

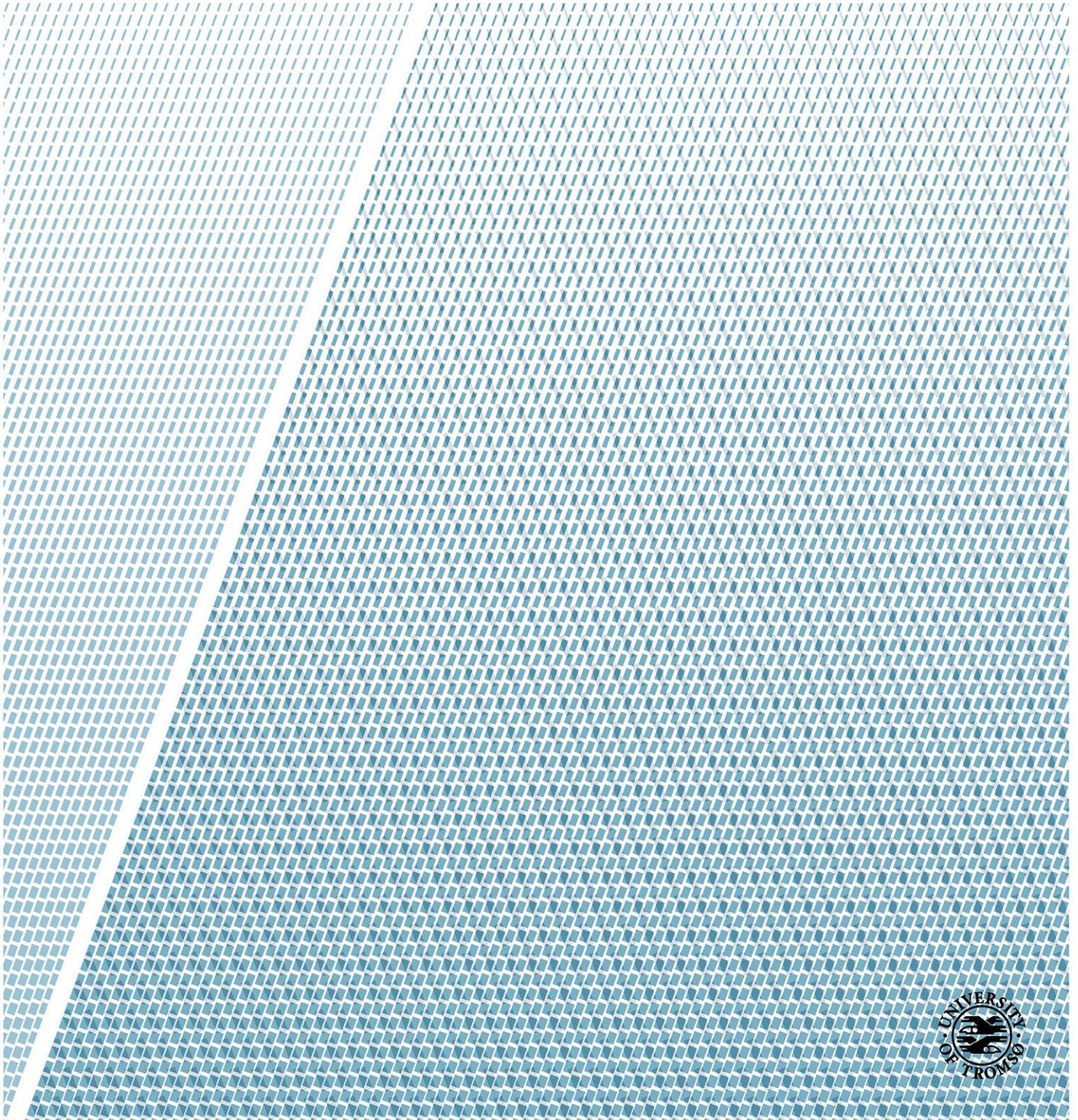
Department of Education

# Developing intercultural competence through cultural diversity at school

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**Yana Rakovskaya**

*Master thesis in Education, spring 2015*



*«We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools»*

*Martin Luther King Jr.*

## Foreword

This has been a long journey. A journey which made me think about my own cultural identity. A journey with many challenges, personal fights and wins. The whole journey would not be the same without the people who were there for me and who helped me to develop both scientifically and personally.

I would like to thank Hilde Sollid, a professor at the Arctic University of Norway, for letting me be a part of her own project *Språklig mangfold i klasserommet*. Hilde made additions to her own project which made the process of research approval from NSD smooth.

I would also like to express my gratitude to Jens Ivar Nergård, my supervisor, for guidance, encouragement and inspiration. He always had good advice for me. His positive thinking and support made me feel confident about my project. Many thanks for the contribution!

Thanks to Marianna Melenteva, my good friend, an amazing person and an excellent specialist, for proofreading my thesis.

*Spring 2015*  
*Yana Rakovskaya*

## **Abstract**

The following thesis attempts to discuss the topic of intercultural competence with emphasis on cultural diversity. The major focus is on elementary school children, their processes of learning, socialization and cognitive development.

The major research question is whether cultural diversity at school can be an effective predisposition for the development of intercultural competence. The hypothetical assumption to this study is that cultural diversity in a classroom is beneficial for a child's development. The research question is reached through theory on the issue and qualitative interviews with a couple of teachers and an after school club counselor, as well as reflections on my own personal intercultural experience and intercultural competence. This personal experience is the main inspiration for the study on the topic.

Cultural diversity at school may contribute to positive attitudes among children. Positive experience is most essential for the development of intercultural competence. The development of intercultural competence is interwoven with the processes of learning and social interaction. This makes culturally diverse school environment a strategic important arena for the study of intercultural competence among children. The school is a learning arena where children with different cultural backgrounds communicate and learn from each other. The research concludes has shown that intercultural communication has a positive impact on children's development.

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## Introduction

The era of globalization has led to increased international mobility. Young people growing up today can expect to have various and numerous contacts with people from different cultures. We are living in a society of great cultural diversity. Intercultural contacts affect everyone on all levels of the global community: international trade, immigration and refugees, and other numerous situations developing in the world (Olson 1982: 25). We are living in the era of global development and are directly and inevitably influenced by that. Simons and Krols (2011: 225) write: "Intercultural experiences are no longer exclusively associated with internationalization processes, but also with domestic intercultural experiences as a result of ongoing migration dynamics within the national borders as well".

Olson (1982: 25) draws attention to the US experience where increasing attention has been given to programs such as ethnic studies which are intended to promote an atmosphere of understanding and acceptance among the many cultural diverse persons or groups in the world. The key words are *understanding* and *acceptance*. It is no longer enough just to teach basic skills and knowledge. It is important to develop competence so that children become interculturally educated and due to this acquire abilities to understand, accept and respect cultural diversity.

The scope of intercultural education should expand beyond the limits of politics, economy, geography and culture. Intercultural education should evoke attitudes and feelings towards people from other countries (Olson 1982: 25). An interculturally competent person is not only a person with specific knowledge, but also a person with a certain attitude and identity.

Olson (1982: 25) maintains that children should be exposed to other cultures as early as possible at school. It is the most effective way to minimize the development of stereotypes, prejudices, inflexibility and ethnocentrism. A school with a culturally

diverse setting should be seen as an arena for the development of intercultural competence.

### Research focus

Cultural diversity penetrates all spheres and levels of our everyday life. However, I focus on the influence of cultural diversity on children and therefore limit my research to an elementary school. I have chosen an elementary school in Tromsø, where pupils with different cultural backgrounds study together. My empirical material is limited. It is based on three depth interviews with teachers and an after school club counselor (SFO leder). I also attempted to do a series of observation in an after school club (SFO), but did not succeed. I wanted to collect more empirical material about actual relations and interactions between children after school time. This did not work out and I did not get access to the after school club for various reasons.

### Personal experience and reflections

I got interested in cultural diversity and learning when I was working in a kindergarten. Tromsø is a culturally diverse town. Here you find representatives from many countries and cultures. There were many children with different cultural backgrounds in the kindergarten where I worked. Most of the children spoke fluent Norwegian. Some had difficulties to express themselves in the Norwegian language since they came from another country and their mother tongue was not Norwegian. I spent a lot of time observing the children. I noticed that they managed to get along well in spite of all cultural or language challenges. No child was ever excluded. Children did not seem to discriminate between cultural backgrounds or language differences. They somehow managed to find something in common and involved everyone in their activities.

There is a lot of research on the challenges which immigrant children face when they move to another country with their families. Much is written about acculturation, language acquisition and identity formation. Without any doubt, this research is essential. However, I have decided to view the situation from a different perspective and

study how the growing immigration and cultural merge influence Norwegian children. Is cultural diversity a challenge for them or does it bring its benefits? What do Norwegian children learn from their friends who have a different cultural background? Do they learn anything at all and do they even realize that their friends are somewhat different? These questions have construed the framework of my interest and the search for answers has become my motivation. I have defined my subject as “intercultural competence”, but to put it differently, my idea is to examine how culturally diverse groups of children function and interact together.

My reflections on the issues of the thesis are also based on own personal experience. I moved to Norway three years ago. Living in another country and integrating into new culture can be considered as a fieldwork on a personal level. In many respects I am my own informant with personal experience and reflections on the issue of my research project. Reflections on my own experience also serve as motivation for the study of the question of intercultural competence. The subject of my study concerns me fully as I believe that I have developed intercultural competence only after moving to another country and getting to know people with different cultural backgrounds. Interacting with people who have other world views, beliefs and values made me develop different attitudes and different interests. The access to cultural aspects and people with different views and values helped me to become more open-minded, accepting, respectful, reflective and eager to understand others. I should admit that when I moved to Norway, I had plenty of opinions of people from other countries. However, these prejudices were minimized quickly when I got to know people with cultural backgrounds different from my own. It feels scary at first when the only thing you see in other people is how they are different from yourself. This feeling arises from unfamiliarity and lack of awareness. When I started to get to know people here in Norway and learn about other cultures, the borders between “them” and “me” blurred and I started to trace similarities and focus on what I had in common with them rather than differences between us.

Getting acquainted with new cultures and new people has made me a culturally “new” person. My cultural identity remains in many respects unchanged, but the new experience acquired new dimensions and peculiarities in my self-understanding. I started to develop intercultural competence by obtaining new attitudes which involve

having more respect and value other people and cultures differently, becoming more tolerant and understanding, developing cultural curiosity. I started to interest myself in other ways of living and other's attitudes and values. Cultural diversity triggered my personal transformation: from having prejudices and thinking one-sided to becoming more open-minded and being able to reflect over different issues from different angles. I have learned to listen to others opinions, to accept and respect these opinions no matter how different they are from my own. I am now able to accept different points of view without judgement. This is why I argue for an essential need to expose children to different cultures early. My own experience has led me to think that being exposed to cultural diversity is beneficial and that it promotes personal development of an individual. It is reasonable and a lot easier to be open-minded, tolerant and flexible than to be reserved and ignorant. Cultural diversity broadened my mind and made me realize how important it was to be open to new experiences and new ideas.

My study is not based on problem solving. I focus on my own experience and the data from my research, as well as on theoretical assumptions to prove the hypothesis.

### Hypothetical assumption

Cultural diversity in classrooms has positive influence on children. It is beneficial to be exposed to cultural diversity in early age. Cultural diversity contributes to the development of intercultural competence. It broadens the mind and forms positive attitudes.

### Research outline

Firstly, I discuss the theoretical assumptions and try to find what scientific theory can explain interactions between children in a culturally diverse environment. Secondly, in order to make a conclusion whether cultural diversity is a contributing or a restraining factor, I have to collect empirical data. For this purpose I conducted 3 interviews with teachers and an after school club counselor (SFO leder). The idea was to examine relations between children both in classes and at after school time. At last, I analyze if cultural diversity at school can contribute as a predisposition for the development of

intercultural competence. I discuss the development of intercultural competence with theoretical support from Mead and Piaget's theories. I use empirical data from the interviews and from my personal experience to explain how the theories can be applied in practice.

## Objectives

The central and supplementary objectives of this thesis are:

- a. to look for support to the idea that intercultural competence possibly is increased by cultural diversity in elementary school
- b. to find the possible predispositions for intercultural competence in culturally diverse settings
- c. to study what impact cultural diversity possibly has on the Norwegian children
- d. to see if cultural diversity can be a resource in teaching and children's development
- e. to find out if children are aware of cultural differences at all and if they are curious about other cultures

## Research project

The research is based on the qualitative approach. I have conducted a number of interviews in one of the elementary schools in Tromsø. This school has a large number of pupils with various cultural backgrounds. For the interviews, I have chosen two teachers from different grades and one after school club counselor (SFO leder). My main goal was to get to know about respondents' experience from culturally diverse classes.

## Structure

### *Chapter 1 Theoretical statement*

In this chapter, I make an attempt to create a theoretical framework in which the research will take place. I start with discussing the general terms of culture, learning and competence. I then move on to the concept of intercultural competence and try to line out its analytical orientation. In this chapter I describe major physiological characteristics of the chosen age group as well.

The main theoretical basis, used for the study is Piaget's theory of cognitive development and Mead's theory of the "self".

### *Chapter 2 Research*

This is a purely methodological chapter where I give reasons for the chosen research method, as well as all the preparatory stages for the study. I explain how I perform the interviews, chosen as a research method. I discuss ethical questions, connected to my research as well.

### *Chapter 3 Discussions*

This is the discussions chapter. It is fully dedicated to my own observations and perceptions from the conducted research. In this chapter I discuss the school and its culturally diverse setting, give descriptions of the respondents and comment on the interviews.

### *Chapter 4 Results*

In this chapter I present the results of my research. It is divided into 2 smaller sections. Firstly, I shortly interpret the collected data. All the data is organized in groups. Secondly, I compare the results of my own research to the earlier research presented in the first chapter. I discuss also what the school does to promote intercultural competence among pupils. Here I focus on age characteristics of the chosen group. Finally, I analyze the question of the development of intercultural competence in the light of Mead and Piaget's theories.

### *Chapter 5 Major findings*

Here I discuss my most valuable findings. I also answer the questions raised in the objectives for the study.

### *Chapter 6 Critical evaluation of the study*

In this final chapter I approach my study critically with the emphasis on possible mistakes and weaknesses. The reason is to point out what I have learned in the course of the research and what improvements I could possibly make.





# 1. Theoretical statement

## 1.1 What is culture?

The subject of intercultural competence is closely connected to the issues of culture. Culture is a very broad notion which encompasses values, beliefs, attitudes, ways of behavior, norms, traditions, and language. Before I start discussing what is intercultural competence I find it useful to discuss the notion of culture and why its meaning is important for my study.

There is no simple way to define culture and there is no single definition with supreme authority. There are numerous approaches to explain the phenomenon we refer to as culture. According to Kottak (1991: 17, in Wikan 1994: 127), culture is “distinctly human, transmitted through learning, traditions and customs that govern behavior and beliefs”. I have chosen McDaniel, Samovar and Porter’s (2009) understanding of culture as basic. They define (2009: 11) culture as a set of social rules. These rules provide a framework which attributes meaning to events, objects and people. These rules help us to make sense of our surroundings and reduce uncertainty about the social environment. McDaniel, Samovar and Porter (2009: 11) explain that we start learning cultural rules since the moment we are born. We learn proper cultural rules and behavior by listening to others, by observing them and most important; grow up with the and practice them ourselves. When we meet people, who belong to our own culture it is easier for us to start the conversation because we have learned the social rules, and we can choose appropriate patterns of behavior in such situations. On the contrary, when we meet a foreigner, the level of social insecurity becomes much higher, because we do not really know what behavior is considered to be appropriate for a person who grew up in a different culture, who has different views and attitudes.

