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The Experiences of Teachers and Students in Perceiving and Developing Intercultural Sensitivity in Indonesian International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme



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Abstract

Globalization and increasing diversity have rendered intercultural sensitivity (IS) an essential skill for effective communication and development of positive international relations. However, there is a notable lack of studies on the perceptions and development of IS among teachers and students in international schools. This phenomenological study explored conceptions of IS and development strategies involving eight teachers and four students from International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme (IB MYP) schools in Jakarta, Indonesia. Drawing on semi-structured interviews and reflexive thematic analysis, this

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study found that participants viewed IS as a dynamic developmental process that exceeds mere recognition of differences. IS was characterized by respect, emotional engagement, open-mindedness, effective communication, empathic understanding, and appreciation of cultural plurality. Participants emphasized experiential and dialogic learning, which is the direct engagement with diverse cultural contexts, alongside sustained personal reflection as central mechanisms that help develop IS. The findings suggest that IS should be intentionally embedded in educational frameworks by integrating cognitive learning with affective and metacognitive dimensions (emotional awareness and reflective practice) to build inclusive and respect-oriented learning environments. Future research should extend these insights through longitudinal designs, cross-context comparisons and examinations of links between IS and international-mindedness in the IB MYP.

Keywords: Teacher, student, Intercultural Sensitivity (IS), International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme (IB MYP), International Mindedness (IM), Indonesia

Introduction

Globalization has significantly transformed social structures by placing greater emphasis on the need for effective cross-cultural communication in the educational context (Ospina & Medina, 2020). This transformation is particularly evident in the rapid growth of International Baccalaureate (IB) schools worldwide, which reflects the increasing demand for globally recognized educational frameworks (Maire & Windle, 2021). The IB, founded in 1968 in Geneva, Switzerland, was initially established to offer a globally accessible pathway to international education (Lee & Ryu, 2024). Central to the IB is a mission to develop inquiring, knowledgeable, and caring young people who contribute to a more peaceful world through education that creates intercultural understanding and respect (International Baccalaureate Organization [IBO], 2026). In Indonesia, mainly in Jakarta, this global approach is embodied in the IB Middle Years Programme (IB MYP), where students aged 11–16 from a variety of cultural backgrounds learn together. Cultivating an appreciation for cultural diversity in these settings is crucial for academic achievement and personal development (Jurasaitė-O’Keefe, 2022). As teachers and students navigate diverse worldviews and identities, they contribute to a dynamic educational environment that highlights the importance of cross-cultural understanding (Ferguson, 2024).

Developing intercultural sensitivity (IS) is key to developing teacher-student relationships in the IB MYP, as it encourages respect towards cultures and supports the creation of more cohesive and peaceful communities (Howard, 2022; Othman & Ruslan, 2020) as well as prevents misunderstandings and ineffective communication (Storz & Hoffman, 2018). Chen and Starosta (2000) defined IS as a dynamic concept characterized by a person’s ability to develop positive emotions by understanding, appreciating and accepting other cultures. Tuncel and Paker (2018) asserted that IS comprises cognitive and emotional components, where individuals learn to comprehend cultural differences and engage with them emotionally to create appropriate and effective behaviours in intercultural contexts. This competence is essential for facilitating positive interactions in the IB MYPs (Demircioglu & Cakir, 2016). The IB MYP in the Indonesian international-school context, typically serve culturally and linguistically diverse cohorts, including internationally mobile students, that intensifies everyday intercultural interaction (Tanu, 2016). However, some students might face specific challenges, such as adapting to unfamiliar educational systems, negotiating language demands, or adjusting to differing social norms (Roïha & Sommer, 2021).

The students’ ability to engage respectfully and effectively with individuals from different cultural backgrounds is vital for their academic success and personal development (Stroud &

Arumuhathas, 2024). Likewise, teachers must possess IS to meet the diverse needs of their students and adapt their teaching strategies accordingly (Chahar Mahali & Seigny, 2022). Effective teaching in multicultural settings requires an understanding of cultural diversity, and also the ability to integrate inclusive values into classroom practices that helps build a supportive and welcoming environment (Deringöl & Değirmenci, 2025). Nevertheless, despite the well-established importance of IS, significant gaps remain in understanding how this concept is perceived by teachers and students. Many teachers enter the profession with limited cross-cultural awareness, which leaves them underprepared to effectively integrate cultural diversity into their teaching practices (Ferguson & Brett, 2023; Leek, 2024).

Research on teachers' ongoing intercultural development as part of their professional growth remains sparse (Ospina & Medina, 2020), and a major barrier to effective multicultural education is the lack of formalized training programs (Othman & Ruslan, 2020). Additional challenges, such as limited interpersonal trust, underdeveloped social competencies, and feelings of social disconnection due to cultural differences, further impede teachers' ability to engage in meaningful cross-cultural communication (Harrison & Kai Hou, 2023). Teachers may unintentionally perpetuate stereotypes or marginalize certain student groups without a deeper understanding of the cultural dynamics in their classrooms (Tardif-Grenier et al., 2022). Hence, there is a critical need for research that explores how IS develops in teachers and how it can be effectively supported to enhance teaching practices.

Students frequently face challenges when interacting with peers from diverse cultural backgrounds, often leading to misunderstandings, social isolation, and internal conflicts regarding their identity (McKeering et al., 2021). These issues are particularly pronounced among international students who may also experience prejudice and discriminatory behaviours (Jurasaitė-O'Keefe, 2022) that further diminish their sense of belonging and academic success (Storz & Hoffman, 2018). In some cases, they may even encounter cultural disdain from local students (Stroud & Arumuhathas, 2024). These challenges may be compounded by the limited empirical attention to IS as a relational and interactional process in the IB MYP context. Most existing studies have predominantly focused on the viewpoints of students or teachers (Estaji & Tabrizi, 2022b), thus leaving an important void in the understanding of interactional dynamics between these two groups. Hence, there is a need to investigate how these perceptions of IS influence educational outcomes and social interactions in the IB MYP environment. The specific emotional and interactional dynamics as a strategy for risk-avoidance or the potential impact of *guided reflection* on emotional responses have yet to be thoroughly examined although IS's general frameworks are well-established. Therefore, this study sought to fill this gap by exploring the teachers' and students' perception of IS in the Indonesian IB MYP schools with the following research questions:

1. How do teachers and students in Indonesian IB MYP schools perceive IS?
2. What strategies do teachers and students in Indonesian IB MYP schools use to develop IS?

