or even in contexts beyond schools of general education (e. g., instrumental tuition or adult continuing education), as well as in subjects beyond music, may also provide opportunities to support a wider range of STs in their intercultural learning and teacher identity development. Domestically, formats and tools could be adapted for use in schools and music classrooms characterised by high levels of cultural and linguistic diversity, particularly in classes for newly arrived pupils with limited proficiency in the local language, to investigate how such settings impact STs' intercultural learning.

SIAs require institutional support in order to become more firmly established. The findings of this study indicate that SIAs are beneficial for music STs, and it is the research team's conclusion that mobility in European music teacher education merits support. This necessitates fostering a culture of mobility (see Triantafyllaki & Knigge, 2026, in this volume; Knigge et al., 2026, in this volume; Jenssen & Steinmetz, 2026, in this volume); specifically, the promotion of SIAs on an institutional level, access to *Erasmus* funding for this purpose, and flexibility regarding requirements (e. g., internship requirements or exam formats that enable STs to be physically absent from campus).

To this end, we are developing a network of universities in schools – the *TEAM* internship network, or *TEAM-IN* (https://teacher-academy-music.eu/student-mobility/school-internships-abroad) – that will continue to facilitate SIAs after the conclusion of the *TEAM* project, as well as supporting SIAs through the tools we developed. It is our hope that SIAs will become a well-established element of European music teacher education, within the overall culture of mobility *TEAM* encourages.

[7] These are: Introductory Conversation Guide to assist in planning and preparing the SIA; Voice Memo Prompts and Photo Journal Prompts to support STs' self-reflection during their placement; Checklist for Language-Sensitive Music Teaching, for helping STs teach in English in linguistically complex situations; Checklist for Mentor Teachers, to support MTs throughout the SIA; the Cultural Tree Self-Reflection Exercise, a further self-reflection tool for STs; and a Debrief Conversation Guide, for guided reflection between ST and MT and/or university teacher educator.

The long-term sustainability of the beneficial impacts of SIAs remains uncertain. Nonetheless, the findings demonstrate that SIAs contribute positively to developing teacher identity, professionalisation and intercultural competence, and they may well be a valuable component in preparing confident and interculturally competent music teachers.

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