McDaniel, Samovar and Porter (2009: 7) emphasize that “intercultural communication occurs whenever a person from one culture sends a message to be processed by a person from a different culture”. Therefore, it has been asserted that understanding of intercultural communication and competence is closely related to the concept of culture.

There are three important aspects of culture, which can be discussed in relation to the research question. They are beliefs, values and attitudes. These aspects of culture has an impact on our behavior. McDaniel, Samovar and Porter (2009: 13) define beliefs as an individual's subjective ideas about the nature of objects or events. A value is something that is important for an individual. Values are often defined as morality, ethics, and aesthetics. Every individual has his/her own set of values. Thus, they can be both personal and cultural. Cultural values are "reflections of the rules a culture has established to reduce uncertainty, lessen the likelihood of conflict, help in decision making, and provide structure to social organization and interactions" (McDaniel, Samovar and Porter: 2009). Cultural beliefs and values predetermine attitudes. Attitudes are "tendencies to act or respond in a specific way to events, objects, people, or orientations" (McDaniel, Samovar and Porter: 2009).

It is noteworthy here that I avoid using such terms as "multiculturalism" and "interculturalism" because I am unsure of their connotations. Instead, I use the term "cultural diversity" because it stands as a neutral variant to the latter terms.

## 1.2 Learning

The process of learning is a main issue for this research. Through learning and observing children acquire communication skills. It is important to realize that the process of cultural learning is connected to cultural diversity at school. Children are able to learn a lot from each other. Culturally diverse communication between children provides them with a wide range of learning opportunities. I assume that cultural diversity at school is a prerequisite of fruitful learning. This section aims at explaining the essence of learning with the focus on social learning.

The broad meaning of the word to «learn» is "gaining knowledge or skills by studying, from experience or from being taught. It means to gradually change your attitudes about something so that you behave in a different way" (Hornby 2000: 731).

Learning from each other is one of the leading processes in child's development. As Wenger (1998) points out, children's language and pragmatic development is a socioculturally and dimensionally situated process. Children are never alone: they are a part of communicative community. This kind of "community" develops its own set of routines and rules. Cekaite, Blum-Kulka, Grøver and Teubal (2014: 6) call it "peer culture" – "a stable set of activities or routines, artifacts, values, and concerns that children produce and share in interaction with peers". The authors add that "peer culture" has its own specific social routines, frames of interpretation and a linguistic code. To put it differently, children create their own environment where they use simple and available behavioral and communicative schemes for communication.

Learning plays a leading role in child's development. Children learn through communication with their parents and other adults. However, Cekaite, Blum-Kulka, Grøver and Teubal (2014: 10) explain that adults offer conversational support and ready-made schemes of behavior. Adults provide guidelines for a culturally and cognitively appropriate behavior. That means that communication with adults does not seem to be adequate enough for proper learning. Cekaite, Blum-Kulka, Grøver and Teubal (2014: 10) conclude that communication with adults can have a constraining effect on children's development of communicative skills. Making communicative task easier, adults constrain children's investment in the communicative exchange.

Therefore, the necessity and importance of communication between peers plays such a significant role. When children interact, they have to find ways of expressing themselves. Through communication with each other they learn and acquire schemes of communication and behavior.

Piaget (1962) maintains that interaction between children is an effective social arena for their development, because peer interaction is not limited by the power and cognitive asymmetries of adult – child relations. It allows for dialogue and discussions. Cekaite, Blum-Kulka, Grøver and Teubal (2014: 9) state that peer interaction promotes and maximizes cognitive and conceptual conflict. This leads to a cognitive change and a higher level of understanding, or, in other words, to re-establishment of equilibrium. I

return to the question of cognitive development (as seen by Piaget) below when I discuss Piaget's theory of cognitive development.

Olson (1982: 27) manifests that any stage of learning is cumulative. That is so to say "what the child learns at one stage is going to become part of the individual's foundation for assimilation of future learning". The section below reviews the theory of cognitive development, proposed by Piaget. He was interested in the processes of learning and development. His ideas will be further used to analyze the empirical data.

### 1.3 Theoretical approach to learning and social interaction

This section focuses on Piaget's theory of cognitive development, as well Mead's theory of the social "self".

#### 1.3.1 Piaget's theory of cognitive development

##### *Intelligence, cognition, scheme*

The process of cognitive development should be seen as a process of "improving existing structures and replacing temporally achieved equilibrium through re-equilibrations" (Boom, 2009: 132). Cognitive development is a constant effort to adapt to the environment. The driving force of this adaptation is disequilibrium (conflict, lack of balance) (Gerbhart, Grant, von Georgi, Huber, 2008). When people with two different cultural backgrounds meet, it inevitably leads to disequilibrium. It is a situation which individuals are not used to. An individual cannot easily adjust and choose the appropriate behavior, because scheme of appropriate behavior in such situations does not yet exist in our cognitive structures. This is when we learn to be flexible and adjustable. This process of adaptation is characterized by assimilation and accommodation.

Piaget argued that intelligence can be seen as an adaptation to the environment. As humans adapt physically to the environment, so they adapt mentally to it. Cognition is

seen as an active, complex and self-organizing system. Children do not passively learn from experience. They actively construct knowledge through interacting with the world and reflecting on these experiences (Miller, 2010: 652-3).

According to Miller (2010: 651), any cognitive structure is called a “scheme”. A scheme is an organized pattern of behavior for interacting with the environment. A scheme is repeatable and generalized in an action. With time, every general scheme develops and acquires more classifications with various subcategories. As a result, schemes become well developed and increasingly organized. Pallini and Barcaccia (2014: 290) write that external influence on knowledge and feelings does not represent an entirely new beginning. It always assimilates to existing patterns and modifies them by giving an impulse in a partly new direction. We do not get a completely new and different way of thinking, but rather a modified and enriched one. Piaget (1960) writes that things do not remain in memory exactly as they were. They are “schemata” of actions or operations derived from one another. The latter have a constant adaptation to the present and structuration which is continuously oriented on equilibration.

According to Boom (2009: 140), schemes are the structures which indicate permanent features of a system, which consists of cyclic series of changes or exchanges with the environment. Such a system is both open due to the exchanges, and closed because it maintains identity throughout the changes.

### *Subject – object relations*

According to Piaget (1976: 12), in the child’s perception the external world is separate from the subject. Any objective knowledge is the result of perceptive recordings, motor associations, and verbal descriptions. The subject creates a functional copy of objects and connections between them. The function of intelligence, therefore, is to create a system for the new information and to categorize it. In order to know objects the subject must act upon them and transform them. The subject must displace, combine, connect, take apart, and reassemble the objects.

Knowledge is always the result of interactions between the subject and objects. Piaget (1976: 13) writes that the issue of knowledge is directly connected to the issue of the intelligence's development. It reduces to analyzing how the subject becomes capable of objectivity, or, in other words, how the subject becomes able to get to know objects adequately. Objectivity, in this case, is not an initial property. It requires a series of successive constructs which form it. Therefore, construction is a natural consequence of the interactions. Since objective knowledge is not just a recording of external information, but the result of interactions, it requires two types of activity. Firstly, the coordination of actions. Then, the introduction of interrelations between the objects. These two activities are not independent, because relations originate only through action.

### *Assimilation and accommodation*

All organisms seek adaptation and organization. Adaptation is harmony of organisms and the world, organization is harmony in itself. We use cognitive schemata (structures) for adaptation. These are specific cognitive – affective structures, which are parts of physical or mental action. The process of assimilation and accommodation is a form of maintenance and modification of cognitive structures. Assimilation is incorporation of an external element into a conceptual scheme. Such external elements can be, for example, objects or events which are not yet found in our cognitive structures. Sometimes existing cognitive structure cannot reach equilibrium, or balance. This happens because new sensations (emotions) are not compatible. Then, as a result, there occurs accommodation – adjustment of a cognitive structure according to environmental demands. Accommodation occurs when a cognitive structure has to be modified until assimilation becomes possible (Gerbhart, Grant, von Georgi, Huber, 2008).

Miller (2010) says that adaptation involves two complementary processes: assimilation and accommodation. She defines assimilation as a “process of applying what one knows, or fitting reality into one's current cognitive organization” (p. 653). She explains that when child's thinking is limited to current cognitive structures. Child's mind always filters experiences through the current way of understanding. Besides, she explains that accommodation refers to adjustments in cognitive organization which results from

experience. All objects have their unique features which should be taken into account eventually. Accommodation occurs because the existing structures cannot interpret a particular object or an event adequately. The reorganization of thoughts leads to a different and more adequate assimilation of the experience.

According to Piaget (1970), assimilation is integration of external elements into evolving or completed structures. Accommodation is any modification of an assimilatory scheme or structure by the elements it assimilates. Block (1982) writes that assimilation serves the purpose of integrating new elements into existing structures, while accommodation permits a structural change, or a transformation of the structure.

Initial directions of these two processes are different. Piaget (1954) points out that assimilation is conservative and tends to subordinate the environment to the organisms as it is. Accommodation is a source of change and bends organisms to the successive constraints of the environment. However, according to Block (1982), there would be no sense of continuity without assimilation and no sense of change without accommodation. These processes always go hand in hand. Piaget (1970) thinks that “if assimilation alone were involved in development, [the child] would not develop further”.

### *Equilibrium/ disequilibrium*

Boom (2009: 132) proposes that “equilibration is the tendency of the subject to develop increasing control over experience”. Furthermore, he writes that equilibration is a system which always exchanges with the environment. He claims that this system has to have an identity, or a unity. This system is self - maintaining. Piaget himself is careful in locating this process, but generally, it can be argued that the subject has “one brain, one history, one memory”. Boom (2009: 133) writes that experience involves all exchanges with the environment outside the body. As I understand it, experience in a culturally diverse classroom is not limited to direct information about other countries and cultures. Experience is all new associations and sensations. For instance, body language, the manner of speaking, various patterns of behavior should also be considered as experiences, that is new external information which children acquire during interactions with each other.

Piaget (1967) maintains that all organisms tend to always equilibrate: all behavior tends towards assuring an equilibrium between internal and external factors, or, speaking more generally, between assimilation and accommodation. The construction of structures is mainly the work of equilibration, defined not by balance between opposite forces, but by self-regulation. Equilibration is a set of active reactions of the subject to external disturbances, which can be effective to varying degrees.

Block (1982) writes that cognitive adaptation is equilibrium between assimilation and accommodation which always follow each other. Improved equilibration is a functional goal for all developmental sequences.

### 1.3.2 Mead's theory of the social "self"

The development of intercultural competence and the influence of cultural diversity in general can be understood in terms of Mead's theory of the social "self". He operates with three key concepts: "The Self", "I" and "Me". This section focuses on these three concepts. Further, I analyze the collected data from a theoretical perspective and attempt to answer the research questions applying Mead's theory integrated in Piaget's theory of cognitive development.

#### *"I" and "Me"*

The "self" in Mead's understanding is a broad and general formation. It consists of two fundamental elements: "I" and "Me". According to Mead (1934: 174), "I" and "me" are two different elements, and are never mixed. "I" and "me" are the parts of a bigger formation which is the "self". "I" is the spontaneous element, while "me" is more reflective. "Me" occurs when an individual is interacting with an environment. All the experience which is coming from the outside world is incorporated into "me" and is stored for "I" to use them. "I" is responsible for actions. It uses the incorporated experience and chooses the appropriate schemes of behavior. There is always a dialog going on between "I" and "me".



Mead (1934: 174) explains: "If one determines what his position in a society is and feels himself as having a certain function and privilege, these are all defined with reference to an "I", but the "I" is not a "me" and cannot become a "me" (Mead, 1934: 174). The "I" is the subject, and "me" is the object. The "I" is the self which acts, the "me" is developed when we observe ourselves from the perspective of the other (Baldwin, 1986: 115). The key to understanding the "I" and "me" lies in defining their functions. "I" is something that "acts out", "me" is something that collects the experience, reflects over the environment and takes roles.

According to Mead (1934: 175), "I" is a response to the attitudes of the others. "Me" is an "organized set of attitudes of others which one himself assumes". This illustrates again that "I" acts and "me" collects and organizes the experience. As Mead (1934: 175) explains, "the attitudes of the others constitute the organized "me", and then one reacts towards that as an "I".

Individuals constantly receive new experience which they adopt and assimilate. This assimilated experience is stored somewhere in subconsciousness and becomes part of "me" (accommodates into "me"). And since all experience gets accommodated, we can form schemes of behavior which can be used in different social situations. In any social situation "I" inevitably becomes prominent and acts out using the experience stored in "me".

### *The Self*

Mead (1934: 135) writes that "the self" is not given to an individual at birth. It is the result of development which occurs through social experience and activity. "The self" develops in an individual as a result of his relations to the process of social experience as a whole and to other individuals within that process.

Baldwin (1986: 109) observes that children can reflect over their "selves" only after they take the role of others. In this case they can view themselves as social objects. According to Baldwin (1986: 108), "selves could only emerge after humans evolved to the point of

using significant symbols (which) allow a person to take the role of the listener and thereby get the objective, outsider's view of his or her own self as a social object". He writes (1986: 109) also that when children begin to use a language, they are able of simple role taking. They "hear their own significant symbols in an objective manner and get an objective view of their own thoughts". When children play, they take different roles, let it be a policeman, a doctor or a parent. Mead (1934: 153) explains that the role children play controls the development of their selves. The "self" can start to develop when children are able of sending and receiving significant symbols. In this case an individual gets meaningful bits of experience, which will later be accommodated in "me" and be stored as a behavioral scheme.

"The Self" is a formation which has developed and arises in interactions between individuals. We collect new experience from interactions with the environment and other people. This experience gets stored and grouped in "me" in the form of schemes. These schemes are later used by "I" for acting in a given situation.

The idea of development is significant for Piaget's theory as well. Here lies the similarity between the two theories I discuss. New knowledge, attitudes and ideas are always the result of development. In Piaget's understanding, this is the misbalance (disequilibrium) which is the driving force, while in Mead's understanding of development the driving force is a trigger is social interaction. Every new experience is a development of "self". Any interaction results in enriching the existing "me". But not only general interaction gives experience. Baldwin (1986: 114) points out that any problematic situation is a source of experience. Problems make us reflect on possible solutions of the problem. This makes us establish new relations between ourselves and others, as well as between self and society or environment. This is Piaget's disequilibrium: a situation, which requires new experience, attitudes and understanding. This constitutes the core of the development.

According to Baldwin (1986: 115), we can develop selves with complex and sophisticated structures through art, literature and the news media. This happens because we "become aware of a large range of human condition and role taking with the larger whole of a complex society". This means that access to cultures and everything

which is not quite known to us allows us to develop an elaborated and diversified “self”, which is capable of taking a whole range of social roles and which has access to a whole range of experiences and patterns of behavior. Cultural diversity at school provides this kind of environment where children are able to acquire cultural experiences and become able of acting as “I”, using their cultural experience.

### 1.3.3 Concluding notes

Organisms always get new information and experience from the outside world. This information does not yet exist in cognitive structures. Every new experience gets integrated in cognitive schemes, and a person can operate with them. Accommodation ensures that all the new “bricks” are finding their places and therefore form a solid structure. It is worth turning to the subject of my study now and connecting this theory to more specific issues. In case of cultural diversity new external elements to be assimilated are cultural differences. When children are placed in a culturally unknown situation, they have to find ways of expressing themselves. On the one hand, children acquire new cognitive schemes of communicative and social behavior in a given situation of cultural diversity. They learn to communicate in a way to understand and to be understood. On the other hand, children learn that there is more than one culture, that cultures are different, and that people with different cultural backgrounds have different values, views and attitudes. All new information gets assimilated during social contacts. Then, when it comes to accommodation, children accept that and treat cultural diversity as something natural. They are able to be open and accepting. This suggestion will be further discussed in Chapter 4 “Results”.