Literature Review and Theory

Interculturality, Intercultural Competence, and IS: A Brief Discussion

The exploration of interculturality presents a multifaceted challenge as the effective management of intercultural interactions necessitates specific competencies (Castañeda-Trujillo et al., 2023). Traditionally regarded as an academic discipline, the study of intercultural communication is also perceived as a transformative instrument addressing global inequalities and political injustices (Peng & Dervin, 2024). It mirrors the challenges and opportunities inherent in a globalized world by promoting more

equitable and inclusive educational practices (Dervin & Simpson, 2021). This dual function, as an academic discipline and a transformative tool, emphasizes the need for teachers and students to engage in acquiring knowledge and participating in critical discussions that address real-world challenges, thereby preparing them for a globally interconnected society (Roiha & Sommer, 2021).

Yuan et al. (2025) further argued that interculturality should not be perceived as a set of static competencies but as a dynamic lived experience. They emphasized that interculturality involves an ongoing dialogue that builds mutual understanding and negotiation, thus challenging the traditional view that it is merely a collection of fixed skills. This perspective is supported by Moloney et al. (2023), who identified three key aspects of interculturality, namely recognizing culture and developing respect, interacting empathetically with others, and reflecting on intercultural experiences while taking responsibility for one's actions in those interactions. These aspects of interculturality suggest that effective intercultural education must impart knowledge as well as cultivate emotional intelligence and reflective practices that guide individuals in navigating intercultural interaction (Demircioglu & Cakir, 2016).

While these perspectives underscore the fluidity inherent in interculturality, there is an increasing critique regarding the predominance of Western ideologies in the academic discourse on this subject. These concepts are not neutral, rather they are situated in specific economic, political, and social contexts (R'Boul & Dervin, 2023). Dervin and Simpson (2021) contended that interculturality should transcend a Western-centric framework to incorporate diverse epistemologies that more accurately reflect global realities. Yuan et al. (2025) echoed this call for the greater inclusion of non-Western voices from minority-serving institutions. They asserted that interculturality cannot be universally defined from a singular cultural perspective but must instead consider the diverse lived experiences of teachers and students from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Building on these insights, Portera et al. (2025) proposed that interculturality should be understood as a dialogue that deeply engages with cultural differences, while moving away from static competency models. Traditional models often emphasize the acquisition of discrete skills, such as cultural awareness or communication techniques, whereas the dialogic approach advocates for ongoing negotiation and adaptation in intercultural competence. This aligns with Deardorff (2009), who highlighted intercultural competencies, such as respect, self-awareness, perspective-taking, and active listening, as being essential for effective cross-cultural communication. Similarly, Chen and Starosta (2000) offered a comprehensive model for intercultural competence, which included intercultural awareness, intercultural adroitness, and IS. IS, in this three-part model, is regarded as a key to growth and a foundational component that is critical to the overall development of intercultural competence (Trisnawati, Kamaruddin, et al., 2025).

Chen and Starosta (2000) conceptualized IS through five interrelated aspects in order to elaborate on this affective dimension of intercultural competence, including respect for cultural differences, interaction engagement, interaction attentiveness, interaction confidence, and interaction enjoyment. Therefore, IS is widely regarded as an affective foundation for intercultural communication competence that shapes an individual's openness to cultural difference and supports appropriate and effective communication in cultural contexts (Deardorff, 2009). Aksin (2023) examined the influence of personality traits on IS, especially the trait of openness to experience, which is associated with creativity, imagination, and a willingness to engage with new perspectives. Conversely, IS's emotional dimension is particularly significant, as it affects an individual's willingness to engage with people from different cultural backgrounds, thereby shaping their approach to diversity in meaningful ways (Chen & Hu, 2023; Nguyen, 2023). IS underpins greater ethical awareness and sensitivity in interactions, thus contributing to the reduction of misunderstandings and conflicts (Irayanti et al., 2025).

The concepts of IS (Chen & Starosta, 2000), intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2009), and interculturality (R'Boul & Dervin, 2023) represent related but analytically distinct lenses, although frequently

used interchangeably, which contributes to ongoing inconsistencies in how they are defined and operationalized (Moloney et al., 2023). This study treats interculturality as a broader socio-ethical orientation toward living with cultural differences, such as intercultural competence as a multidimensional capacity that integrates knowledge, skills, and attitudes for appropriate and effective interaction, whereas IS is conceptualized as the affective readiness to engage across difference (respect for cultural differences, interaction engagement, interaction confidence, and interaction enjoyment). Framing IS as a foundational affective element in these broader constructs foregrounds emotional dispositions, such as empathy and openness, that are crucial for mitigating misunderstandings and creating ethical and inclusive interactions across cultural boundaries. However, this conceptual differentiation poses a practical challenge for the IB MYPs, because programmes may struggle to translate an affective construct, like IS, into explicit pedagogy, classroom routines, and assessable learning outcomes. Consequently, understanding how teachers and students perceive and cultivate IS in IB MYP schools, particularly in non-Western contexts such as Indonesia, becomes essential.

Teacher-Student Relationships in IB Schools: Navigating Global and Local Dynamics

Teachers in the IB MYP are implementers of a standardized curriculum and are actively engaged in the co-creation of knowledge, leading to the contribution of developing global citizens (Lee & Ryu, 2024; Leek, 2024). This role includes cultivating global citizenship, critical thinking, and inquiry-based learning, which are all core elements of the IB framework (Zeng, 2024). However, Poole (2019) challenged the simplistic view of globalization being a homogenizing force, suggesting instead that it results in complex interactions between global dynamics and local educational practices. The concept of global citizenship education remains contentious, with considerable debate over its definition and implementation (Howard & Maxwell, 2023). Notwithstanding IB's emphasis of these ideals, the demanding nature of the curriculum that focuses on exam preparation often leaves teachers with insufficient time or motivation to explore global citizenship in meaningful depth, which reflects wider neoliberal trends in education (Ferguson & Brett, 2023). Belal (2017) also critiqued the IB's focus on global engagement that often neglects sufficient local contextualization. The IB's expansion from a programme primarily associated with international schools to one that increasingly informs national policy and curriculum has profound implications, with IB frameworks shaping national educational systems (Hung & Liu, 2024). In countries such as Indonesia, where IB schools must meet IB MYP requirements while complying with national curriculum mandates, tensions can arise because the IB policy's influence is often partial and national standards may not align neatly with IB's curricular and assessment expectations.

Classrooms, as dynamic spaces for teacher-student communication, play a crucial role in facilitating teaching and learning processes (Estaji & Tabrizi, 2022a; Othman & Ruslan, 2020). In this context, teachers bear a significant responsibility in guiding students from diverse backgrounds to integrate into the academic environment and society at large (Ospina & Medina, 2020). Grant et al. (2024) highlighted that effective teachers exhibit qualities such as collaborative teaching, leadership, IS from a global perspective, and proficiency in the host nation's language, that are vital for navigating increasingly diverse classrooms. Tardif-Grenier et al. (2022) emphasized the importance of teachers' receptiveness to cultural diversity by arguing that this trait significantly shapes their perceptions of students and strengthens teacher-student relationships. Furthermore, teachers' engagement with colleagues from different cultural backgrounds is a key determinant that shapes IS, as it exposes educators to diverse viewpoints and broadens their understanding of cultural contexts (Belal, 2017). It is essential for both of them to possess competencies for developing IS, given that students often learn by observing the behaviours and attitudes of their teachers who serve as role models (Othman & Ruslan, 2020).