Miller (2010: 651) observes that cognitive development goes through a series of stages. Each stage reflects a particular type of a mental logical structure, or a general way of thinking. This means that every stage has a different specific structure, or a set of mental actions which allows a particular type of interaction between a child and environment. Each stage represents a fundamentally different view of the world. The next section gives an overview of mental characteristics, specific to various age groups.

## 1.4 Specific features of the chosen age group

The theory covers elementary school (barneskole) age. Elementary school includes the first seven grades. The youngest children are 6 years old, while children of the seventh grade are 13. Children of the chosen age group are characterized by the specific physiological traits. The following section gives a description of these traits, which helps to clarify the choice of the age group. Another goal is to find out how can these age characteristics be used effectively when working with children (with the focus on development of intercultural competence). The last question is discussed later in Chapter 4 "Results".

This section is built on Olson's (1982: 26-7) proposal of adding intercultural awareness development. He focuses on Piaget's stages of child's development and then discusses it in terms of cultural awareness.

### 1.4.1 Preoperational stage (age 2 – 7)

Olson (1982: 26) observes that at the preoperational stage child's thinking becomes more logical, but the thinking as such is self – centered. A child lacks an ability to see things from the viewpoint of others. The values and consciousness are based on punishment and obedience. At this stage children cannot yet understand abstract things. This makes it impossible to expect them to understand other cultures, which they have never experienced. A child realizes that people from other cultures can be different. However, children cannot respect other people's religions, beliefs and cultures because they cannot sort out and organize information. Children do not develop prejudices at this stage. Therefore it is important to have personal contacts with representatives of other cultures. This will form direct associations and positive attitudes. According to Olson, a "teacher's voice is almost equal to a god's voice" for an obedience – oriented child (p. 26). This can be used effectively to teach equality to children

### 1.4.2 Concrete Operational Stage (age 7-11)

Olson (1982: 27) observes that at concrete operational stage children become aware of that other people can have different opinions. Thinking becomes more logical and is no longer based on mere perceptions. Children learn what is right and wrong. The right thing is something which satisfies one's own needs and sometimes the needs of others ("You help me and I'll help you"). The child is able to think about hypothetical situations and understand them. A child is no longer limited to his/ her own experience. A child becomes aware of differences in people's way of living (different manners and customs), ways of thinking and ways of reacting to different situation. Social interactions with other children smooth the self - centered thinking, which has been prevailing at the earlier stage. It is important to introduce intercultural communication in the form of games, movies and enjoyable activities (such as international days, parties, studies of artifacts, etc.). This should involve sharing interests with other cultures.

Miller (2010: 652) writes that at this stage children can perform different mental operations due to developed logical structures. Thinking becomes more flexible and abstract. Actions still remain the primary source of knowledge, but actions become mental. Logic dominates over perceptions.

### 1.4.3 Formal Operational Stage (age 11-15)

Olson (1982: 27) observes that at formal operational stage a child completely starts thinking logically and scientifically. This makes it possible to relate to different types of problems and use theories in solving them. Good behavior is determined by having approval from others. There is a wish to follow the existing understanding of "good" and "normal" behavior. At this stage, a child is able to understand other cultures. As the processes of assimilation and accommodation affect cognitive structures (study of history, sociology, anthropology, etc.), it is important to have formal studies with the focus on other children's cultural backgrounds. It is important as well to continue with social activities with focus on cultural diversity (such as simulations, games, music, dances, films, festivals, sports, etc.).

### 1.4.5 Adolescence: Formal Operational Stage (age 15-18)

Olson (1982: 27) characterizes adolescence by an idealistic crisis. At the previous stage a child finds a high degree of correspondence between values and behaviors. Now a child finds divergences in the same area. An adolescent bases the judgments on logics, which is not necessarily realistic. According to adolescent's idealistic thinking, the world should have an idealistic structure. Therefore it is important to teach laws which are supposed to promote and protect cultural diversity. There is a need for study of international issues so that adolescents develop the ability to see the world without "ethnocentric limitations".

### 1.4.6 Brief summary

At an early stage, children are unlikely to develop prejudices against other cultures and people. In order to form a positive and lasting intercultural understanding, direct contact with other cultures is essential. Early school age is a favorable time to teach a child about equality. When thinking becomes more logical, a child becomes more receptive and reflective about different ways of living, traditions and routines. This is the time when social contact becomes dominant in child's everyday life. Children start to learn about other cultures through playing and other direct social contacts with peers who have different cultural backgrounds. This brings culture understanding and awareness on a cognitive level. This gives opportunities to form new cognitive schemes and understandings which are essential for a successful and effective development of an intercultural competence. I conclude that an early school age is favorable time to build and developed basic skills and attitudes which are part of a bigger picture - intercultural competence.

## 1.5 Intercultural learning

The notion «intercultural learning» in its broad sense can be defined as a process during which an individual acquires knowledge, attitudes and patterns of behavior connected to interaction which occurs when people with different cultural backgrounds meet and communicate. It is a process which provides the setting when people with different cultural backgrounds can coexist peacefully and understand each other (Gillert 2000: 17).

Having studied international youth exchange programs, Vasbø (2014) concludes that such programs help young people to achieve understanding of the idea that people from different countries and cultures are rather alike than different. She (Vasbø 2014: 5) writes that with the growth of the multicultural Europe in mid1990-s, cultural differences were seen as a resource. This observation is of significance for my research since I study the question of cultural diversity focusing on its resourcefulness. I argue for the idea that cultural diversity opens numerous pedagogical opportunities, which otherwise would not be available. One of these opportunities is the development of intercultural competence in early age.

Vasbø (2014: 5) reports that in 2001 international youth work acquired a responsibility to develop youth's *competence* to both discover and to deal with cultural difference in a constructive, or practical, way. This work was called "intercultural learning".

According to Vasbø (2014: 5-6), intercultural learning should be understood as a new pedagogical teaching field which has four goals: 1) to overcome ethnocentricity and stereotypical attitudes, 2) to develop openness and respect towards other cultures, 3) to increase ability to communicate across cultural borders, 4) to explore new methods of collaboration in a culturally diverse society.

## 1.6 What is competence?

UNESCO (2013: 12) defines the word “competence” as “having sufficient skill, ability, knowledge, or training to permit appropriate behavior, whether words or actions, in a particular context”. It includes cognitive (knowledge), functional (application of knowledge), personal (behavior) and ethical (principles guiding behavior) components. Spitzberg (2009: 381) writes that competence is defined as an ability or a set of skilled behaviors. He, however, points out that any behavior or ability can be considered competent in one context and incompetent in another. Therefore he concludes that competence cannot be defined by any behavior or ability. It is rather a social evaluation of behavior. The two criteria for such evaluation are appropriateness and effectiveness. I will discuss these two notions below in the following section.

Since any competence is a set of skills, I will discuss in the following section what skills exactly are required to develop intercultural competence.

## 1.7 What is intercultural competence?

The question about how much I actually know about intercultural competence was the point of departure for my research. I found out that it was not that easy to define this notion. I had a lot of associations and vague ideas, but could not really give a clear answer. I guessed that intercultural competence might involve a certain set of skills and some specific knowledge, which helps to communicate in a culturally diverse setting. As I see it, being interculturally competent means being tolerant and having respect for other cultures. In other words, it is an ability to come into successful dialog between cultures. When I started working with literature on the subject, I realized that literature does not provide a definite answer to the question of what intercultural competence is. I got interested in the question of how my understanding of intercultural competence will evolve during my research. Another question I got interested in was about the aspects or characteristics of intercultural competence necessary to define it.



In this section, I discuss different approaches to understanding of intercultural competence. I also discuss intercultural competence in connection to general communicative competence.

The first issue I learned was that intercultural competence should be interpreted through the prism of communication. Fitzgerald (1993: 2) writes that communication lies in the heart of international, intercultural, and interpersonal relations. If we wish to become better communicators, we must acquire new competences, skills, and implications, which involve new ways of looking at self and others.

Liu (2012: 270) studies the question of communication competence with reference to different authors.

Communicative competence is

- “a person’s capacity to interact *effectively* with the environment” (White, 1959),
- “an ability to accomplish interpersonal tasks” (Weinstein, 1969),
- “an ability to relate *effectively* to self and others” (Bochner and Kelly, 1974),
- “an ability to interact and choose among available communicative behaviors in order to <...> successfully accomplish <...> own interpersonal goals during an encounter while maintaining the face and line of the fellow interactants within the constraints of the situation” (Wiemann, 1977).

Liu concludes (2012: 270) that the key elements, which unite all the definitions are effectiveness and appropriateness. The same ideas are shared by Spitzberg (2009: 381). Liu (2012) defines “effectiveness” as “individual’s ability to achieve the intended goal through interaction with the other communicator or environment”. Spitzberg (2009) defines “effectiveness” as “accomplishment of valued goals or rewards relative to costs and alternatives”.

“Appropriateness”, according to Liu (2012), is “individual’s ability to act and speak in a way that leads to positive communication outcomes (or avoids negative outcomes)”. Spitzberg (2012) understands appropriateness as a behavior, which fits into the context; or at least it is when “valued rules, norms, and expectancies of the relationship are not violated significantly”. Moreover, Liu (2012) writes that there are linguistic and cultural

differences, which distinguish intercultural competence from general communication competence. In this case, intercultural competence is context – specific behavior.

Dahl (2001: 175) explains that when people with different cultural backgrounds meet and communicate, general communicative competence might turn out to be insufficient. This opens space for more specific, more contextual type of competence, intercultural competence. He (Dahl 2001) explains the term as follows: *Med begrepet interkulturell kompetanse vil vi forstå evnen til å kommunisere hensiktsmessig og passende i en gitt situasjon i forhold til mennesker med andre kulturelle forutsetninger* (p. 175). This means an ability to communicate appropriately in a given situation towards other people with different cultural beliefs.

As reported by Liu (2012: 271), intercultural competence is bound to context. The same behavior can be perceived differently depending on the context. Contexts define what is appropriate in communication between individuals with different cultural backgrounds. This reveals the relational aspect of intercultural competence.

The above described gives a general understanding of what intercultural competence is. It is an ability to act appropriately in a given situation in relation to other people with different cultural backgrounds. In other words, it is an ability to see the communicative situation from a different angle and ability to anticipate reactions and responses, both verbal and non-verbal.

According to Chen (2009: 394), intercultural communication competence is the “key to cultivating the ability to tolerate and mutually respect cultural differences”. He points out that this type of competence contributes to the development of knowledge and creativity for a peaceful and productive society. He states that global mindset is the key element in the development of intercultural competence. By global mindset, he understands openness to other cultures in order to be able to interact interculturally.

Dahl (2001) writes that modern processes of globalization and development of multiethnic and multicultural society make it important to teach intercultural competence at school, higher education and different spheres of business, health care and economics. UNESCO (2013) writes about the necessity of obtaining new

competences in the era of globalization and strengthening contacts between nations: “...This becomes particularly evident in the globalization era where the ever-fast evolving cultural landscape is characterized by an intensified diversity of peoples, communities and individuals who live more and more closely. The increasing diversity of cultures, which is fluid, dynamic and transformative, implies specific competences and capacities for individuals and societies to learn, re-learn, and unlearn so as to meet personal fulfillment and social harmony. <...> When a culture is critically aware of its own strengths and limitations, it can extend its horizons and enrich its intellectual and spiritual resources by learning from alternative visions in epistemology, ethics, aesthetics, and worldview”.

According to Deardorff (2012: 47), developing intercultural competence is a lifelong process. She states that there is no one common point, when an individual suddenly becomes completely interculturally competent. Intercultural competence should be addressed, developed and acquired. She notes that intercultural competence does not happen in isolation. The context in which this competence is occurring is in focus. In this connection it is important to raise the issue of cultural awareness. A few preliminary remarks are however necessary. I would like to refer to Chen (2009: 394-5), who describes three dimensions of a broader notion of intercultural competence. These dimensions are intercultural sensitivity, intercultural awareness and intercultural effectiveness. He puts special emphasis on the intercultural effectiveness and treats it as a major dimension, which leads to full understanding of what intercultural competence is. According to him, intercultural competence requires “cognitive ability to map one’s own and another culture”. To understand another culture, one should realize oneself as a cultural being from own cultural perspective. Dahl (2001) explains that intercultural competence presupposes a complete disposing for others’ cultural norms and values, and altering completely to a different culture. On the contrary, it is rather clarifying your own assumptions and your own cultural background when it comes to the dialog between cultures. He (Dahl: 2001) writes that ability to see, hear and learn does not confront being yourself and finding your own position in relation to others.

Intercultural awareness opens for respect and integration of cultural differences. Chen (2009) comments that understanding of cultural differences contributes to dealing with

discomfort, confusion and anxiety. And due to the lack of these, it is easier to adopt to different situations and to deal with changing environment. By “intercultural sensitivity”, Chen (2009) understands an “ability to discover and expand personal characteristics”. Such characteristics include flexibility, sensitivity, open – mindedness and motivation.

Finally, Chen (2009) discusses intercultural effectiveness, which is a set of behavioral skills, required to negotiate multiple meanings. He writes that intercultural effectiveness “refers to a person’s ability to interact and adjust adroitly with other human beings and the environment”. Effectiveness depends mostly on personal sensitivity. It does not necessarily mean the right choice of communication behavior, which helps to accomplish specific goals (such as getting relevant information, predicting responses, selecting communication strategies, and correctly interpreting the results in culturally diverse context). It is rather the right quantity of sent communicative messages, the quality of message delivery, the topical relevancy and the manner of expression. In this sense, intercultural effectiveness is closely related to intercultural appropriateness. On the one hand, it is an ability to meet the contextual requirements in the process of intercultural communication. It is an ability to recognize and operate with different sets of behavioral rules. Moreover, Chen (2009) writes that intercultural effectiveness requires attention to both verbal and nonverbal expressions, so that they make sense to the participants within the context.

To summarize, intercultural competence is a life – long process, which has its own unique evolution. In the next section, I discuss the elements of intercultural competence and their hierarchical relations.

## 1.8 The model of intercultural competence

Darla K. Deardorff elaborated a model of intercultural competence as a part of her own research for her PhD thesis in 2004. Her main goal was to firstly define the concept and then to single out the elements of this type of competence. She (Deardorff 2012: 45)

claims that this is the first research-based framework of intercultural competence, which reflects the consensus of leading intercultural experts.

The primary goal of intercultural education is successful intercultural interactions. The key question in defining intercultural competence is *what it means to interact successfully with those from different cultures?* (Deardorff 2012: 45). The answer to this question lies in understanding of all the five elements of intercultural competence and the interplay between them. Further on, I present the model of intercultural competence and outline its elements.

## 1.9 Intercultural competence and its elements

As reported by Bertelsman Stiftung (2006: 6), “intercultural competence is neither a static state nor a direct result of one discrete learning experience”. Intercultural competence is not completely connected to language proficiency and explicit cultural knowledge. It is a multidimensional phenomenon which can be learned and developed. Intercultural competence is not acquired only by visiting a foreign country or through education. Culture is in constant development and it is required to have an ability to deal with ongoing processes. The development of intercultural competence encompasses several levels/ or dimensions. It is a dynamic process which involves going through different dimensions to develop and enrich the existing abilities (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2006).

**Figure 1 Intercultural competence learning spiral<sup>1</sup>**



There are four key dimensions of intercultural competence:

1. Attitudes
2. Intercultural knowledge and skills
3. Ability to reflect on intercultural issues as an internal outcome
4. Ability to interact constructively as an external outcome

The more dimensions are achieved and the more often they are passed through, the higher the degree of intercultural competence is. It can be argued that all four dimensions influence each other. Each dimension is a ground for the development of the next dimension. The correspondence between dimensions ensures an effective development. The learning spiral shows that intercultural competence requires lifelong learning and it is a part of “ongoing personal development” (Bertelsman Stiftung, 2006: 7).

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<sup>1</sup>

<http://site.valenciacollege.edu/inz/toolkits/Interdisciplinary/What%20is%20Culture/Resources/Intercultural%20competence%20-%20the%20key%20competence%20in%2021st%20century.pdf> (10.03.2015)

### 1.9.1 Attitudes

According to Deardorff (2012: 45), respect, openness, cultural curiosity and discovery should be considered as the underlying attitudes of intercultural competence. To be culturally open and curious means to move beyond one's comfort zone and to be open to new experiences. Respect for other cultures and people implies valuing others' beliefs, traditions and views. These attitudes are preliminary for intercultural competence and are required for the development of the next dimension which is knowledge and skills.

According to Bertelsmann Stiftung (2006: 8), attitudes, essential for intercultural competence are forwarded towards tolerance and valuing cultural diversity. One of the goals of intercultural competence is to form fundamentally positive attitudes towards other cultures and people. Another required attitude of intercultural competence is general openness for cultural diversity, its appreciation and an ability to interact and deal with people who have different cultural backgrounds in an open and curious manner without judgment. Openness and appreciation of cultural diversity can be promoted by focusing on cultural aspects and varieties. They (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2006: 8) argue that cultural constraints and lack of awareness can lead to uncertainties and misunderstandings which may result in conflict situations. The desired goal of intercultural competence is when any uncertainties arise, participants remain patient, understanding and open to unknown situations.

In a school setting children learn and develop intercultural competence on the level of attitudes. It is fulfilled both through education which focuses on cultural differences and similarities and through interactions with fellow – pupils who have different cultural backgrounds. Children learn from each other through playing, communication and common activities. Interculturally diverse setting plays an important role in learning and socialization and it is supposed to be generally beneficial when it comes to the development of positive attitudes. As it is described in Bertelsmann Stiftung's thesis (2006: 9): "only when learners are offered diverse opportunities for appropriate intercultural interaction – be it through a change in their learning environment, interaction with people who hold different values, travel abroad or other measures – it can result in intercultural competence".

### 1.9.2 Intercultural knowledge and skills

Intercultural knowledge and skills imply cultural awareness. Deardorff (2012: 46) notices that cultural awareness is the influence of one's culture on one's identity and worldview. On the other hand, there is culture-specific knowledge, which includes understanding others' worldviews. This element is essential because it is important to understand the world from different perspectives. According to Deardorff (2012: 46), the essential skills of intercultural competence are observation, listening, evaluating, analyzing, interpreting and relating.

This dimension of intercultural skills and knowledge implies thorough cultural knowledge, communication and conflict management skills, according to Bertelsmann Stiftung (2006: 8). They write that cultural knowledge and specific skills to communicate are required to have an efficient dialog in a culturally diverse setting. Interculturally competent behavior is directly dependent on full knowledge about one's own culture and the foreign culture. Thorough cultural knowledge means understanding of others' worldviews, understanding the role and impact of one's culture on one's behavior and communication, as well as sociolinguistic awareness of the relation between language and meaning. According to specialists, to the degree that comprehensive cultural knowledge cannot be definitely known, process-oriented skills grow in importance, skills that make it possible to acquire and process knowledge about one's own as well as foreign cultures. In order to enrich a cultural knowledge, one should listen, observe and interpret, as well as analyze, evaluate and relate cultural elements (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2006: 8).

### 1.9.3 Internal outcome: intercultural reflection

According to Deardorff (2012: 46), the interplay between attitudes, knowledge and skills leads to internal outcomes. They are flexibility, adaptability, ethnorelative perspective and empathy. These aspects occur for an individual as a result of acquired attitudes, knowledge and skills necessary for the development of intercultural competence. At this



point, “individuals are able to see from others’ perspectives and to respond to them according to the way the other person desires to be treated” (Deardorff 2012: 46). This outcome is reached to a different degree by different people.

According to Bertelsmann Stiftung (2006: 9), intercultural competence is an ability to interpret a situation from different perspectives and to expand one’s own understanding. An intercultural competent person should be able to acquire flexibility and to adapt to new intercultural situations which relate to different communication styles, lifestyles, norms and values. Bertelsmann Stiftung (2006: 9) write that one’s own cultural, religious and ethnocentric world view is not seen as absolute. It always requires reflection. This reflection leads to an interpretation of others’ communication styles, lifestyles, norms and values. If one is capable of reflecting on one’s own views and understandings, then new elements can be assimilated. This can also lessen a fear of the unknown can be as well reduced. “This is the prerequisite for developing empathy and for taking what is cognitively recognized as foreign behavior into one’s own behavioral repertoire” (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2006: 9). The theoretical discussion of Mead and Piaget also has led to a conclusion that we interpret all the social situations and assimilate new experiences and understandings which are stored as schemes and can later be used for interaction and adequate behavior in various situations. With every interaction an individual enriches the existing “repertoire” and accommodates new understandings and views.

#### 1.9.4 External outcomes: constructive interaction

Intercultural competence consists of both internal and external outcomes. According to Deardorff (2012: 46), external outcomes are embodied in behavior and communication, which become the visible outcomes of intercultural competence as experienced by others. Intercultural competence is therefore effective and appropriate behavior and communication in intercultural situations (Deardorff 2012: 46).

According to Bertelsmann Stiftung (2006: 7), external outcomes of intercultural competence are targeted towards other people and presuppose that one avoids violating

cultural rules and is able to achieve desired objectives. Intercultural competence leads to appropriate, effective and constructive communication between people with different cultural backgrounds. Communication is appropriate in a way that the major cultural rules are valued. An interaction is effective when participants are able to achieve their desired communicative objectives. An interaction is constructive when each of the participants has certain attitudes, knowledge, skills and cultural reflections on identity (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2006: 7).

### 1.10 Who is an interculturally competent person?

After I have studied the question of intercultural competence, I seek a clear conclusion. In this section I answer the question of what does it mean to be interculturally competent. First of all, I have found out that the subject of intercultural competence is discussed a lot nowadays. McDaniel, Samovar and Porter (2009: 7) discuss the importance of being interculturally competent in a modern and constantly changing world. They write: “as the global community continues to integrate, all of us, willingly or unwillingly, must learn to deal with a social order characterized by escalating levels of contact and communication with people of other cultures” (McDaniel, Samovar and Porter, 2009: 7). They manifest that people should become more culturally aware if they want to be effective intercultural communicators. This leads me to the thought that the subject of cultural diversity is existent and ongoing, and the question of intercultural competence is meaningful and relevant.

According to Simons and Krols (2011: 228), an interculturally competent person is “someone who looks multifocal at (social) reality, is able to build up relationships, is able to give culture a correct and (well-) balanced place, is able to manage intercultural conflicts, is able to cope with ambivalence and ambiguous situations, is able to be introspective, is able to get insight into one’s own frame of reference and that of others, is aware of his own experiences (story, contexts), is able to find creative strategies to cope with intercultural differences and takes time to engage in dialog (active listening)”. This is a very vast but accurate description of what it means to be an interculturally competent person. Intercultural communication always deals with culture. A well-

balanced understanding of culture should be one of the key characteristics of an interculturally competent person. Understanding both your own culture and other cultures and finding balance between them is a way to successful communication and crosscultural understanding. Managing intercultural conflicts is, probably, the most topical and desirable goal for many businesses which are involved in a world market. An interculturally competent person should be able to see and predict ambiguous situations. He/she should be able to possibly avoid situations based on cultural misunderstanding. This is closely connected to ability to see situations from different perspectives. An interculturally competent person is interested in a dialog, which involves both being a speaker and, mostly, being an active and attentive listener.

Deardorff (2006: 12-13) visually organizes the definition and elements of intercultural competence. There is a worked out set of seven definitions, which can be considered as traits, an interculturally competent person possesses:

1. Ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes,
2. Ability to shift frame of reference appropriately and adapt behavior to cultural context;
3. adaptability, expandability, and flexibility of one's frame of reference/ filter,
4. ability to identify behaviors guided by cultures and engage in new behaviors in other cultures even when behaviors are unfamiliar given a person's own socialization,
5. behaving appropriately and effectively in intercultural situations based on one's knowledge, skills and motivation,
6. ability to achieve one's goals to some degree through constructive interaction in an intercultural context,
7. good interpersonal skills exercised interculturally; the sending and receiving of messages that are accurate and appropriate,
8. transformational process toward enlightened global citizenship that involves intercultural adroitness (behavioral aspect focusing on communication skills), intercultural awareness (cognitive aspect of understanding cultural differences),

and intercultural sensitivity (focus on positive emotion towards cultural difference)

(Deardorff 2006: 12-13).

Hammer (1989: 251-2) writes there is a number of communication skills which are essential for the development of intercultural competence. These are self-disclosure, behavioral flexibility, descriptiveness, understanding, expressiveness, openness, listening, negotiation, social relaxation, interaction management, attentiveness, interaction involvement, and adaptability.

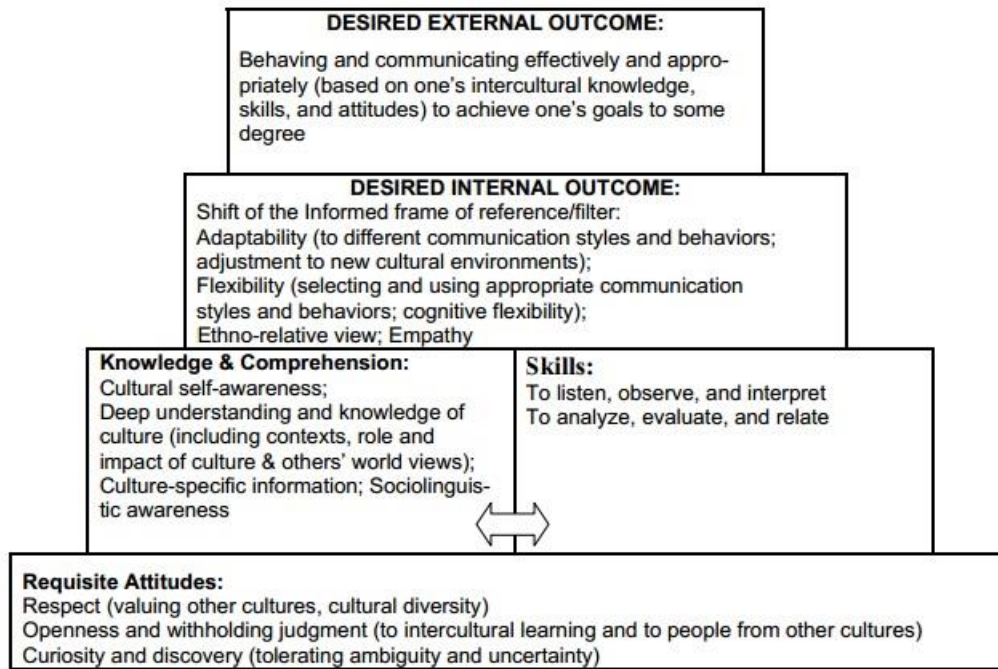
In order to be more specific, Deardorff (2006: 14) present a list of key characteristics and skills within intercultural competence. These are the following: understanding others' world views, cultural self-awareness, adjustment to new cultural environments, skills to listen and observe, openness to intercultural learning and to people from other cultures, ability to adapt varying communicational situations, flexibility, skills to interpret and relate, skills to tolerate, knowledge and understanding of culture, respect for other cultures, empathy, understanding the value of cultural diversity, cognitive flexibility, awareness of relation between language and meaning in social context, withholding judgement, curiosity and discovery, learning through interaction, culture – specific knowledge. The list of key characteristics of an interculturally competent person is long and various, because intercultural competence is a very complex process which is related to learning and interaction.

### 1.11 Brief summary

According to Deardorff (2012: 47), attitudes are the foundation of intercultural competence. Without openness, respect and curiosity, it is very difficult to pursue knowledge or skills that are essential to intercultural competence development. When we move on from basics of intercultural competence to more advanced levels, we learn that adding the necessary knowledge and skills may ensure that an individual can be

more effective and appropriate in his and her intercultural interactions. This will be more successful if flexibility, adaptability and empathy are added.

**Figure 2 Model of intercultural competence (Deardoff, 2004) <sup>2</sup>**



I do not argue that children can possibly become interculturally competent only by being exposed to different cultures at school. Though, being constantly present in a culturally diverse environment is a great prerequisite to efficient development for future intercultural competence. I conclude that cultural diversity at school helps to build a solid base for further development.

I have concluded that intercultural competence is an integrated component of a bigger and broader notion *communicative competence*. As a child obtains communicative competence through the social environment, the same supposition can be applied to intercultural competence. When children are placed into a multicultural setting, their social setting becomes culturally colored. And then from the very childhood they learn how to act in different situations through their culturally diverse social interaction.

<sup>2</sup>

<http://site.valenciacollege.edu/inz/toolkits/Interdisciplinary/What%20is%20Culture/Resources/Intercultural%20competence%20-%20the%20key%20competence%20in%2021st%20century.pdf> (10.03.2015)

Being interculturally competent is a way to reduce, or better to say – minimize, the social insecureness, which occurs when people with different cultural backgrounds start to interact. It is not easy to read the “messages” and “signals” sent by your respondent. But intercultural competence is a way to adjust to others. It is a way to find a common ground rather than feeling socially awkward.

### 1.12 Research on cultural diversity at school

The Guardian published an article, which is based on teachers’ experience from multicultural classrooms. It was written by Kerry Eustice, editor in The Guardian Teaching Network. This article is based on teachers’ discussions of what intercultural competence is and how it is possible to develop it.

The subject leader in BPE (beliefs, philosophy and ethics) names integration and language as one of the main challenges. In their school, they do a great job to help children to integrate quickly. This work includes both having translators and teachers who are especially interested in EAL (English as a Second Language), pupils who help translating and conducting outside school hours time for families to help to understand how the education system works. She says that it is a challenge to organize such activities, but it also can be enriching for other students. They can learn about other cultures and people (Eustice 2012).

Jess Hamer, a science teacher, underlines positive features of having cultural diversity at school. She says that is an opportunity to bring different backgrounds and experiences to the classroom. In their school they celebrate many festivals from around the world. She has an impression that it creates a feeling of understanding between students. According to her, “prejudices that exist in the adult world are virtually non-existent in the classroom” (Eustice 2012).

Christopher Waugh, an English teacher from New Zealand, values the range of nationalities in the classroom. According to him, different cultural perspectives provide

a dynamic and vivid forum for debate, which contributes to the need of mutual respect. He finds that offering opportunities for students to communicate with each other about their culture, origins and backgrounds should be part of a learning program. It is an effective method of demonstrating respect for cultural diversity (Eustice 2012).

An experienced primary school teacher Mark Huges says that their school puts special emphasis on cultural diversity. They launch different projects, such as language of the month, Diwali<sup>3</sup> Christmas concert. They also look for opportunities in lessons to promote different cultures. He is sure that different nationalities within one classroom contribute to efficient discussions based on tolerance and respect. They also follow global curriculum project where they learn about how to be a good citizen of the world. They are discussing topics from all over the world: wars, child labour, respect, tolerance, historical influence on cultures and so on. He suggests that we need to be open about how little we know; we should be curious, learn more about countries and cultures and, most importantly, show interest in them (Eustice 2012).