International mindedness (IM), with respect to IB schools, is not merely an aspirational curriculum statement as it is developed relationally through everyday teacher-student interactions that shape classroom

norms, communication practices, and the negotiation of global-local meanings (IBO, 2026). At the same time, IM is not defined or operationalized consistently in the IB context since its meaning often varies according to institutional and sociocultural setting, which contributes to conceptual ambiguity in the literature (Hacking et al., 2018). IM is central to global education because it orients both teachers and students toward becoming global citizens who can engage with the world's complexity, diversity, and interconnectedness (Singh & Qi, 2013). IM encourages individuals to transcend their national identities by promoting empathy and also engagement with global issues, such as climate change and human rights (Chernoff, 2023).

IM more than merely emphasises tolerance and acceptance by encouraging a critical engagement with diversity and challenging preconceived notions, while underscoring respect, care, compassion, and tolerance as fundamental values essential for racial harmony (Layne & Teng, 2022). Jurasaitė-O'Keefe (2022) further elaborated that IM, integral to IB philosophy, comprises three core dimensions, namely multilingualism, which builds an understanding of diverse languages in varied sociocultural contexts, and intercultural understanding, which encourages engagement with one's own culture and of others while promoting mutual respect. In alignment with these principles, Trisnawati, Zakaria, et al. (2025) suggested that teachers can cultivate IM by employing intercultural teaching strategies and utilizing instructional resources that encourage students to broaden their global perspectives, respect different cultures and embrace open-mindedness. However, empirical studies examining how IM is related to IS, since it is developed in teacher-student relationships across varied IB school contexts that remain limited, indicated a key gap that this study seeks to address.

Personal and cultural growth in teacher-student engagement plays a pivotal role in shaping ethical behaviours and interactions in the IB MYP classroom (Storz & Hoffman, 2018). The cultural backgrounds of teachers and students significantly influence classroom norms and attitudes, largely through everyday communicative practices (Aksin, 2023). According to Othman and Ruslan (2020), students largely perceive that IS is developed through co-curricular activities, suggesting that such interactions outside of the formal curriculum may play a key role in cultural development. Jurasaitė-O'Keefe (2022) further emphasized that teachers, much like adolescents, undergo critical phases where they explore multicultural identities and learn to navigate diverse cultural contexts, often leading to the formation of multicultural or intercultural identities. While interculturalism is widely viewed as a positive force, Ferguson (2024) highlighted that students and teachers tend to view intercultural interactions in overly simplistic terms. Respect and tolerance are often central to how intercultural relationships are framed (Roiha & Sommier, 2021), yet critical reflections on power dynamics and cultural hierarchies are frequently overlooked. This lack of critical engagement can result in superficial understandings of IS that fail to challenge the deeper inequalities inherent in these interactions. Therefore, it is essential to explore the perception and development of IS among teachers and students in IB schools in the Indonesian context in order to address existing gaps and further enrich the academic discourse on international education.

Methodology

Research Design

Phenomenology is a philosophical methodology that focuses on the examination of human experiences, including emotional, affective, and overall lived experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Deringöl and Değirmenci (2025) proposed that this method is particularly effective in uncovering underlying meanings and understanding the fundamental nature of a given phenomenon. This approach was instrumental for this study because it facilitated the exploration of how teachers and students in IB MYP schools perceive and navigate the development of IS, thereby capturing the richness of these experiences in

a complex educational context. Furthermore, it encourages the exploration of experiences from the perspective of those directly involved (Bojos & Oclina, 2023), while providing critical insight into the personal, cultural, and educational factors that shape IS. The method is designed to illuminate the nuanced ways (Boadu, 2021) in which individuals engage with intercultural issues, making it effective in revealing the actual IM concept implemented in the IB MYP and the correlation of these values in perceiving and developing IS, which is connected to the broader interculturality concept and the local context of Indonesia. According to Johnson and Christensen (2014) and Creswell (2014), researchers employing this method begin with narrative data, identify key themes from the stories and descriptions, and conduct a thematic analysis of the language and concepts used to convey the experience. The nuanced understanding generated through this analytic process aligns with the literature's call for more empirical studies examining how global citizenship and IS are enacted in classroom contexts (Ferguson & Brett, 2023; Howard & Maxwell, 2023).

Participants

The IB MYP was selected for this study due to its significant role in introducing students to global perspectives and intercultural issues (Lee & Ryu, 2024), thereby offering an optimal period for developing IS. In contrast to the Diploma Programme (DP), which primarily focuses on academic preparation for higher education (Maire & Windle, 2021), the IB MYP emphasizes holistic development, including social and emotional growth. This focus presents a unique opportunity for examining the integration of IS in teaching and learning processes (Jurasaitė-O'Keefe, 2022). A relatively small sample size was intentionally chosen to prioritize quality and depth over quantity (Smith et al., 2009), thus facilitating a comprehensive and nuanced exploration of the lived experiences of teachers and students in the IB MYP. This approach yields richer data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) that enables the identification of themes and patterns that capture the complexity of IS in the IB MYP context. Creswell (2014) noted that phenomenological studies involving heterogeneous populations typically have sample sizes ranging from 3–4 to 10–17 participants. Consequently, this study involved the recruitment of eight teachers and four students from three IB MYP schools in Jakarta, Indonesia. The demographics of these participants in this study are presented in the Table 1 below.