Simons and Krols (2011: 222-233) made a research on the subject of intercultural competence and even tried to measure it. Their research was as well based on interviewing elementary school teachers. They have come to the conclusion that teachers have many associations with the notion “intercultural competence”. However, these associations mostly present very literal interpretations rather than a broad understanding of the phenomena. Most teachers agreed on that it was essential to pay attention to the development of intercultural competence. Two thirds of them were actually trying to include this in their teaching. Yet, 6 out of 10 teachers were facing difficulties and needed support. According to them, the possible way out is to introduce worked-out material and concrete teaching tips, as well as having in-depth support regarding content and teaching methodologies. Overall, respondents showed a positive attitude towards cultural diversity in their classrooms. They considered them to be valuable in terms of teaching to learn from each other, stimulating openness and respect. Cultural diversity at school challenges teachers as well: they need a bigger variety of skills and attitudes.

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<sup>3</sup> Hindu festival

The previous research on the subject of cultural diversity in a classroom turns out to be very positive. A few of the respondents named any challenges. They mostly focused on all the positive features of cultural diversity and its resourcefulness.

Later in Chapter 4 I will compare the result of a previous research to the results I have got during my own research. I will point out the similarities and possible differences between them.



## 2. Method and design

### 2.1 Project description

I have chosen to use depth interviews with three respondents to collect the empirical data. Two of the respondents are teachers, one of them is an after school club councillor (SFO leder). I also planned to make some observations at after school club, but it did not work out. The project entails participation in a conversation, which lasts approximately 30 to 40 minutes. I did not collect any additional information about my participants from any other sources. The data I collected did not include personal information.

The main goal of my research project is to understand the essence of intercultural communication. As a part of this, I carried out some interviews with teachers and a after school club councillor (SFO leder) who have experience working in culturally diverse classrooms. I am interested in their own attitudes towards cultural diversity at school: whether they see it as a resource or a challenge. I want also to know about their experience working in culturally diverse classrooms: how children communicate, if there are any differences from culturally homogeneous groups, what children learn from each other.

My questions mostly covered experience from working in culturally diverse classrooms:

- do you think that cultural diversity in a classroom influences Norwegian children positively?
- how do Norwegian children experience different cultures, are they curious/ interested/ engaged?
- do Norwegian children learn something new from their fellow pupils who have a different cultural background?
- how can you describe relations between children, is it difficult for them to be in contact with each other (when it comes to language, for example)?
- can you name some disadvantages of having cultural diversity in a classroom?
- is cultural diversity benefitted from in a classroom (for example, at geography or language classes)?

Before performing the interviews, I tried to prepare for this procedure in the best possible way. I have made a list of questions and issues which were important to be asked and discussed, I also pointed out the key words. I wanted to make my interview guidelines very clear and logical. I kept in mind that my main goal was to get as much proper data as possible, so the interviews were supposed to be engaging and the interview questions should be easy to understand. I tried to think of the possible follow-up questions and tried to predict at what point to ask them so that it would feel natural. Before starting with actual interviews, I tried my interview guidelines on one of my fellow-students to see how it worked. When I came to actual interviews, I had some notes with me, but overall I was very clear of what I was going to ask and talk about.

Even though I thought that I was well prepared for the interviews and managed to point out the most essential aspects for future processing of data, the interviews opened new horizons in my understanding of the research question. During the interviews, I added new categories and questions, which I had never thought of before.

These were my first proper research interviews. They were therefore influenced by the lack of experience. Since they had been planned on beforehand, I followed the interview guide which I have prepared in advance.

I spent approximately 30-40 minutes on each respondent. The interviews were recorded with the help of a digital recorder. I was making some notes during the conversations. I did not completely manage to get answers to all the planned questions from each respondent. Either it did not really fit or it did not feel natural to ask. The drawbacks of the interviews are discussed in chapter 6 “Critical evaluation of the study”.

At the end of the research project, I transcribed the interviews and moved on to classification and analysis.

## 2.2 Research strategy

The interviews are based on qualitative research method. According to Thagaard (2011: 17), qualitative research is going into depth with an emphasis on meaning. Its methods are focused on processes which are interpreted in the light of the context in which they take their place. Qualitative research gives a lot of information about few units and is directed to qualities, properties or characteristics of social phenomena which is studied.).

Research questions in qualitative research are targeted at analytical descriptions. The aim is to develop an analytical – based understanding of social phenomena. Based on the analysis, we argue that the understanding of social phenomena developed within a project has transferability to similar situations. When it comes to methodology, qualitative research is characterized by flexibility, that the program (opplegg) can be changed during the research process and thereby customizes to new experiences and new challenges along the way. Qualitative research has a flexible design and is dependent on close contact with sources which give possibilities for relevant interpretations (Thagaard 2011: 18).

Qualitative researchers rely wholly on in-depth interviewing. Kvale and Brinkmann describe qualitative interviews as a “construction site of knowledge, where two or more individuals discuss a theme of mutual interest” (Kvale, Brinkmann 2009: 2, in Marshall, Rossman 2011: 142).

Maxwell (2013) writes that the data in a qualitative study can include virtually anything that you see, hear, or that is otherwise communicated to you while conducting the study: “it is not only what is being told, how it is being told and the conditions of its being told, but also all the data surrounding what is being told” (Maxwell 2013: 87). A researcher should be sensitive to and analytical about the situation. Interview as a qualitative research method is a constant interplay between a researcher and an informant. That opens a possibility to deepen the context. When a situation allows and a researcher has a possibility for more informal means of communication with informants (for example, casual conversations and incidental observations), this sort of data should be recorded

in memos and then be treated critically (Maxwell 2013: 88). While conducting the interviews, I was making notes/ memos right after the interview. It concerned behavior, traits of character and my general impression of each respondent.

The method of interview that I chose can be defined as semi-structured or as an interview with a flexible structure. In methodological literature I came across both notions, but I personally prefer the second one as such types of interview are actually fully structured but give space or freedom for filling with new information, questions and topics in the flow of an interview. The issues for my research were outlined and grouped in advance. I knew exactly what I was going to ask about and what kind of data I required (as Maxwell (2013: 89) writes: “prestructuring your methods reduces the amount of data that you have to deal with, simplifying the analytic work required”). But at the same time I let the structure be more or less flexible in order to adjust the order of questions, or ability to come up with more questions if required. Since I was not acquainted with my informants from before, it was difficult to predict the flow of the interviews. Maxwell (2013: 89) writes that “emergent insights may require not only new research questions, but also new participant selection decision, unexpected relationships, different kinds of data, and different analytic strategies”. Maxwell (2013: 88) also adds that structured approaches can help ensure the connection of data between individuals, times and settings, and are particularly useful in answering questions which are related to differences between people or settings. While less structured approaches allow one to focus on the particular phenomena being studied, which may differ between individuals or settings.

The type of research I am doing follows a phenomenological approach. It seeks to explore, describe and analyze the meaning of individuals' experience: how individuals perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others. This approach presupposes interviews with individuals who have experienced the phenomenon of interest. Analysis proceeds from the central assumption that there is an essence to an experience that is shared with others who have also had that experience. The experiences of those participating in the study (those who have had a similar experience) are analyzed as unique expressions and then compared to identify for essence (Marshall, Rossman 2011: 19).

### 2.3 Sampling

I have chosen an elementary school in Tromsø where there are classes with children who have different cultural backgrounds and who study together. An elementary school is for children aged 6 - 13.

I have planned to conduct interviews with two teachers from different grades and one after school club counselor (SFO leder). This was done in order to approach the research questions from different angles and see if there is any difference between the situations when it comes to age and social setting. In a classroom children are fellow pupils, at the after school club children acquire different social roles. They become friends. My intention was to find out if that what they learn in a class somehow influences their social behavior after school.

### 2.4 Selection of respondents

The research was focused on interviewing two elementary school teachers from different grades and an after school club counselor (SFO leder). I was interested in learning about their experience from working with classes where children with diverse cultural backgrounds study and spend time together. Interviewing experienced teachers gave me a wider range of facts and diverse information, since they could follow children's development through their teaching experience.

The chosen respondents have a lot of experience working with children with various cultural backgrounds.

### 2.5 Field notes and digital recording

The data was collected with a help of a digital recorder and notes. The priority was given to a recorder, and notes were written down only after the interviews have been carried out.

Thagaard (2011) writes: «notater underveis bidrar til å redusere den personlige kontakt som intervjuet gir muligheter til. Forskere kan ikke observere informantens reaksjoner og lese de kroppslige signalene på samme måte som under opptakk av intervjusamtalen» (p.102). Recording the interviews definitely contributed to the natural flow of the conversations, since both me and some of the respondents were visibly nervous at the beginning. Therefore I took notes immediately after the interviews. The notes regarded my personal impressions, non-verbal behavior and other observations made during the interview. The notes are discussed in the next part. The gathered data was later transcribed, grouped and interpreted in chapter 4 (Results).

## 2.6 Transcribing the interviews

Since all the data was collected with the help of a sound recorder, I had to transcribe it first to have a better overview for further analysis. This was the part when I transferred the conversation into a written text. The interviews were mostly clear and distinct. In spite of dialectal peculiarities, it was quite easy to understand what was said. I was very precise when transcribing so that to preserve the narration's expressivity and to keep the emotions. However, I had to adjust structures and a word/ sentence order. As Kvale (1997: 105) observes, when the material is structured in the form of a text, it is easier to have an overview. In fact, structuring is the beginning of the analysis. Therefore, I put logical accents and framed the most essential information. I tried to mark out a pattern in answers, typical of all the respondents and to find similarities in the answers. This contributed to further categorization.

The names were replaced with "Respondent 1/ 2/ 3" for ethical reasons. The transcribed interviews are not published and are kept separately from all the other materials for the purpose of confidentiality.

## 2.7 Data analyses

Maxwell (2013: 107) writes that coding is the most common categorizing strategy in qualitative research. The goal of coding is not to count the data, but to split into smaller meaningful parts. These parts are further organized into groups or categories. As a result, these groups and categories can be compared and analyzed. Maxwell (2013) adds that categorizing involves first of all with sorting out the most meaningful information. Knowing what information can be considered as meaningful and valuable for a research can be based on a researcher's own ideas of what is significant for the study, or on the attempt to get new insights. This is also called for *open coding*. It involves reading the data and developing new categories. These categories can be based on the information which is considered the most important and valuable by a researcher (Maxwell 2013: 107). There is a set of categorical distinctions when it comes to data analysis.

Organizational categories are general and extensive topics which a researcher is planning to investigate in the course of a research. Such categories are usually worked out before a research, let it be interviews or observation. Such categories mostly serve as the first level of organizing the data in order to get the overview and basically function as "bins" for sorting the data for further analysis (Maxwell 2013: 107).

Substantive categories are descriptive and include participants' thoughts and ideas. Such categories can be fully based on the participants' own words and concepts, or they can evolve from a researcher's understanding and interpretation of the situation. Such categories serve to develop a more detailed understanding of the research questions, but they are not based on any theory (Maxwell 2013: 108).

Theoretical categories locate the categorized data into a more general or abstract framework. These categories may either be derived from a prior theory or from an inductively developed theory, in which the concepts and the theory are developed all at once. Theoretical categories represent a researcher's perceptions, rather than participants' ones (Maxwell 2013: 108).

I begin to analyze the collected data by making organizational categories which merge into substantive categories. As a result, the data will be placed into theoretical framework which was chosen for the study.

## 2.8 Research ethics

Processing the gathered data from interviews requires a special focus on ethical issues. Respondent's identity is not supposed to be possible discovered. There are two types of data, which can be connected to respondent's identification. According to Thagaard (2011: 25), personal information is the information which can be directly or indirectly connected to an individual. An individual will be directly identified via name, social security number (personnummer) or other unique personal characteristics. Another type of data – indirect personal information. This is the information which is registered with reference number and refers to a separate list with, for example, name or social security number. My project did not require collecting personal information either about the respondents or about the pupils. I was merely interested in respondents' experience which they have got in a culturally diverse classroom.

During the interviews I faced an ethical challenge connected to the use of language. I did not know how to call children who had different cultural backgrounds so that it would sound neutral and ethically correct. I tried to avoid such expressions as, for example, "immigrant", "multicultural child", "child with immigrant background". Thus, I have chosen to use "children with a different cultural background", which is long and difficult to pronounce, but which sounds neutral at the same time.

Thagaard (2011: 26) writes that the basic principle in any research project is that participants should be informed about the project and approve of taking part in it. NESH (2006: 13) defines this principle: *"som hovedregel skal forskningsprosjekter som inkluderer personer, settes i gang bare etter deltakernes informerte og frie samtykke. Informantene har til enhver tid rett til å avbryte sin deltakelse, uten at dette får negative konsekvenser for dem»*. This means that participation in a research project always must



be informed and voluntary. Thagaard (2011: 26) highlights that this principle is based on the respect for individual's sovereignty of one's own life, as well as that individual has control over the information about him- or herself which is shared with others.

Voluntary participation means that individual agrees to participate without any pressure. Informed participation means that respondents are aware of the project's goals and the kind of information it requires. Before we started with interviews, my respondents received full information describing the project and the possible topics we were going to discuss. They were informed as well about their right reject participation in the project and to withdraw their participation at any point without giving any reasons for that.

Another general and important ethical principle in any research is that participants should not be afflicted (Thagaard, 2011: 214) by taking part in the research project. It is important that the interpretations which a researcher presents, make participants feel understood.

The project was reported to NSD (Norwegian Social Science Data Services) by Hilde Sollid as a part of her own research project *Språklig mangfold i klasserommet* and was permitted to be conducted. The participants have signed participation approval. All the collected data, both audio files and transcribed interviews, were kept on a personal computer with a password. I did not make any confidential lists with personal information, such as name, email address and phone number.



### **3. Discussions**

#### **3.1 Description of the school. First impression**

My study is based on interviews, however, I made some observations which can be analyzed and contribute to a general understanding of the research question.

Observation is in general a significant part in any qualitative research. I will describe my own observations because they are significant for the study. I believe that a teacher contributes a lot to the way children communicate with each other and the way they treat each other. Any teacher is a role model for children. That makes me think that an open-minded, active and creative teacher can gain success in teaching children being interculturally competent. I argue also that school environment influences children to a much greater extent than one might think. School is a place where children spend a lot of their time. It is as well a place where they develop both intellectually and socially. If school promotes and encourages trust, understanding, compassion and respect, children are likely to develop these features themselves. The aim of this part is to present my own description of the school, as well as my own short observations and impressions.

I drew my first impression from meeting children at after school club. They were friendly, welcoming and polite. They were curious about me since I was new to them. They greeted me and studied me while I was talking to their teacher. When I looked around, I noticed that the general atmosphere at the after school club was very peaceful. The boys were busy playing Lego, and the girls were sitting on the sofa, chatting and giggling. Every single child was included in a group activity.

The after school club counselor (SFO leder) informed me that there was a girl who had just started at that school and did not speak Norwegian fluently. Two Norwegian girls were very eager to tell me how they helped her with home tasks and that they taught her new words constantly. They sounded very excited and proud of that they could help the new girl.

The whole setting of the school can be characterized as culturally diverse. There are flags from different countries, drawings of children in national costumes. What drew my

special attention was a big painting on a wall: a globe and children in different national costumes standing around it holding hands. This produced an impression of unity; I felt that children are taught that the world is big, but all the people are close to each other.

I noticed that there were different flags at the classroom's doors. I was later explained that they represented the countries, where children came from. This makes me think that every child and every culture are treated with respect at this school. And this is what I will learn later from the interviews, that children are taught to respect each other. Respect and interest for values and peculiarities of other cultures are the basic attitudes which are important for the development of intercultural competence.

My general impression of the school is that it was a welcoming place. A place where one would like to come back. It did not look boring, on the contrary, it was very colorful and simple in a positive way. A great part of my impression was drawn from the interviews and conversations with the teachers.

### 3.2 Who are the teachers?

The contact a researcher establishes with respondents is valuable for the research itself. It can directly influence the flow of the interview on the one hand, and the data on the other hand. Thagaard (2011: 103) notes: «den personlige kontakten som som utvikles i intervju situasjonen, er i seg selv et metodisk poeng. Den tillitten og troverdighet oppnås under intervjuet, gir grunnlag for at informanten kan fortelle åpent om sine erfaringer». This means that the personal contact during the interview is valuable in itself. The confidence is obtained in the course of an interview contributes to the open atmosphere when respondents speak freely about their experiences.

It was very easy to establish contact with my respondents; all three of them were very open and responsive. They were very eager to share their experiences. Before meeting the respondents, I sent them emails regarding the project and the time of the meeting. All of them answered my emails straightaway and were very flexible when it came to arranging a meeting.

Before meeting the respondents, I sent them a brief explanation about the research issues and clarified what I wanted to talk about. I had to explain some notions as well, since such terms as “intercultural competence” are unlikely to be used in everyday school life. The respondents were aware of what we were going to speak about and took the research seriously.

The respondents showed great commitment to their occupation. It was obvious that they enjoyed what they were doing. They in fact were very inspirational to me. I can describe all three of them as open – minded, creative and resourceful.

The first respondent, teacher of the beginner grades, was very calm and attentive. He did not express himself much non – verbally, made long pauses to formulate the answers and was listening carefully to the questions.

The second respondent was very narrative and sometimes it was difficult to catch his attention and direct him into the subject. He was very eager to speak about the school and the children.

The third respondent was the most emotional and engaged. Her non – verbal language was very pronounced, she was giggling, smiling, gesticulating and used a lot of mimicry. When she was describing a sad situation, which happened to one of the parents, but though ended up positively, she was beaming with smile and it was obvious that she took her job very personally.



## 4. Results

### 4.1 Data classification

In order to make a clear presentation of the collected data, I organized it into meaningful groups. The aim of this grouping is to present the sorted information and to interpret it.

#### 4.2.1 Cultures presented at school and language proficiency

I start with a general presentation of cultural diversity at the school. I asked respondents what cultures were presented at the school and whether children with different cultural backgrounds spoke the national language. Language proficiency is important when it comes to communication between children. I was interested to know how children managed language difficulties.

When it comes to cultural diversity, there are children with various cultural backgrounds in the school. The school has always had a culturally diverse setting, according to one of the respondents. Some of the children with a different cultural background were born in Norway, but their parents come from other countries. Some of them immigrated to Norway with their families and lived in an asylum. Some of the children have only one parent, who is not Norwegian. The countries of origin vary a lot: there are children from Eastern Europe, Middle East and Africa.

When it comes to language proficiency, one respondent states that all the children in his class speak fluent Norwegian (“snakker som en Tromsøværing”); at least good enough to follow the conversation in the classroom, as he clarifies. The second respondent says that not all of the children are good at Norwegian. Some of them do not speak fluently and it can result in using wrong words or not knowing what words to use at all. The third respondent says that sometimes children come to after school club (SFO) and cannot say a single word in Norwegian.

#### 4.2.2 Communication between children with lacking language proficiency

I made a separate group for language proficiency because it is important to know how children manage challenging communicative situations. The examples of how children communicate when they do not speak the same language, will be later analyzed in the light of Piaget's theory.

When I asked the respondents, how children manage to communicate when they do not speak the same language, I was curious to know what Norwegian children would do when there was a challenging language situation. I have experienced that a grown-up person would rather avoid talking at all, rather than trying to manage the situation somehow. It looks like it is completely different when it comes to children. According to the respondents, Norwegian children show big interest and engagement when it comes to the situations when not all of the children speak the same language. I have an impression from the interviews which is based on respondents' answers, that Norwegian children try to take care of their fellow pupils who have different cultural backgrounds. They consider lacking language skills with understanding. It looks like it is natural for children to find a "common" language.

One of the respondents describes a situation when a child with a different cultural background does not know some words and has difficulties communicating, however the child can speak some Norwegian. The respondent notices that in such situations Norwegian children try to teach their fellow pupils new words and help to express themselves. They do it with the help of gestures, movements and simple words. This respondent has a lot of experience working with children. She says that it is natural for children to do that when they are small. The respondent notices that children helped the new girl both during the breaks and during the classes, when, for example, children were working in groups. They helped by explaining the tasks in simple words, by showing with gestures and by drawings.

The third respondent (after school club counselor (SFO leder) mentions the situation when a child with a different cultural background does not speak Norwegian at all. The



respondent is impressed by how well children manage language difficulties. He says that when a new child comes to after school club (SFO) and if this child does not speak the language, others would try to talk using gestures and simple words. He makes the following example: when a new girl came to the class, another girl came up to her and said “Jeg – Runa. Du?” She named her name and pointed at herself. Then, requesting the other girl’s name, she pointed at her. Later, when they were playing together, the Norwegian girl pointed at objects around her and called them by name. This way she tried to help the new girl to learn new words and to adapt to a new environment, as well as to get used to things around her.

#### 4.2.3 Relations between children

This category includes several questions, which were asked during the interviews. I wanted to know if Norwegian children reflected over cultural differences at all and if this could affect their relations with other children who had different cultural backgrounds. As I have mentioned earlier in chapter 3 (*Discussions*), I got an impression that the children were friendly with each other and were a close-knit group. I was also curious about the teachers’ experience.

One of the respondents answered that children were usually visiting each other. They invite each other on birthday parties regardless of their cultural backgrounds. The respondent adds as well that there are several girls with a different cultural background in the class. They are still skeptical to others and try to stick to people from their own culture. Despite that, when they play outside, Norwegian girls try to get them involved in what they are doing and to play together.

The respondent also tells me a story about a colored boy from her class. Somebody from another class called him for a “chocolate cake”. The boy became very upset and frustrated. He ran to another room to calm down, and when he came back to talk, he was surprised. His fellow pupils started to defend him in front of the other class. They said that he was their friend and it was not allowed to call him for a “chocolate cake” or anything else offensive.

The first respondent said that he did not notice that Norwegian children discriminated between cultures and reflected that children with other cultural backgrounds are somehow different. All the children with a different cultural background, according to him, are integrated to the group. He adds that children with a different cultural background are not less “popular” than others. He says: “though there are different skin colors in the class, one is as popular as the others”.

The third respondent mentioned that children who practiced Islam, prayed at school. They can easily start praying right in the hallway. This drew my attention and I wanted to know how Norwegian children would react to praying at school (which is unusual for Norwegian culture). The respondent answered that most of the Norwegian children would just pass by without paying any special attention to that. He explains that most of the children are “international” (as he called them): “they watch TV or get information from their parents”.

#### 4.2.4 Cultural engagement and curiosity

Since Norwegian children are constantly in a direct contact with other children who have different cultural backgrounds, they have an opportunity to learn more about other cultures. I was interested to know if Norwegian children are interested in learning something new and if they are curious about other cultures.

One of the respondents believes that the children do not really think much about other cultures. According to her, children do not realize that they are anyhow different. Since answer came from a teacher, it made me think that probably children did not show their curiosity in class. So I was interested to get to know what the after school club counselor (SFO leder) would say.

According to the after school club counselor (SFO leder), children are getting more curious about other cultures when they get older. They think and ponder a lot. They are

also good at asking if they wonder about something they do not know. He adds that curiosity depends on a person.

Sometimes children get a task to bring food to school which is typical for their country of origin. They tell others about the way the food is prepared, what ingredients are used; and others are allowed to taste. According to the respondent, Norwegian children are very curious and interested in that. The respondent said that children ask, for example, when is it typical to eat this dish (if it is an everyday dish or if it is related to a holiday). They discuss their own food preferences and discuss the dish in general.

The last respondent is absolutely sure that children are curious about other cultures. They used to speak about other cultures in the classroom. She has an impression that Norwegian children are interested in listening and learning about cultures and traditions.

From the answers I have collected, I can make a conclusion that children are curious about other cultures and they want to learn about the way other people live, as well as learn about different traditions. It is obvious that teachers attempt to arouse cultural interest in children. Cultural curiosity and knowledge are the elements of intercultural competence. This question will be later discussed in connection to the theoretical viewpoint.

#### 4.2.5 Learning from children with different cultural background

I wanted to know if Norwegian children learn something from their fellow pupils who have different cultural backgrounds. My major focus was on after school activities, when children can communicate freely and interaction between them is natural.

The answer of the first respondent considered learning in a classroom. The respondent says that learning from children who have a different cultural background is difficult when they themselves do not know much about their own culture. If, for example, they lived in an asylum or have experienced a war and violence, then their cultural

knowledge is very limited. Moreover, teachers try to be very careful when discussing children's backgrounds, so that not to hurt the child, if the past experience had been traumatic.

The third respondent, on the contrary, states that a culturally diverse environment is a huge learning resource. When it comes to language, children learn to say "hello", "I am a girl/boy" in different languages. When it comes to culture and traditions, children can also learn a lot. For example, when they read about Allah in textbook, Muslim children would explain how they speak about Allah in their culture, how they portray Allah, how they write the name, etc.

During the School's Open Day parents who have different cultural backgrounds, cook food, typical of their country of origin. For example, they bake cakes and explain what they are made of and what makes it special to their country. Other children are allowed to taste the food and express their opinion.

Further on, this respondent tells me about "Glød" (Glow): a performance about children made by children. Children from different schools gather together to make a performance on their own. Adults can help them when it comes to organization, but the ideas belong completely to children. There they learn to sing in different languages, they dance, they draw pictures. And when the performance is ready, they present it to their parents. The respondent underlines that during this cooperation, children learn that there are different ways of doing things, which are specific to different cultures. And yet, they figure out that they have much in common. Though they were singing "Fadder Jacob" in different languages, it still sounded familiar, since the melody is so alike. They have also learned that the games they were playing were not that different either. During this project, children learn to see similarities as well as they learn about different countries and cultures.

#### 4.2.6 Using children's background in teaching

Cultural diversity at school can be a great source and assistance in teaching. I was interested to discover if children's backgrounds are relevant in the classroom.

The after school club counselor (SFO leder) approaches this question critically. He says that they discuss children's countries of origin from time to time at after school club. However, they do not really have any special focus on that. He believes that children's cultural background can be relevant at geography or language lessons. However, according to the respondent, for after school club (SFO) this issue is not relevant.

The first respondent says that sometimes they ask children to tell something about their countries of origin. They occasionally watch a movie from one of the countries; sometimes they look at the map and speak about the countries other children in the class come from. They use internet resources as well. However, the respondent adds that they could have been better at teaching about other countries and cultures.

The last respondent says that sometimes in the classroom they speak about difficulties related to moving to another country and learning a new language. The respondent explains to children that sometimes words can be used wrongly and this can sound very funny, but that it only shows how difficult it is to learn new language. This respondent is very impressed by how much children can learn from each other.

It looks like children's cultural backgrounds are relevant in teaching to a bigger or smaller extent. Children do not only acquire culture – specific knowledge, they learn to understand different cultures and people. As one of the respondents states, children learn to see the challenges which immigrant children inevitably face. And they learn to be sympathetic about that.

#### 4.2.7 Experience from classes with cultural diversity

This was the most informatively poor question. Most of the respondents were focused on practical matters connected to language with the focus on children who have a different cultural background. One of the respondents, though, answered that the only way to balance cultural diversity is to have all the children together no matter cultural background. Even though they are different, they go very well together.

If I wished to get more information about teacher's general experience from culturally diverse classrooms, I should have been more specific. I did not get the desired information, because I confused my respondents and did not set a clear direction for this discussion.

#### 4.2.8 How Norwegian children are impacted by cultural diversity

When answering this question, one of the respondents makes emphasis on the School's Open Day. It is mentioned by one of the respondents, that this is a very exciting event for children. They usually march with different flags and the whole action is very colourful and joyful. The respondent is sure that children are *proud* of the school's cultural diversity.

The last respondent says that there is obviously a positive influence. According to the respondent, when children grow up, they will experience that they have knowledge about other countries and cultures, and about how they can live in other countries. They also learn that they can be friends nevertheless. When children get to know each other, they find out that they are not that different as one might think. "A friend is a friend". The respondent adds that the most important thing that they learn is to be nice to each other.

During the interviews I came to conclusion that children are used to cultural diversity. When children, for example, see Muslim children praying in the hallway, they do not

really make much fuss about that. They treat the diversity with understanding and they are very relaxed about that.

#### 4.2.9 Cultural diversity at school: challenge or a resource?

I argue that cultural diversity is a resource. But is it really a resource rather than a challenge?

One of the respondents says that cultural diversity at school is a positive thing so long it has functioned at their school. According to the respondent, it “functions” when all the cultures are appreciated and respected, when children feel secure and valued despite of their cultural backgrounds, when there is no sign of discrimination or bullying.

The second respondent shares the same opinion: so long it functions well, and so long children are taken care of, cultural diversity is a resource.

The third respondent thinks in practical terms. Sometimes it can be a challenge, because some of the children need extra help and attention. This can involve explaining the same tasks differently, spending extra time on explaining unknown words, helping with organizing the whole learning process. In such cases, being the only teacher is not enough. This respondent does not give a direct answer to the question, mostly focusing on the challenges of children who have different cultural backgrounds. She names such challenges as learning the language, assimilating in the culture and society, building relations with other children.

The first two respondents seem to focus on the potential of cultural diversity for kids’ future. The last one focuses on the current challenges for teachers.

#### 4.2.10 Challenges of cultural diversity at school

Though the research shows that cultural diversity at school is a positive phenomenon in general which functions well at this school, there are always hardships and challenges. I was interested in what negative sides of cultural diversity the respondents have noticed during their experience of teaching in culturally diverse classrooms.

One of the respondents says that there can be challenges related to language proficiency. When a child does not speak Norwegian good enough to follow the conversations in the classroom, a teacher should pay extra attention to this child. This can decrease the attention to be given to the rest of the class. The respondent is mostly worried about the children, who do not get proper knowledge because of language difficulties.

There can also be a challenge when children are strongly influenced by cultural regulations. An example of such regulations is when a girl is not allowed to sit with a boy, or when a girl is not allowed to take swimming classes together with boys. This makes it difficult for a teacher to manage the situation in the classroom. This also arises confusion among other children.

One of the respondents names the challenges which are directly related to children with a different cultural background: acculturation, adaptation and learning the language.

There is a challenge connected to cultural diversity which I can name from my own experience. When people belong to different cultures and do not speak the same language, it can lead to misunderstandings. There can appear negative associations and attitudes. It is very important that people are eager to understand each other and are tolerant and patient.



## 4.2 Comparing the results

The aim of this section is to compare the results of the earlier research discussed in chapter 1 “Theoretical statement”, and the results of my own research.

Surprisingly, I found many similarities in data. The results look strikingly similar. The earlier research shows that teachers think that cultural diversity at school is beneficial. My respondents, as well, look at it as a resource, rather than something negative. My respondents also think that it is significant to involve cultural aspects into teaching. Moreover, they also practice it in class and implement children’s cultural backgrounds in teaching. My respondents agree as well on that cultural diversity at school teaches children to learn from each other and to respect each other. It has been mentioned earlier in the discussion of earlier research, communicating with each other about their culture, origins and background is a method of demonstrating respect for cultural diversity. One of the respondents observes that this should be integrated into a learning program. According to my respondents, speaking about cultures is part of the teaching process in the school where I conducted my research. All three of my respondents mention that they use children’s backgrounds actively in class.