Table 1 *Participants in the Study*

Teachers			
Participant	Gender	Country of Origin	Teaching Experience
T1	F	New Zealand	11 years
T2	M	India	20 years
T3	F	Indonesia	15 years
T4	F	Kenya	22 years
T5	F	US	10 years
T6	F	Indonesia	17 years
T7	M	Indonesia	8 years
T8	F	Indonesia	14 years
Students			
Participant	Gender	Country of Origin	Living Abroad Experience
S1	M	India	14 years
S2	M	Indonesia	8 years
S3	F	Indonesia-France	10 years
S4	M	Japan-South Korea	10 years

Procedure and Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in English, which allowed participants to express their narratives in their own words while providing a flexible structure through which the research questions could be systematically addressed. All quotations are presented *verbatim* from the interview transcripts; where necessary, minor grammatical edits were made for clarity and are indicated in square brackets. The interviews in this study were conducted in two phases, with each session lasting 45–60 minutes. Several measures, such as interview guidelines that were meticulously developed to align with the study's two primary research questions, were implemented to ensure the accuracy and consistency of the findings and these guidelines underwent expert review by three specialists in intercultural education. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Malaya's Independent Research Institute (UM-REC), under approval number UM.TNC2/UMREC_2340, and informed consent was obtained from all participants through signed forms prior to the interviews. The study employed *member checking* to enhance the study's trustworthiness, as described by Merriam and Tisdell (2015). Participants were provided with their interview transcripts for verification, and their feedback was solicited. All participants confirmed the accuracy of the transcripts and reaffirmed their permission for the use of the verified data (including selected quotations) in this study. As lecturers with a sustained scholarly and professional commitment to intercultural education, we recognized that our positionality may influence the perspectives we emphasize and the interpretations we assign to participants' narratives, particularly concerning IS within the IB MYP contexts. To mitigate this, we kept reflexive memos and conducted regular peer debriefing within the research team, revisiting transcripts and refining codes when interpretations differed, and maintaining an audit trail of decisions.

Data Analysis

This study employed reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) to interpret interview transcripts and provide critical insight into the perspectives of teachers and students in the IB MYP schools. According to Braun and Clarke (2022), RTA consists of six phases that collectively form a structured approach for identifying, analysing, reflecting, and reporting recurring patterns or themes in qualitative data, thereby facilitating deeper analysis and discussion. First, the researchers immersed themselves in the data by reading and re-reading all interview transcripts. Second, they systematically coded the data to extract explicit content and interpret underlying concepts. Third, the coded data were clustered into initial themes, directly addressing the study's two research questions. Fourth, these themes were developed and reviewed to ensure coherence and consistency across the dataset. Fifth, concise definitions and core concepts were formulated for each theme to establish a central organizing framework. To support reflexivity throughout the analytic process, the researchers kept ongoing memos to record assumptions, emergent interpretations, and key decision points, and systematically revisited these reflections during coding and theme refinement to mitigate the influence of prior expectations. In addition, we conducted iterative peer debriefing within the team to critically examine interpretive choices and to ensure that the final themes remained firmly anchored in the interview data. Finally, the findings were synthesized into a cohesive and reflective report of the study's results. The researchers utilized NVivo 12 software throughout all the stages of this RTA process to facilitate data management and analysis.

Findings

The results were categorized into two principal themes, which were identified through a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts. Each theme is elucidated below, accompanied by relevant excerpts from the interviews.

Perceptions of Teachers and Students Regarding IS

The participants articulated IS as an ethical stance and a practical competence that consists of several key themes, such as respect, equality, open-mindedness, effective communication, understanding, and appreciating cultural differences. As S1 stated, “*IS means respecting others’ cultures and treating everyone as equal*”. Conversely, some experiences moved beyond attitude to skill, framing IS as something enacted through understanding and appreciation of differences. T3 conceptualized, “*IS is assumed as the ability to understand, appreciate, and respect the diversity of cultures of individuals*”. These statements suggest that participants locate IS at the intersection of values (respect) and capacities (perspective-taking, communicative flexibility). In addition, development is shaped by contextual constraints. T1’s comparative reflection illustrates sensitivity as an awareness of how linguistic repertoires and local interactional norms tend to condition intercultural engagement, and what *being sensitive* can look like in practice. As she stated,

I think the language was much more difficult in China and more people speak English in Indonesia. So, that’s helpful for me. Also, I think people in Indonesia are more interested in talking to foreigners and getting to know us. In China, they were shy.

Rather than treating intercultural encounters as uniformly available, T1 highlighted that opportunities to build rapport and demonstrate sensitivity depend on communicative access (shared language) and the perceived openness of interlocutors. Her account suggests that IS involves recognizing these situational dynamics, such as differing comfort levels when engaging outsiders and adapting one’s approach accordingly, rather than interpreting limited interaction (“*shy*” responses) as a personal rejection. In this way, the findings caution against conceptualizing IS as a purely individual trait, as its expression is mediated by the interactional environment and the relational possibilities it affords.

Participants’ experiences broadly align with IS as a foundation of intercultural competence, but they reveal different logics of practice. Several respondents, such as S1 and T3, foregrounded equality and respect as baseline attitudes. However, other participants argued that respect operates as acknowledgment of differences as well as how people navigate and respond to it. T4 advanced a restraint-based stance, as she stated, “*Keeping and talking about anything which may hurt somebody’s feeling is avoided. Actually, that is IS, it means no comments on anybody’s culture, behaviour, clothing, gender, or anything like that. It should be neutral, not biased*”. Analytically, this frames sensitivity as risk-avoidance to minimize potential offense rather than competence that is developed through inquiry, dialogue, and adaptive communication. Other testimonies illustrate sensitivity as an active engagement with differences. S2 recounted confronting stereotyping at school in Dubai, as he explained:

I was one of only three Indonesians in a school of about 4,000. Because I’m from Southeast Asia, some people called me a maid or a cook, or said I’d end up working at McDonald’s. I don’t take it personally, maybe I’m used to it from growing up in international settings. I usually confront them and ask, ‘Why would you say that?’ I remind myself it might come from a lack of understanding, not just closed-mindedness.

Therefore, IS is practiced through “*calling out*”, probing intent, attributing ignorance rather than malice, and inviting explanation, rather than staying silent. Complementing this, T7 underscored behavioural adaptation as an everyday discipline, as he stated, “*How I speak, how I behave, how I dress must reflect the diverse groups of people one interacts with*”. These accounts substantiate a distinction between sensitivity-as-avoidance that serves to maintain harmony and sensitivity-as-competence, which includes perspective-taking, inquiry, and adaptation. Consequently, while respect is necessary, it is not sufficient; IS becomes evident when participants engage with differences, scrutinize potential harm, and adjust their behaviour according to the context.

Participants' narratives across interviews positioned IS as a continuous and deliberate alignment with situated norms and interlocutors, rather than a static attitude. As T4 stated,

I find people here very polite and kind, generally not loud or outgoing. I think that's cultural. Because, I have taught in Egypt, where people are much louder. So, the contrast stands out. Indonesians seem quiet, laid-back, and very friendly.

Although T4 does not explicitly frame this observation in terms of IS, the account illustrates IS as an interactional competence enacted through recognizing culturally patterned communicative styles and recalibrating one's interpretations and responses to align with local norms. Several participants, moving beyond broad invocations of respect, had identified the mechanisms that help develop IS, namely open-mindedness and communicative effort. T5 remarked, "IS is about recognizing that cultural differences can lead to misunderstandings. So, being a good communicator and open-mindedness can resolve them". S4's reflection underscores how first impressions can obstruct contact unless countered through dialogue:

Let's say my face looks kind of scary. So, people avoid me and don't try to get to know me. But, I might actually be a good person with a nice personality, we might even share interests, like sports. If people looked past appearances and got to know me, we could have more fun and build a real connection.