One of the respondents from the earlier research mentions festivals when he speaks about cultural diversity as an opportunity to bring experiences to the classroom. And the same idea I got from my respondents. Not only that my respondents think that social gatherings are a great opportunity to introduce cultural diversity, they also say that this has become a usual practice at the school. It has been described earlier, that the school where I conducted the research takes active part in May, 17 celebration, when children are walking with flags, representing different countries.

My respondents, as well as the respondents from the earlier research, name language and integration as one of the main challenges. It is not directly connected to the subject of my study, but it still should be mentioned as it has been named by all the respondents. Language might be a big barrier when it comes to communication between children. But my research shows that children manage this challenge easily, since finding a common language is natural for children.

I can assume that teachers come across the same problems when it comes to the methodological support. But then, one of my respondents mentioned that he had discussed intercultural competence before during one of the teaching courses. Therefore, it is very difficult to measure and compare the amount of support and learning teachers actually get.

To conclude, teachers commonly look at cultural diversity at school as an opportunity to bring new experiences and ideas to the class and to enrich the learning process with something new and different. There can occur challenges related to organizing the process of integrating cultures into the teaching routines, but when it is done, it will contribute greatly. All the respondents agree that it is essential to teach children to respect other cultures and to learn from each other.

#### 4.3 Child's development in a culturally diverse environment

Earlier I have written that I absolutely do not claim that an intercultural competence can be completely developed at an elementary school in any context. Moreover, I have concluded that developing intercultural competence is a life-long process, which involves different stages. However, I have found out that it is actually possible to develop positive attitudes, as well as start developing intercultural competence at school in a culturally diverse environment. Such an environment has shown itself to be an effective predisposition for successful development of intercultural competence.

My goals are:

1. to find the indicators of intercultural competence,
2. to trace the indicators of intercultural competence on different levels (focus on the model of intercultural competence, discussed in chapter 1 (Theoretical statement),

3. to conclude if the basic elements of intercultural competence can be developed at an early school age with the help of a specific context. In case of my study, the context is a culturally diverse school environment,
4. to analyze the effects of cultural diversity on children's development with reference to Piaget's theory of cognitive development and Mead's theory of the "self".

#### 4.3.1 Indicators of intercultural competence

Earlier, in chapter 1 (Theoretical statement) I have described the model of intercultural competence, developed by Deardorff. The model was later presented in section "brief summary" as a hierarchy of stages of development of intercultural competence.

The model is a hierarchy of required components for development of intercultural competence. The lowest and the most basic level of this model are requisite attitudes, which flow into knowledge and skills, and, as a result, they are followed up by desired outcomes, both internal and external. My goal is to find indicators of intercultural competence at different levels, if this is possible. I want to prove that it is possible to shape the basic level of intercultural competence at elementary school.

When discussing the model of intercultural competence, I have come to the conclusion that attitudes are the foundation in the development of intercultural competence. I have also found out that the most essential attitudes are openness, respect and curiosity. These are the attitudes which I had a lot of focus on while conducting the interviews.

According to the respondents, the pupils can be characterized by both being open to new experiences and curious about other cultures and traditions. As far as cultural curiosity is concerned, all the respondents agreed that children are very eager to learn about other cultures and traditions. At the School's Open Day, when parents cook meals typical of their culture, all the children participate actively and show their interest. One

of the respondents observes that children are very curious to learn words in different languages. When they succeed, it makes them very proud.

The question of openness will be discussed later in the light of Mead's theory.

It is more difficult to make any conclusions about respect, since I have not studied children's attitudes directly. However, I have got an impression that the children learn to value other cultures and people. According to my respondents, they speak a lot about respecting others and valuing other cultures during classes. Children show respect to other pupils' cultural backgrounds, for example, when some pupils need to pray during the day.

There are indicators of intercultural competence at higher levels as well. They are discussed in the next chapter 5 (Concluding notes).

#### 4.3.2 Child's cognitive development

In this section, I intend to discuss the question of a child's cognitive development, possibly positively impacted by cultural diversity at school. This discussion is mostly based on Piaget's theory of cognitive development with the focus on several important aspects of it: disequilibrium, assimilation and accommodation.

As said earlier, disequilibrium is considered to be the driving force of cognitive development. When children with different cultural backgrounds interact and are involved in common activity, it creates a situation of disequilibrium for them. This situation does not only involve language difficulties, but also different attitudes, worldviews, ways of behaving and communicating in general. Children have not yet acquired necessary schemes of behavior when it comes to the intercultural communication, interactions between representatives of different cultures. When children experience communication difficulties, their minds struggle to harmonize this situation and children eventually start to learn from each other, finding the suitable ways of establishing contacts. New schemes of behavior, new attitudes and understandings spring from this.

The two processes accompanying and promoting the process of cognitive development are assimilation and accommodation. Assimilation presupposes that children receive new experience from all social experiences and interactions. This experience is processed and incorporated in a child's mind. This is the first step of cognitive development, followed by the process of accommodation. The incorporated experience further becomes a part of one's cognition and is stored in the form of schemes which come forward in situations of social interactions. As far as Mead's social "self" is concerned, the incorporated experience is stored in the part of the social "self" he called "me". "Me" takes care of all new experiences and organizes them into schemes. Later these schemes are used by "I" to act out and react appropriately in various communicative situations in various settings.

My own experience shows that culturally unfamiliar situations made me feel "uncomfortable" and unfitting, often led to misunderstanding and misjudging of social situations. In order to harmonize this state, I had to find solutions of how to balance the situation and to get integrated. From my own experience I know that any social interaction and experience contribute to this process. Experience involves both interactions with other people and with the environment. Observing other people and social situations adds to new understandings. I have learned from my experience that in any situation which involves several cultural backgrounds, it is important to be a good listener and a careful observer in order to obtain an essential knowledge and understanding. In that way, I could feel comfortable and secure. This suggestion gives grounds to successful intercultural communication.

#### 4.4 What does the school do to promote intercultural competence?

As I have learned from the interviews, the school has focus on cultural diversity which is valued and is treated with respect and appreciation. This section explains how the teachers use the school's cultural diverse environment in everyday practice. All the respondents underlined the necessity of including children's cultural backgrounds into the teaching process. I have concluded earlier that culturally colored activities can be a predisposition to developing certain attitudes, required for the development of

intercultural competence. This section is mostly based on the theoretical discussion of the specific features of the chosen age group, which were presented earlier in chapter 1 (Theoretical statement). There are special activities for every age group which contribute to successful child development. I would like to focus on the specific features while discussing what the school does to promote intercultural competence.

I have concluded earlier that the elementary school age is favorable time to teach children equality. One of the respondents says that speaking about other people and countries and cultures in general are the issues which are often discussed in the classroom. The school helps the organization "Redd barn" to raise money for the children in need. The pupils of this school get different tasks around the house and get money from their parents, if they manage to fulfill these tasks. Then they collect all the money and donate to "Redd barn". The respondent says that this teaches children to think about others, that other children must also be allowed to go to school, to drink clean water and to have clothes. She adds that she keeps reminding her pupils that all the children and people are worth the same ("alle barn og mennesker er like mye verdt").

In order to start developing intercultural competence in the elementary school, it is important to have personal contacts through direct associations with representatives from other cultures as much as possible. As stated by the respondents, the school has always had children with various cultural backgrounds and has presented various cultures. According to the respondents, Norwegian children have opportunities to communicate with other children with different cultural backgrounds on a daily basis. During the School's Open Day parents with different cultural origins cook food, typical of their country of origin, explain its connection to their country, tell children how they make it and what ingredients they use. This is an example of a direct contact with a representative from another country.

At the elementary school age, children are able to understand hypothetical situations rather than be limited to what they have experienced at the moment. It is worth referring to Deardorff (2012: 47) again and to underline that the knowledge component should be seen essential when speaking about the development of intercultural

competence. She manifests that it is fundamental to understand others' worldviews and to be able to see from other's perspectives. And this is actually what is done in classrooms at this school. Two of the respondents make special emphasis on that they try to teach children that there are many opinions all over the world and that people from other cultures can look on the same things differently. It works well, for example, when they discuss different topics and he asks children to speak about their countries of origin. Norwegian children are able to get information from their fellow pupils and to learn about other worldviews.





## 5. Concluding notes

In the first chapter of this thesis, I have concluded that the notion of intercultural competence is complex and versatile. It requires a deep understanding of all the elements in order to have a clear picture of what it actually means. I have also concluded that intercultural competence is a dynamic state, and its development is a life-long process. It requires both knowledge and skills to access it intentionally at school. In other words, teachers can help developing (or can develop directly in many cases) pupils' intercultural competence by focusing on different aspects of it. This thesis does not discuss practical ways of developing intercultural competence, but there exist guidelines to that (as for example, Deardorff, 2012).

The respondents do not seem to be completely aware of what intercultural competence is. However, one respondent mentions that "they" (teaching personnel) constantly attend courses and that he has come across and discussed this kind of competence before. When it comes to developing it, the teachers for the most part act instinctively rather than deliberately. They feel the need to use cultural backgrounds of other children, but they do not fully recognize the complete benefits of that. Two of the respondents conclude that although they try to take into account cultural diversity at school, they do not do it efficiently enough.

Taking into consideration the studied theoretical aspects, I draw the conclusion that the combination of knowledge and skills among teachers, as well as a culturally diverse setting of school makes it an extremely successful arena for developing intercultural competence at lower school levels.

The theoretical discussion, the interviews and my reflections allow me to summarize and conclude the research questions raised by me in the introductory chapter and to make an overall conclusion on the objective.

### *Are there any predispositions for intercultural competence development through cultural diversity at school?*

The results of the interviews showed that it is possible to speak about certain predispositions for the development of intercultural competence (in the context of this particular school). The major attitudes on the most basic level in the model of intercultural competence are respect, openness and curiosity. One of the predispositions for developing children's intercultural competence at this school is teaching them respect. From an early age, children learn about other cultures and they learn to respect and value people, no matter what culture these people belong to. Some examples of that are as follows:

- a teacher shows the world map and speaks about a huge amount of countries in the world. He makes emphasis on that "we" are just a small part of the broad picture and that we are all equal all over the world and should have equal rights;
- a teacher discusses the situation with the class when girls in some countries are not allowed to go to school and get education. He asks if this is fair and explains that this shows little respect for human's life;
- children raise money for the organization "Redd Barna" and learn to respect and value others, as well as help and sympathize;
- when Muslim children pray at school during the day, others are taught to respect this and treat the situation with understanding.

Children also show interest in other cultures. Having friends with different cultural backgrounds and a different way of living is probably an explanation. I have got a strong impression that Norwegian children find it exciting that some of their classmates can speak different languages, that they eat different food, get dressed in a different way or think about the same things differently. I believe that language peculiarities bring the most excitement. One respondent says that children become very proud when they can say some words in other languages, which are not usual for their typical environment.

The teachers are also doing a great job when it comes to cultural curiosity. They use children's cultural backgrounds actively in class and engage children on speaking about their usual ways of doing things (for example, the way of writing or the way of preparing meals, typical of another country).

When it comes to openness, it is difficult to say how much open-minded children are. If we refer to Mead and his understanding of the “self”, it is possible to suggest that children at this age are open-minded and receptive. This is due to yet limited social interactions which contribute to the formation and enrichment of “me”. Children at this age do not have a lot of experience and therefore their “me” is still limited, while there is a lot of space for their “I”. Since their “me” is not yet fully developed, children “absorb” any new experience of social interaction which makes them “open” and responsive.

I have learned from the interviews that children at that school are understanding and accepting. An example is when the situation when Muslim children pray in the hallway. Norwegian children do not really seem to pay much attention to that. They have learned that it is normal and important for some people from different cultures to pray several times a day. Norwegian children would not disturb either. They seem to handle this situation with understanding and respect. Praying at school is nothing shocking for them. They treat it as normal.

There are other aspects of intercultural competence, such as cultural self-awareness, deep understanding and knowledge of culture and sociolinguistic awareness. I cannot judge about cultural self-awareness, since I did not study children directly and it is difficult to speak about their deep cultural knowledge at such a young age. However, the question of culture-specific knowledge can be applied to the study. As it has been mentioned earlier, children’s cultural backgrounds are used actively in teaching. This is one of the effective and practical ways of teaching. Another example is that a teacher uses a world map to study the countries and to discuss what is happening in the world. Sometimes they choose countries represented in the class.

All these examples are indicators of the basic attitudes of intercultural competence. It answers the question about predispositions for successful development of intercultural competence that take into consideration a culturally diverse environment.

## *What influence does cultural diversity have on Norwegian children?*

I will not be able to answer this question objectively because I have not made research on children. The answer is fully based on teachers' experience and on my understanding and interpretation of it. Even though I cannot fully and objectively answer this particular question, I have collected enough data to make an attempt to find out how cultural diversity at school influences children.

I have described the example of praying at school. Children do not treat it as something strange and alien. They, on the contrary, accept it as something normal for others. Close contact with children with different cultural backgrounds and everyday interactions broaden children's minds and enrich their understanding of the world as a very diverse and complex.

The interaction between children with different cultural backgrounds teaches them to handle social difficulties. For example, the situation when children have to find a way to communicate when one of them does not speak Norwegian. In such situations, children use body language, gestures, and simple words to express themselves. It is also important, that such an interaction teaches them new patterns of behavior, as well as it teaches them to listen and be eager to understand.

I believe that cultural diversity in a classroom teaches children empathy. For example, there is a child in class who is a refugee and who has moved to another country with the family because of the war. Other children in class learn that not everyone in the world has chances to go to school, to have food and home. Children at that school learn to help others when they collect money for "Redd Barna". They do simple tasks around the house for one week and get money from their parents, which they afterwards donate to other children in need of help.

Another good example is the situation when one of the boys was called for the "chocolate cake". Then the whole class stood up for him and said that it was unacceptable to use such words to call names. The class felt that it was unfair to call their friend for that. They felt empathetic and wanted to show that they did not accept

that. At the same time, their friend felt that he was part of a group. Even though there was a line between “me” and “they”, he still belonged to the group. This is another thing children learn: we can be friends, no matter what background we have. Children learn that every person is important and should be treated with respect.

I have found out that children learn to value other cultures and reflect on their own culture. Children learn to find differences and, what is more important, similarities in cultures. For example, at Glød (performance, which children from different schools made together) children found out that game rules are similar in many countries. So is the music: though the words are different, the melody is still similar.

On the example of this particular school I have found a lot of positive impacts which cultural diversity bring. It contributes both to educational (such as learning about cultures and ways of living), social (children learn to handle language challenges and find ways to express themselves) and personal (children learn to respect and value other people and cultures, learn to listen, understand and be sympathetic) aspects.

### *Can cultural diversity be a resource in teaching and children's development?*

Cultural diversity can definitely be considered as a resource. It gives opportunities to learn peculiarities of other cultures (for example, national costumes, cuisine, way of reading and writing were mentioned during the interviews), to learn other points of view and, what is important, to learn that there *are* different points of view and each of them should be heard and respected. Teachers can use children's backgrounds in teaching. It makes a learning process more realistic and engaging.

In terms of development, I will operate with Piaget's terminology. The situation, when children with different cultural backgrounds meet, is an obvious disequilibrium. Schemes of behavior in such situations do not yet exist in children's minds. They have to find the way to harmonize the situation and to bring it further to the level of assimilation and accommodation. As I have concluded earlier, disequilibrium is the driving force for

development. Leaving the “comfort zone”, where everything is clear and easy, gives an opportunity to learn something new and enriches the existing schemes.

Intercultural communication lies at the heart of interaction between people with different cultural backgrounds. This is a formation of learning arena, where two (or more) people are learning from each other. On the one hand, it is an exchange of experiences. On the other hand, it is a way of enriching existing knowledge and understanding of the world. In the course of such an interaction, both parties “use” each other as a source of new experience and knowledge.