Both accounts suggest that bridging cultural divides can be achieved through clear and empathetic dialogue. It implies a deeper understanding of cultural complexities and a willingness to engage with individuals whose life experiences may differ from one's own. T4's and S4's narratives, when taken together, illuminate how IS was interpreted as a relational practice shaped through dialogue and interpersonal engagement. Extending the earlier point about contextual affordances, participants emphasized that enacting IS requires situational judgment and behavioural flexibility across cultural settings. T1 emphasized behavioural flexibility across settings, as she stated "...in New Zealand, asking someone how many children they have is okay. But in other countries, you can't do that". Complementing this, T2 detailed the practical work of adapting under sociolinguistic constraints:

When I first taught in Indonesia, especially in primary school the language barrier was tough. Many students didn't understand much English, and my accent was different from what they expected. I slowed down, used gestures, and after a few months it got easier. Jokes with some Western colleagues were hard too. I didn't always get the context, so I kept a neutral face. Then, we learned each other's style, and communication got easier.

These experiences position IS as a dynamic competence, performed through perspective-taking, communicative openness and iterative adjustment to audience and context, rather than as a passive ethic of courtesy.

Communication and emotional awareness emerge as being pivotal to cultivating IS toward cultural differences. As S3 remarked, "We need to understand and to be sensitive towards their emotions, because the way they're brought up through their culture may not be the same as ours". Complementing this emphasis on affect, T7, as an Indonesian teacher, underscored how shared practices can anchor empathy. He stated:

We have students from several countries, such as Malaysia, Taiwan, and more. Even with our differences, we share some traditions, like Chinese New Year. It is celebrated in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Taiwan. Sharing these cultural beliefs helps build understanding and empathy, and having a common celebration creates a sense of unity and harmony.

S3 and T7 highlight an often-under-explored dimension in the competence literature, whereby IS is developed not only through cognition (knowing about differences) but also through how emotion functions (attuning to others' feelings) and relational practices (organizing common rituals that sustain unity). Participants also drew attention to IS's behavioural aspects, as to how it appears in outward responses and not merely inward attitudes. Therefore, T2 defined IS by saying, *"The reaction or the attitudes that are given by people toward other people from different cultures"*. This definition centres the observable expression of IS involving recognizing differences internally, as well as acknowledging and honouring it in practice.

S4, who identifies as Japanese-Korean, foregrounded tolerance as a gateway to relationship-building in perceiving IS. He stated, *"Even though you might think that it is wrong or disagree, I think it is very important to try to get to know other cultures, so that we all can know each other"*. This positions IS as recognition of differences and an intentional move toward engagement that can build mutual respect and empathy. Similarly, T3 framed tolerance positively but insisted on contextual boundaries that balance inclusion with local norms, as she stated:

For me, tolerance includes freedom, equality, respect, acceptance, and appreciating culture. I agree with that, but with limits. We also need boundaries based on context. For example, some non-Indonesian students might be used to wearing tank tops or crop tops at home. That's fine in their culture, but at school in Indonesia, we should follow local norms. So yes, be tolerant, but also consider others' cultures and the community's expectations.

However, another participant problematized *"tolerance"* as an endpoint. T1 cautioned that the term can mask mere forbearance rather than understanding, as she stated:

I don't know if tolerance is a good thing. To be honest, because tolerance means you don't like something, but you will put up with it. And I think, it is better to try to understand something rather than just put up with it. So, I'm not sure what word that would be. But for me, tolerance is a little bit negative.

These experiences differentiate minimalist *"putting up with"* from deeper efforts to make sense of others' practices.

T8 further clarified that understanding does not entail endorsement, as she illustrated, *"In Spain, they're very big into bullfighting. That's not something I personally agree with, but I understand. I have listened to Spaniards and why they believe that bullfighting is a great tradition"*. These testimonies portray IS as a continuum from tolerance toward informed understanding, where the aim is to acknowledge disagreement while sustaining engagement, rather than requiring agreement or assimilation. Moreover, T6 emphasized the importance of appreciation in IS, as she stated, *"I guess IS [is] like appreciating other people's culture and [not] judging people right away"*. This perspective underscored the significance of engaging without judgment and valuing diversity without hastily forming conclusions or stereotypes. The interviews characterized IS as a complex and dynamic practice rather than a static trait. Participants consistently identified respect as fundamental, yet they also emphasized that genuine IS necessitates continuous learning and adaptation, including active engagement, empathy, and behavioural flexibility in everyday interactions. Participants' experiences conceptualized IS as an evolving competence manifested through perspective-taking, communicative effort, and situational adjustment, rather than merely declarative attitudes. This broader understanding positions IS as being essential for maintaining constructive relationships and equitable participation in multicultural contexts.

Strategies for Developing IS

Findings suggest that the development of IS is more contingent on the implementation of practices in classroom pedagogy, co-curricular design, disciplinary learning, and everyday interactions, rather than merely on verbal affirmations of respect. Participants consistently identified the classroom as the primary setting for practice through structured and practical engagement. As S2 asserted:

The best way to develop IS is to apply skill in a practical environment, such as doing group work in discussion. In group work, whether you want it or not, you have to talk to people with different thinking patterns.

Group work functions as an interactive mechanism that necessitates perspective-taking, negotiation of meaning, and the resolution of miscommunication. Another participant, T1, highlighted the importance of calibrating risk to ensure productive dialogue rather than merely being performative, by noting:

I'm just careful because I'm not always sure what's okay to discuss here. I think it is important for students to know what's happening in the world. In other places I've taught, we talked about things like U.S. elections as they happened and smaller conflicts around the globe. I just avoid highly sensitive topics, as teens can have strong opinions from home without fully understanding them.

These perspectives conceptualize classroom discussions as a form of scaffolded openness that involves integrating external perspectives while adjusting exposure to align with developmental readiness and community standards.

Co-curricular activities, beyond the confines of the classroom, are characterized as transforming “differences” into an opportunity for inquiry and role-taking. T2 commented:

We have lots of activities that bring everyone together, sports teams play as one, without focusing on nationality. There's also the Greenhouse Committee working on environmental projects, and clubs like World Scholar's Cup and MUN [Model United Nations] where students discuss cultures, current events, and global issues. In MUN, for example, each student represents a country, so they research its culture, language, and problems to really understand it.

The co-curricular activities described by T2 normalize cross-cultural inquiry and project-based learning that encourages students to transcend stereotypes and adopt the perspective of the “other” in order to formulate well-reasoned arguments. This approach embodies IS as an active practice rather than merely an attitudinal position.

IS emerges as discipline-specific work, rather than a generic “soft skill”. Teachers utilize subject content to highlight global diversity and its civic implications. As T8 explained:

There are lots of biology topics tied to global issues like global warming, pollution, and 'life below water' from the SDGs. When we discuss these, there's an IS side too, because different communities experience and respond to them in different ways.

Science becomes a platform for comparative reasoning about uneven exposures, resources, and responses across communities. In addition, students recognized this integrative logic in the timetable. For instance, S1 remarked:

Before starting a topic, I consider its relevance now and in the future. English develops debating, writing, and public speaking for professional contexts. Mathematics supports exams, university study, workplace tasks, and basic business finance. Science (especially environmental and societal topics) introduces sustainable practices and potential career paths. Physical Education builds lifelong health habits. Additional languages expand study and career opportunities across countries. I plan my learning with these applications in mind.

Therefore, the subjects are conceptualized as avenues for the development of applied IS, including areas such as argumentation, quantitative reasoning, sustainability literacy, health practices, and multilingual accessibility.

The IB MYP, in this study, plays a significant role in instilling IS among teachers and students. As T6 noted:

In IB, the six global contexts guide every unit and lesson. They focus on real global issues and how people live together; fairness and development (how we share resources), scientific and technical innovation (how learning improves life), globalization and sustainability, and more. In my English class, for example, we discuss topics like female empowerment, political instability, police brutality, mass incarceration, and human rights. IB also encourages us to use the UN's 17 SDGs. The goal isn't just to pass exams; it is to help students become thoughtful people and future leaders.

Furthermore, S3 remarked:

I don't think we have a formal plan for IS. It is just part of many subjects because we're an international school, especially in Individual and Society (I&S subject), where we learn about the world and society. We need to be IS to understand different countries. So, we're always practicing it.

This perspective aligns with T7's assertion that IS is cultivated through the development of IM. He stated:

Learning is not just something that happens in a particular context. When we are looking at our students, we need to look at our students with the end goal in mind. That they will become adults in a society where they can work and live in anywhere right now. Because of the fact that our end goal with students is not for students who are in especially an IB setup, because one of the things that we talk about in the IB region is that we aim to nurture students who are IM.

This approach reflects a more introspective stance, whereby developing IS is perceived as a gradual internalization of a global mindset. T7 suggested that developing IS has a significant correlation with the implementation of IM. In addition, T2 emphasized:

Implementing the values of IM is crucial. For instance, when discussing a particular topic, it is essential to consider the global issues related to that topic. This approach connects the discussion to IM or intercultural skills in IB program. By developing this profile, students become more open-minded toward individuals who differ from themselves.

T2 proposed that teachers can facilitate the connection between local and international issues by encouraging students to contemplate global issues related to their topics, thereby promoting an awareness of global interconnectedness. This is particularly significant in international educational settings, where students from diverse cultural backgrounds engage in learning together. S4 also acknowledged that his school supports local culture, as illustrated by “*I haven’t really participated on my own, but [School 2] has lots of assemblies that include Indonesian traditions. Recently we had a New Peace Celebration. I joined in to learn more about Indonesian culture*”.

Positive engagement among teachers has been identified as a systemic mechanism for enhancing IS, facilitated by two interrelated dynamics, namely localized norm literacy and epistemic equality, that are bolstered by the explicit articulation of shared values. Extending the earlier point about contextual specificity, participants emphasized the need for professional guidance that operationalizes respect into locally appropriate communicative and behavioural practices. T2 remarked:

Yeah, there should be guidance, because some issues are sensitive and not every community accepts the same things. Teachers need training on what’s okay to say or do locally. For example, in parts of Indonesia, using the left hand can be seen as impolite. I’m left-handed, so that’s tricky for me, training on things like this would help.

Professional learning is framed as a type of normative literacy that helps prevent unintended offenses and promotes assured participation. Equally crucial is creating a collegial environment that dismisses hierarchical distinctions based on nationality. T7 expressed:

I see myself as no different from others. We may have different cultures and perspectives, but our knowledge is equal. When I collaborate, I feel we’re on the same level. Nationality doesn’t define what someone knows. We all have the same opportunities though sometimes, I notice some Indonesians feel inferior to other cultures, and I don’t think they should.

Finally, articulating local values provides a shared moral vocabulary for everyday coordination. As T8 shared,

I’m from Indonesia, so my culture is Indonesian. We value togetherness being kind and polite to each other. Of course, each province has its own traditions, but over-all we emphasize community, respect, and especially politeness from younger people to elders.

Participants identified enduring and positive teacher–student relationships that are grounded in trust, psychological safety, and sustained opportunities for interaction, as foundational conditions for developing IS. Such relationships are more readily cultivated in classroom environments that welcome international perspectives while accommodating diverse participation styles and varying levels of communicative comfort. As T1 noted, “*It feels very open-minded. Most students are Indonesian, but they come from different cultural backgrounds. And even though there aren’t many international students, people are willing to engage with international ideas*”. These experiences indicate that openness alone is inadequate, hence, teachers must construct interactional pathways that mitigate initial contact risks and ensure that cross-cultural engagement is perceived as safe and purposeful.

Participants emphasized the significance of acknowledging and accommodating distinct discourse norms and access needs. As T3 observed,

In my classes, I’ve noticed different styles. Some students from the U.S. or Australia tend to speak up and ask questions openly. Many of my Asian students, like Indonesian

students will ask sensitive questions one-on-one instead. The mix of cultures shapes how we interact. I've also seen many Indian and Korean students show strong interest and skill in math; they often say they're motivated by competitive university goals.

In practice, inclusion was achieved through flexible language use and multiple participation channels. These experiences conceptualize teacher–student relationships as intentionally inclusive, whereby teachers validate diverse interaction styles (public, one-to-one), employ codeswitching to enhance accessibility, and deliberately scaffold initial interactions. This approach ensures that IS is cultivated through supported engagement rather than assumed predispositions.

Peer relationships emerged as a crucial circumstance where IS is learned through everyday practice. Students described how intentional mixing creates low-stakes and repeated contact across difference. S1 gave the following illustration:

Teachers put us in groups or assign them, so we meet new people instead of always working with the same friends. They want us to mix as much as possible, without focusing on who's from which country. Everyone brings their own culture, values, and beliefs, so we can learn from each person we meet.

Assigned heterogeneous groups serve as a contact structure that facilitates collaboration and frames cultural diversity as a collective resource for learning, rather than an obstacle to be managed. Concurrently, students highlighted the interactional skills necessary for maintaining the productivity of such exchanges. S2 noted:

It really depends on the person or group you're talking to. My friends and I like discussing global issues, race, religion, gender, so those topics come up. You have to be careful, though; some people find them sensitive. In Indonesia, religion is especially important, so it helps to know your audience and adjust what you say to avoid offending anyone.

This points to audience awareness and message calibration as core peer competencies around high-salience topics. Students also framed self-directed learning about others as a relational duty that reduces the risk of inadvertent harm. As S3 observed,

One big way is research. If you want better relationships across cultures, learn about people's backgrounds yourself. I'm from France and have friends from Korea and Japan, there are big differences, but we understand each other enough to avoid causing offense. It is better to learn first than to talk blindly, it shows you care and are trying not to hurt anyone.

These experiences suggest that peer interactions enhance IS in educational settings by facilitating diverse groupings. Students engage in audience-sensitive dialogue and exhibit informed curiosity. In this context, IS transcends by being merely a disposition and becomes a developed practice that involves mixing, listening, adjusting, and learning to maintain respectful and substantive exchanges.

Discussion

Formulating Perceptions of IS

Teachers and students in the IB MYP emphasized that IS involves an intellectual understanding of cultural diversity, and also a commitment to treating others with respect and equality, being open-minded,

communicating effectively, showing understanding, and appreciating cultural differences. Their experiences were broadly consistent with the notion that IS forms a foundation for intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2009), but they also revealed distinct interpretations in practice. In the participants' view, IS lies at the intersection of key values (respect) and capacities (perspective-taking, communicative flexibility). They also highlighted that a willingness to ask questions, seek clarification, and remain curious about others' experiences is crucial for resolving cultural miscommunications before they escalate, a view consistent with Ferguson (2024). This proactive communicative stance supports the view that IS entails passive tolerance and active engagement fuelled by genuine curiosity and empathy. Furthermore, the enactment of IS is shaped by contextual constraints and requires deep engagement, as suggested by Dervin and Simpson (2021). In practice, IS is demonstrated by "calling out" (actively probing intent, assuming ignorance rather than malice, and inviting explanation) rather than by remaining silent. This conceptualization characterizes IS as an interactional strategy for constructive engagement, whereby individuals address tension through clarification and mutual understanding rather than through withdrawal.

This study's participants actively engaged in intercultural interactions by demonstrating perspective-taking, communicative openness, and iterative adaptation to their audience and context, rather than treating such engagement as a passive courtesy. This proactive approach aligns with Peng and Dervin's (2024) conceptualization of IS as a transformative tool for addressing global inequalities and political injustices. This perspective also resonates with Chen and Starosta's (2000) assertion that respect for cultural differences is a fundamental indicator of IS. Participants' ethical orientation was evident in their emphasis on "*learning first before talking*" to prevent unintended offense, indicating that emotional awareness and self-regulation are integral to the practice of IS. Participants perceived IS, based on their experiences, as an ongoing adjustment to local expectations. This approach is not merely about accommodating Western perspectives, but it also necessitates the integration of the host country's local values, in line with R'Boul and Dervin's (2023) call for more inclusive intercultural frameworks. Such an approach responds to recent calls for incorporating more diverse and non-Western perspectives into intercultural research. This study illuminates how global intercultural frameworks manifest in an Indonesian setting, given that the IB schools have predominantly been studied in Western contexts. In doing so, it directly contributes to expanding the range of geographic and cultural perspectives represented in intercultural communication research. Consequently, a more nuanced understanding emerges of how global-local dynamics influence perceptions of IS.

Participants emphasized that IS entails ensuring that one's behaviours and comments do not inflict harm on others, hence, highlighting the critical role of emotional awareness and self-regulation in intercultural exchanges. This observation resonates with the emotional dimensions articulated by Tuncel and Paker (2018), who underscored the importance of emotional engagement in creating respectful and effective intercultural communication. The findings further suggest that IS can be conceptualized as a continuum ranging from tolerance to informed understanding, where the objective is to acknowledge and navigate disagreement while sustaining engagement, rather than insisting on consensus or cultural assimilation. However, this continuum warrants further exploration, as the concept of tolerance itself is inherently multi-perspectival and context-dependent. In addition, the data revealed a nuanced distinction between sensitivity-as-avoidance, which aims to preserve harmony through non-confrontation, and sensitivity-as-competence, characterized by active perspective-taking, critical inquiry, and adaptive behaviour, an area that also requires deeper investigation. Therefore, while respect remains a foundational element, it is insufficient on its own as IS becomes most evident when individuals engage directly with cultural differences, assess potential harm and responsively modify their behaviour consistent with the situational context.

Communication and open-mindedness emerged as central dimensions of IS, reinforcing previous research that highlighted these traits as foundational for navigating cultural differences (Deardorff, 2009).

This finding aligns closely with Moloney et al.'s (2023) model of IS, which emphasizes the roles of openness, flexibility, and adaptability in facilitating meaningful intercultural interactions. Participants consistently stressed the importance of effective communication as a strategy for addressing potential misunderstandings arising from cultural differences, echoing insight from Ferguson (2024) and Storz and Hoffman (2018). Other than functional communication, participants underscored the need to engage others without judgment and to resist forming premature conclusions or stereotypes. This active and reflective stance supports the view that IS is not limited to cognitive recognition of cultural variation but also involves dialogic and empathetic interaction, as suggested by Trisnawati, Kamaruddin, et al. (2025).

Participants framed open-mindedness as a necessary condition for understanding perspectives shaped by different lived experiences by positioning it as a core element of intercultural competence. One recurring theme was the willingness to tolerate, even when not personally endorsing cultural practices that diverge from one's own norms. This view reflects a more complex and inclusive understanding of tolerance, as described by Aksin (2023), whereby IS involves recognizing the legitimacy of diverse practices while maintaining respectful engagement. Participants' reflections reinforced IS's requirement for sustained efforts to understand, not necessarily agree with, cultural differences. This nuanced orientation is captured in Chen and Starosta's (2000) dimension of "interaction engagement" that highlights the importance of active and reciprocal participation in intercultural communication.

This study's findings also reinforce the view that IS is not a fixed attribute, but an evolving competence value shaped by continued exposure, learning, and self-reflection. Participants described their growth in IS as a dynamic process informed by real-world intercultural interactions, thereby supporting the developmental perspective advanced by Yuan et al. (2025). This trajectory reflects a shift away from treating IS as a static collection of skills, instead emphasizing its emergence through dialogic and adaptive experiences. In line with Aksin (2023) and Tardif-Grenier et al. (2022), participants recognized the influence of personality, especially openness to experience as a facilitator of intercultural engagement. Those who demonstrated a greater willingness to interact across cultural boundaries often reported deeper awareness and empathy, suggesting that personal disposition plays a critical role in shaping IS. Participants repeatedly emphasized the need to be mindful of others' feelings, cultural norms, and the emotional implications of their own behaviour. Such affective labour is often invisible in traditional competence models but surfaces as being central to navigating cross-cultural interactions in an ethical and relational manner. While Moloney et al. (2023) proposed that empathy and reflection are core components of interculturality, some participants' responses suggested a more situational and emotionally grounded development of sensitivity that may not always follow reflective or abstract principles. This divergence points to a need for further theorization on how emotional intelligence and context-specific adaptation intersect in intercultural education frameworks.

Developing IS: Insight from Teachers and Students

Participants highlighted the importance of direct learning strategies and practical engagement with diverse cultural contexts as a crucial approach for developing IS. They emphasized that in group work, the integration of global contexts in each subject, support from the IB curriculum, and immersive experiences are essential for IS development, as these activities require interaction with individuals from varied cultural backgrounds. This approach aligns with the findings of Estaji and Tabrizi (2022b), which suggested that IS is not an abstract concept but requires active involvement in real-world settings. For instance, teachers' intentional assignment of students to mixed peer groups operates as contact scaffolding by structuring equal-status and shared-goal interactions. Teachers create conditions under which intercultural dialogue becomes routine, low-stakes, and ultimately normalized, which is consistent with the IB mission. The existing literature emphasizes the role of teachers as cultural

facilitators in connection to IB curriculum, as mentioned by Zeng (2024). However, while this study confirms that teachers play a crucial enabling role (by forming inclusive groups and validating multiple communication styles), its findings suggest that the actual *work* of developing IS is done by the students themselves. In other words, teachers provide the structural support and norms, but intercultural learning occurs through peer practice.

The findings, in the Indonesian context, demonstrate how these global ideals can be developed locally by normalizing cross-cultural peer collaboration, and students actively practicing being “global citizens” in their day-to-day school life, while still accepting and considering local values. This peer-driven approach may help address critiques that IB programs sometimes remain superficial or cater only to privileged groups, as stated by Maire and Windle (2021) and Belal (2017). However, this study revealed that students regularly engaged with multiple perspectives in meaningful ways. Participants also emphasized the significance of IM in cultivating a global perspective and IS for equipping students to navigate and thrive in an interconnected world, as corroborated by Trisnawati, Zakaria, et al. (2025) and Jurasaitė-O’Keefe (2022). This perspective aligns with existing literature (Singh & Qi, 2013), which argues that international education frameworks, especially the IB curriculum, provide a key pedagogical foundation for developing IS.

The relational aspect of IS, in the context of the Indonesian IB MYP studied, is particularly pronounced. Classrooms are transformed into environments that serve as academic learning spaces as well as social-emotional communities for teachers and students. IS manifests through daily acts of kindness, empathy, patience, solidarity, and adaptability, as noted by Chernoff (2022) and Dervin (2022). Participants’ focus on the emotional dimension of intercultural interactions corroborates the notion that IS is expressed through caring behaviours (Othman & Ruslan, 2020) and responsive communication in everyday school life. This understanding supports the existing literature that advocates the integration of social-emotional learning with intercultural education, thus enabling students and teachers to navigate cultural differences with intellectual openness and empathetic concern. This study provided evidence that the development of IS is an interactive and continuous process by identifying peer interaction as a critical site for learning, including specific skills such as language calibration and informed curiosity. This insight is novel in emphasizing that the classroom’s everyday social structure is as crucial for developing IS as any formal curriculum.

This study’s participants emphasized that IS is enhanced when language learning and everyday classroom interactions enable students to engage cultural differences while still affirming and sharing their local identities. Another prominent theme in the literature is the role of language acquisition to enhance IS, as explored by Tardif-Grenier et al. (2022) and Grant et al. (2024). Findings from this study corroborate this perspective, with participants acknowledging the necessity of language learning for facilitating communication across cultural boundaries. Consistent with Poole’s (2019) argument that global and local dynamics are not inherently oppositional, this present study’s findings indicate that intercultural learning and local cultural integration can proceed hand-in-hand through teacher-student engagement and students’ peer collaboration. Hence, students were not losing their local identities but actively sharing them with others. This exchange allowed them to engage with diverse perspectives and broaden their cultural horizons while remaining grounded in their own traditions. The present findings complicate critiques advanced by Belal (2017) and Roiha and Sommer (2021), that the IB MYP could marginalize local contexts. The results indicate that international education can effectively engage with local diversity rather than supplant it through intentional pedagogical strategies. In Indonesia, the IB MYP possesses the potential to cultivate IM as well as enhance social harmony and develop an appreciation for local cultural awareness through sustained and respectful engagement with diversity in the school community’s daily life.

Conclusions

This study elucidated that in the context of Indonesian IB MYP schools, IS transcends mere cognitive awareness of cultural differences that embody relational, affective, and behavioral competencies manifested in daily interactions. Teachers and students conceptualize IS as a dynamic and evolving process characterized by perspective-taking, emotional awareness, and ethical communicative practices, such as posing clarifying questions and engaging respectfully with cultural differences. These findings suggest that IS is cultivated through repeated structured peer interactions and teacher-facilitated scaffolding, where mixed grouping, dialogue, and experiential learning instils a sustained commitment to global engagement. The study further demonstrated how teachers and students maintain their local cultural identities while engaging globally, countering critiques that IB MYP often fail to meaningfully incorporate local context. In this manner, IB MYP classrooms function as places of academic instruction as well as socio-emotional spaces where IM is practiced in grounded and context-sensitive ways. Participants also acknowledged that they were indeed implementing IM as a core component of the IB curriculum, despite their unfamiliarity with the concept of IS. They emphasized the importance of personal reflection and introspective exploration of one's cultural identity as essential strategies for developing IS. This underscores the significance of experiential learning and personal engagement in intercultural education that reinforces the notion that IS cannot be fully developed in isolation but requires interaction and reflection.

Nevertheless, this study is constrained by certain limitations that invite further inquiry. The study's phenomenological design, small sample size, and focus on a single educational setting in Indonesia may limit its generalizability to non-IB or non-Asian contexts. Moreover, reliance on self-reported data, while rich in depth, may not fully capture actual behavioural patterns or long-term IS transformations. The findings carry important implications, despite these constraints. This study suggested that international education frameworks, like the IB, should prioritize peer-led interaction, culturally responsive pedagogy, and context-specific emotional learning as a foundation for IS development. Teachers' professional development should include training on creating inclusive and culturally adaptive environments where students can safely explore identity, differences, and shared humanity. Furthermore, policymakers and educators should consider how global values can be intentionally integrated with local traditions to create more equitable and meaningful intercultural learning experiences in diverse school settings.

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