*Are children aware about cultural differences? Are they curious about other cultures?*

In most cases it is obvious that children are aware of that there are many cultures and that they are different. I think the school does a great job in putting accents on cultural aspects. Norwegian children learn about other cultures and they seem to be curious themselves. It seems that Norwegian children are trying to “take care” of immigrant children, who experience language difficulties or difficulties in adaptation. As all the respondents have mentioned, children are always trying to get everyone involved. And if there is someone who does not speak Norwegian, they try to teach, using simple words and gestures.

Are children aware about cultural differences? Yes, they are, according to the respondents. Children are aware of that there are many cultures and that people from different cultures might have different values and views. Are children curious about other cultures? Yes, they are. They are excited to learn new words, they like to learn what other people eat in other countries, they are eager to participate in activities which have cultural focus.

*Is it possible to develop intercultural competence through cultural diversity at elementary school?*

Taking into consideration everything that has been written before, I feel secure to conclude that there are various and numerous possibilities for the development of intercultural competence in an elementary school. This research focuses on a culturally diverse setting, which has its contribution to creating a positive and effective environment for the development of this kind of competence. The example of this particular school (and the experience of the teachers working there) showed that cultural diversity is rather a resource than a challenge. My respondents underlined many positive aspects of having children with different cultural backgrounds mixed in one class. The situation may vary dramatically from school to school, and my research unfortunately did not focus on that. However, my study has shown that a well-organized and integrated work with cultural diversity at school has its benefits.





## 6. Critical evaluation of the study

When I have finalized my research, I can look back and reflect the whole process critically. It is important to do that, as I want to be clear about the mistakes I have done. This is a reflective chapter, where I discuss my own misjudgments. Writing this thesis was in many ways a learning process, both educationally and personally. Seeing your own missteps means that you have learned something and that you are able to do it better next time.

The first that strikes me is that I miss an important aspect which could have been interesting to be included into my study. I have written earlier that I sent a handout to respondents and explained them the subject of our interviews. I explained what intercultural competence is in simple words. But what I did not do was to ask my respondents during the interviews if they had ever heard about this kind of competence, possibly used this term before and whether they had an understanding of what it meant to be an interculturally competent person. When transcribing the interviews, I got an impression that my respondents did not really understand clearly what intercultural competence was. However, they had many associations which could be useful to write about. It could have been interesting to know how much teachers knew about the subject. So, my first mistake was not to let respondents to define the most essential notions themselves.

In terms of methodology, I could have used a quantitative approach to my research. This could be, for example, self – evaluation tests which are discussed by Simons and Krols (2011) and Deardorff (2012). They could have been used on both teachers and pupils. I think though that a quantitative research requires a lot of skill and knowledge from a researcher, but it gives access to different kinds of data, more structured ones. Despite that I could have used another, or additional, methodological approach to my study, I do not consider using a qualitative research alone as a mistake. Earlier, while discussing the chosen method of the research, I explained the usefulness of interviews. It means that I considered qualitative research to be the most efficient way of collecting the required data. However, I am aware that the research for my subject could have been done differently.

As I have mentioned earlier, the flow of interviews was influenced by my lack of experience. I was too focused on getting answers for the planned questions and was too stressed to be creative and to use some extra follow-up questions. This made the interviews a bit “dull” and too straight to the point. As I realize it now, a researcher should be creative and engaging. A researcher should be able to build mutual trust and interest for the issues of an interview. I think that I did not manage to achieve it completely. However, I can assess that the interviews were successful.

## Conclusion

The study was focused on the development of intercultural competence at elementary school. The context was very specific: culturally diverse environment. I wanted to understand the essence of intercultural communication and to discover the benefits of cultural diversity at school.

The age group of the study was limited to elementary school children, which are (6) 7 – 13 years old. The theoretical discussion has led to the idea that at this age children start to reflect on possible cultural differences and similarities. Children also reflect on their own identity and can easily trace cultural differences and similarities. The most effective activities for children at this age are all the social activities which have focus on cultural diversity. It is possible to teach children to respect and value other cultures, as well as teach them to be curious about other cultures, traditions and beliefs through games, music, dance, sports and performances. In terms of this thesis, respect, cultural curiosity and openness are the characteristics of intercultural competence: the basic attitudes, required for its successful and effective development. Elementary school age is a beneficial time to introduce cultural aspects to children and to expose them to cultural diversity.

Culturally diverse school environment has its own challenges. As an example, there are children, who do not speak the same language as the others. This is a challenging situation, when communication between children is not in balance. However, this challenge, as it would first seem, is a beginning of children's cognitive development. Children acquire new experiences, try to solve various communicative difficulties and find ways of expressing themselves when they do not speak the same language. The theoretical discussion has led to conclusion that challenging situations are the driving force of the development.

The research, in general, has shown that there are numerous benefits, connected to cultural diversity at school. On the one hand, it can serve as teaching tool in various disciplines, such as geography, religion, language. On the other hand, it creates a productive social arena. Cultural diversity gives children possibilities to learn from each

other in different social settings, to develop their social skills and to shape their personal attitudes. The research has also shown that it is natural for children to find common language and express themselves with the help of gestures and simple words. Moreover, Norwegian children seem to be taking care of children who have different cultural backgrounds and who experience difficulties in integration and learning the language. Norwegian children in that school try to involve everyone in activities. They help their fellow pupils both in the classroom and at after school time.

I have found predispositions to the development of intercultural competence for the children at this particular school. These are cultural curiosity, respect for other people and cultures, as well as culture – specific knowledge. Children seem to be open to new experiences, and they are not afraid of difficulties which can occur when people from different cultures interact. Having indicators of intercultural competence on different levels supports my supposition that cultural diversity is an effective predisposition to the development of intercultural competence on the lowest school level. Therefore I conclude that it is possible to develop intercultural competence at elementary school in a culturally diverse environment.

The study has shown that cultural diversity at school can, and should be considered as a resource, rather than a challenge. The example of the school where I had my research illustrates that. If cultural diversity is valued, all the cultures are valued and respected, and all the children are taught to take care of each other and value each other in spite of cultural background, there is a well – balanced environment for children to learn from and each other and to gradually become interculturally competent.

It has been exciting to work with the chosen subject. Working with culture and diversity is in general inspiring. There are always new ideas and viewpoints to discover. Culture is a very dynamic structure, which is constantly prone to changes and enrichment. I consider the study to be successful. Even though the empirical data was limited, my personal experience gave grounds to support the findings. The research questions found their answers and the hypothetical assumption was proven to be correct.

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## **Attachement 1: Tillatelse fra Norsk Samfunnsvitenskapelig Datatjeneste (NSD)**

### ENDRING I PROSJEKT

Viser til endringsmelding mottatt 28.1.2014.

Vi har registrert at utvalget i delprosjekt 1 utvides med lærere/skoleledere/sfo-leder. Det vedlagte informasjonsskrivet er godt utformet og tilfredsstillende om informert samtykke. Vi registrerer at studenten Yana Rakovskaya skal gjennomføre intervjuer med lærere og SFO- leder, og at opplysningene vil inngå i datamaterialet til hennes masteroppgave samt i delprosjekt 1 til dette prosjektet. Vi legger til grunn at studenten sletter/anonymiserer data som ev. lagres på egen privat pc ved prosjektslutt. Data kan lagres videre i tråd med vår tilråding datert 2.9.13.

Vanligvis skal studenter melde sine prosjekter separat slik at institusjonene kan holde oversikten over innmeldte prosjekter. Det kan gjøres unntak fra denne praksisen, og i dette prosjektet registrerer vi at studenten er prosjektmedarbeider og at data samles inn til analyse i begge prosjekter. Dersom det på et senere tidspunkt er ønskelig å endre på dette ber vi om at det sendes inn en prosjektmelding. Hvis det er spørsmål knyttet til registrering av student/forskerprosjekter ta kontakt med undertegnede på telefon.

Vennlig hilsen

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Anne-Mette Somby  
Seniorrådgiver

Norsk samfunnsvitenskapelig datatjeneste AS  
Personvernombud for forskning  
Harald Hårfagres gate 29, 5007 BERGEN

Tlf. direkte: (+47) 55 58 24 10

Tlf. sentral: (+47) 55 58 81 80

Faks: (+47) 55 58 96 50

Email: Anne-Mette [Somby@nsd.uib.no](mailto:Somby@nsd.uib.no)

Internettadresse [www.nsd.uib.no/personvern](http://www.nsd.uib.no/personvern)

## **Attachement 2: Informasjon til lærere og skoleledere om prosjektet *Språklig mangfold i klasserommet***

Jeg er ansatt ved Institutt for lærerutdanning og pedagogikk ved Universitetet i Tromsø – Norges arktiske universitet, og våren 2013 starta jeg derfor prosjektet *Språklig mangfold i klasserommet*. Prosjektet tar utgangspunkt i målsettinger i Kunnskapsløftet 2006 som går ut på at opplæringa skal bidra til at elevene få et bevisst forhold til språklig mangfold. I dette ligger det at elevene skal få et bevisst forhold til at vi i Norge snakker ulike talemål, at vi har to norske skriftspråk (bokmål/nynorsk), at vi bruker andre språk (for eksempel engelsk, samisk, russisk) av ulike grunner. Prosjektet er todelt: I del 1 skal jeg undersøke hvordan klasserom faktisk er språklig mangfoldige og hvilke språkholdninger som finnes i og rundt klasserommet. I del 2 skal jeg undersøke hvilke refleksjoner lærerstudenter gjør seg rundt språklig mangfold og språkholdninger. Prosjektet avsluttes juli 2015.

Dette er en forespørsel om du som lærer/skoleleder ønsker å delta i del 1 av prosjektet. I denne delen undersøker jeg altså hvordan klasserom faktisk er språklig mangfoldige og hvilke språkholdninger som finnes i klasserommet. I tillegg er jeg i prosjektet opptatt av interkulturell kompetanse og skolens (det vil si læreres og ledelsens) erfaringer fra flerkulturelle klasserom. For å undersøke dette vil jeg for det første observere elevene og lærerne i ett klasserom gjennom våren 2014. Jeg vil være særlig interessert i om elevene bruker ulike språk/dialekter på skolen, og hva de sier om språk og dialekter. Jeg vil også snakke med elevene ulike tema knytta til språk. For det andre skal en masterstudent i pedagogikk, Yana Rakovskaya, intervju noen lærere ved ulike trinn på skolen.

Prosjektet er vurdert av personvernombudet for forskning, Norsk Samfunnsvitenskapelig Datatjeneste (NSD). All informasjon om informantene i dette prosjektet blir behandla konfidensielt. Når prosjektet presenteres skriftlig eller muntlig (for eksempel på foredrag eller i vitenskapelige artikler), skal det ikke være mulig å identifisere de som deltar i studien. Dette betyr blant anna at både skolen og informantene får fiktive navn når datamaterialet presenteres.

Det er stor sannsynlighet for at det etter prosjektavslutning i 2015 vil komme nye forskningsspørsmål der data fra dette prosjektet kan inngå. Etter prosjektslutt blir datamaterialet (observasjonsnotater, lydopptak, logger) oppbevart ved UiT Norges arktiske universitet i fem år for videre forskning. Navnelistene slettes, men ditt navn kan indirekte identifiseres gjennom sin stemme på lydopptaket. Det er kun undertegnede som kan bruke materialet i videre forskning.

Det er frivillig å delta i prosjektet, og du kan når som helst innen prosjektslutt i 2015 trekke deg fra prosjektet uten å måtte oppgi noen begrunnelse. Etter prosjektslutt slettes navnelista i prosjektet, men du kan fortsatt trekke deg så fremt det lar seg gjøre å identifisere deg.

Ta gjerne kontakt dersom du har spørsmål eller kommentarer.

Vennlig hilsen  
Hilde Sollid  
Prosjektleder

### **Attachement 3: Informasjon til lærere og skoleledelse om prosjektet** ***Kulturelt mangfold i klasserommet***

Tema for min masteroppgave er «Development of intercultural competence through cultural diversity in classrooms».

Formålet med oppgaven er å studere utvikling av interkulturell kompetanse i skolehverdagen til barneskoleelever som er i tett kontakt med barn med forskjellig kulturell bakgrunn. Målet med forskningen er å se på hvordan klasser med elever fra forskjellige nasjoner og kulturer fungerer sammen og hva denne flerkulturalismen leder til.

Videre stiller oppgaven spørsmål om hvilke muligheter det er for skolen til å utvikle, eller til å bidra til utvikling av interkulturell kompetanse i samfunnet. I oppgaven vil kulturelt mangfold bli sett på som en resurs som skolen og samfunnet burde fokusere på og utvikle for bedre integrasjon og kulturforståelse.

I dagens samfunn er interkulturell kompetanse viktig. Personer flytter, i større grad nå enn før på tvers av landegrenser. Da er det både viktig for oss å kunne integrere oss i nye kulturer og samfunn som vi flytter til og for oss å forstå og tolerere de som kommer flyttende hit. Interkulturell kompetanse vil således også lede til bedre integrasjon av de som flytter til Norge.

Jeg er spesielt interessert i å få vite om hvordan og hvorvidt kulturspørsmål blir gjort relevant for elevene i barneskolen. Derfor har jeg valgt å intervjuere lærere for å høre deres syn på spørsmålet, og hvordan barn av forskjellige nasjonaliteter og kulturer fungerer sammen. Her vil jeg få inntrykk av hvordan klasser med flerkulturell bakgrunn utvikler forståelse for hverandre.

Prosjektet innebærer at den enkelte lærer/SFO leder deltar i en samtale som skal vare i ca. 30-40 minutt. Innsamling av opplysninger om deltakeren fra andre kilder kreves ikke. Opplysninger som skal innhentes er ikke personlige. Spørsmålene som skal stilles handler mest om egne erfaringer av samspill og kommunikasjon mellom elever.

## Attachement 4: Samtykkeerklaring

### Samtykkeerklæring for personer over 18 år

Jeg har fått informasjon om forskningsprosjektet *Språklig mangfold i klasserommet*, og samtykker med dette til å være informant i prosjektet. Jeg samtykker til at utdrag fra intervju kan presenteres skriftlig i vitenskapelige sammenhenger (som i foredrag og artikler). Jeg er kjent med at jeg på hvilket som helst tidspunkt før prosjektavslutning i 2015 kan trekke meg fra prosjektet. Jeg er også kjent med at jeg kan trekke meg fra prosjektet etter 2015 så fremt det lar seg gjøre å identifisere de delene jeg har bidratt med i prosjektet.

Sted og dato:

Signatur:

Telefon:

E-post:

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### Samtykkeerklæring for personer under 18 år

Som forelder/foresatt har jeg fått informasjon om forskningsprosjektet *Språklig mangfold i klasserommet*, og samtykker med dette til at min sønn/datter får være informant i prosjektet. Jeg samtykker til at utdrag fra intervju kan presenteres skriftlig i vitenskapelige sammenhenger (som i foredrag og artikler). Jeg er kjent med at min sønn/datter på hvilket som helst tidspunkt før prosjektavslutning i 2015 kan trekke seg fra prosjektet. Jeg er kjent med at min sønn/datter kan trekke seg fra prosjektet etter 2015 så fremt det lar seg gjøre å identifisere de delene som han/hun har bidratt med i prosjektet. Jeg er også kjent med at jeg på vegne av min sønn/datter kan trekke han/henne fra prosjektet både før prosjektslutt og etter så fremt det lar seg gjøre å identifisere hans/hennes bidrag.

Sted og dato:

Signatur:

Telefon:

E-post: