ABSTRACT

The degree to which international immersion programs affect participants can be influenced by and attributed to their experiences in the host country or community. Embedded critical experiences allow participants to immerse themselves within the breadth and depth of humanity, thus fostering connections and relationships. Further, critical experiences can heighten emotions and disrupt values discourse. A mini-ethnographic case study of 20 Australian pre-service teachers' immersion in Kenya explored the impact of embedded critical experiences on participants' values, emotions, and relationships. Analysis of participants' journals, researcher's field notes and recorded debrief sessions identified key themes: emotions are heightened; values are questioned; relationships build community through positive connections; and relationships and understanding are at the core of teaching. Embedded critical experiences allowed for points of comparison across the data, which illustrated that while the participants valued the immersion for many reasons, the cultural interface of those experiences had the most significant impact

CRITICAL EXPERIENCES IN AN INTERCULTURAL IMMERSION PROGRAM IN KENYA

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Universities are increasing the range and scope of opportunities offered to students to improve intercultural competency. Global interconnectedness has opened communities to diverse cultures, beliefs and events that transform understandings of the world (Bamber, Lewin & White 2018). Of the many developmental outcomes of these types of global activities is intercultural competence (Berka, Erickson, & Pérez-Ibáñez, 2022). Smolcic & Katunich (2017) defined a cultural immersion experience as removing individuals from a familiar culture and environment. Embedded critical experiences, as part of cultural immersions, allow participants to immerse themselves within the breadth and depth of humanity (Onosu, 2021). Further, critical experiences can foster connections and relationships whilst also heightening emotions and disrupting values discourse (Myers, 2020).

Within Australia, undergraduate teacher education programs are being framed and transformed as they adopt a set of national professional teaching standards (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) (2011; 2015). Located within these standards is the tenet of developing greater cultural competence, expressly Standards 1.3, which requires teachers to understand students' diverse cultural backgrounds and 1.4, which specifies teachers understand the impact of cultural identity on education. It has become critical for teachers to have the requisite pedagogical knowledge and skills to meet the increasing cultural diversity of students (Szelei, Tinoca, & Pinho, 2020). In addition to the national standards, intercultural competence is one of seven general

capabilities included in the Australian Curriculum, requiring teachers to critically reflect on their cultural perspective and practices to respond effectively to others. Through the Australian Curriculum, the development of dispositions including empathy, respect and responsibility are critical to the development of intercultural competence (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2014)

This article reports on a mini-ethnographic case study of 20 Australian pre-service teachers' (PSTs) three-week immersion to Kenya. One goal of the immersion is to build intercultural competence transferrable to their future profession. In the study, the PSTs would undergo several cultural struggles as part of planned critical experiences to enhance and deepen their experience. This article explores these embedded critical experiences and the effects on participants' values, emotions, and relationships as part of their intercultural competence. Analysis of participants' field journals identified the following key themes: emotions are heightened because of their experiences, which then causes values to be questioned. Participants establish relationships and build community through positive connections, which aids in their professional understanding that relationships and consideration of the child are at the core of teaching.

Literature Review

Harmon defined the internationalisation of higher education as a "process of integrating international or intercultural dimensions into the teaching, research and service functions of institutions" (2006, p.120). The drive towards greater internationalisation has led to international activities within universities to expand in volume, scope and complexity (De Wit, & Altbach, 2021). Such activities include study abroad, exchange and immersion programs, and internships (Gozik, & Oguro, 2020).

Intercultural immersions occur within various sociocultural platforms, which have significant potential to shape one's identity (Duxbury & Richards, 2019). Seminal research by Lave & Wenger (1991) viewed identity as a component of social practice, embedding the construction of identity within a variety of communities: "We define ourselves by what we are not as well as by what we are, by the communities we do not belong to as well as by the ones we do. These relationships change. We move from community to community. In doing so, we carry a bit of each as we go around" (p. 239). Identity as belonging or positioning is surmised by Urrieta & Noblit (2018, p. 4), posits that identity was initially used to describe how one positioned oneself but is now "a self-concept or self-perception that is both existential and categorical, individual and sociocultural, and that shifts and develops over time." Identity, in part, is considered an aspect of one's culture, which in turn is characteristic of a social system.
Bayart (2005), suggests that the terms cultural and identity combined make the concept a contested one, as the two words are polysemic, slippery and illusory as analytical categories. Through a social and cultural lens, identity is concerned about how individuals come to understand themselves and how they "come to 'see' who they are, through the social and cultural 'worlds' that they participate in and how they relate to others within and outside of these worlds" (Urrieta & Noblit, 2018, p. 17). The Ancient Greek aphorism γνῶθι σεαυτόν was inscribed in the pronaos of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi. The phrase, as explained by Socrates, translates to: know thyself. As Socrates

taught, the unexamined life is not worth living. To know thyself is the beginning of all wisdom. Avraamidou, (2020), posits that examining identity requires an individual to respond to the question, where do I belong? Previous research by Dervin (2012) contended that one's identity cannot be reduced to a single element but instead is related to people's individual and collective positioning. Social and cultural perspectives allow for critical thinking on identity in more nuanced and complex ways. Identity influences the way we see the world and informs our experiences. Through this lens, cultural immersions engage individuals in meaningful, direct, cross-cultural interactions, increasing the likelihood of developing cultural understanding and empathy, which provides both affective and consciousness-raising learning experiences (Badenhorst, Martin, & Smolcic, 2023). In addition, learning resulting from cultural immersion has been shown to challenge participants' biases and stereotypes, encourage participants' self-reflections and help participants confront prejudice and racism (Barnes, 2022; DeRicco & Sciarra, 2005), which are all relevant and crucial for effective teaching.

Exposing participants to a culture that is markedly different to their own in its language, ethnicity, socio-economic status and physical exceptionality is referred to by Houser (2008) as taking a cultural plunge. Houser's approach consists of three phases: the initial experience (or plunge), a written piece that describes the experiences and reflects on personal insights, and a small or whole group discussion. During phase one, or the cultural plunge, culture shock is likely to occur. Culture shock occurs when one is placed into an environment with different symbols and different ideas of acceptable levels of risk than what one would encounter in their own culture which can then shape identity (Pacheco, 2020).

The current study aligns with the concept by Smolcic and Kanunich (2017, p.51), where "programs attempt to immerse program participants in a different cultural context, participants often live in a homestay situation and have some type of teaching or assisting teacher role in schools and classrooms." This particular program accomplished this through immersion in a foreign culture and planning critical experiences, which take the form of culture shock. Oberg (1960) popularised the term culture shock defining it as the 'anxiety that results from losing all of our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse' (p.177). In other words, if individuals define and negotiate reality through their symbolic representations of life, this reality is called into question when facing alternative representations (Irwin, 2007).

Elements of taking a cultural plunge, in the form of critical incidents, intended to cause culture shock and were reference points for participants' experiences. The intention was that the critical experiences would be significant points in the immersion that all students would journal about without being told or encouraged to. These included access to potable water, witnessing extreme poverty, communication difficulties, and general feelings of overwhelm resulting from differing cultural norms, giving the researchers various points of comparison between participants.

This paper focuses on five embedded critical experiences that entrenched interculturality. Research conducted in previous years (2013, 2014, 2015) on this immersion identified these encounters as critical in the cultural interface for the students. These encounters were validated as critical in the current cohorts' experiences and emerged as trends in the data analysis. The experiences induced themes consistent with critical incidents in research literature (Green, & Johnson, 2023):

heightened emotions, questioning values; community building through positive relationships; and understanding relationships as the core of teaching.

Method

This research is a mini ethnography employing a case study design within an interpretivist paradigm. The researcher is positioned as the immersion leader, which allows for ethnographic observation, and a participant. PSTs were required to keep a journal documenting their experiences throughout the immersion. Participants decided which experiences they wrote about, with the only requirements being that all entries include the date, a factual log of the event(s) that occurred and a personal reflection that included their thoughts and feelings. PSTs' journals were triangulated using researcher field notes and audio recordings taken during small group discussions, which were a regular part of the immersion experience, but also doubled as data collection for the project. The researcher handwrote her field notes throughout the immersion, which included detailed notes during and directly following each critical experience. The audio-recorded discussions occurred on three occasions following each of the critical experiences. PST journals, researcher field notes and recorded discussions were all coded. To generate and develop initial codes within each dataset, words and or phrases repeated in the set were logged. Once this was complete, words, word synonyms and phrases were grouped and entered into a spreadsheet and assigned an initial code. Two researchers independently assigned codes. The researchers then switched spreadsheets and considered the other set of codes. Finally, the codes noted by both researchers were accepted and others were negotiated between them to ensure that all codes were carefully considered, confirming they captured the broader pattern of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Participants

The participants in this study were all PSTs in their second or third year of a four-year degree. The principles of service learning characterise this immersion, which is designed as a pedagogical tool that includes: experiential learning, reciprocity, relationships and critical thinking. In 2016, 32 PSTs elected to participate in the immersion program. Of the thirty-two, 20 (62.5%) agreed to participate. Most participants were female (90%, n = 18), with two males (10%). All were aged between 19 and 27 and studying to be primary school teachers at a private Catholic university in Sydney, Australia.

Critical Experiences

The immersion program embeds the following critical experiences: Aberdare Ranges Primary School, New Canaan Village, Miti Mingi Village, Giotto dump slum and Homestays. Each is described below within the context of its role in the immersion.

Aberdare Ranges Primary School

Approximately 400–500 children attend the Aberdare Ranges Primary School each day. The children are primarily from the New Caanan Village. Participants delivered a combination of creative and practical arts and sport-related learning

activities to the children at Aberdare Ranges Primary School. Participants were placed into groups of three or four and assigned to a class for the two weeks of the school-based immersion working with children aged 4–14. Each day commenced at 8:30 am and finished at midday when the school provided all the children and PSTs a hot meal for lunch, which was a particularly culturally confronting time for the PSTs. Lunch generally consisted of rice or ugali (a maise porridge), with either beans, kale or, occasionally, goat meat, most of which was completely foreign for the PSTs. Additionally, the PSTs ate with their hands instead of utensils, which was also an unfamiliar experience. It is important to note that because the PSTs were staying in homestays in a fairly remote location, there was no opportunity to choose other foods. In other words, if they didn't like what was served, they either ate it or went hungry. PSTs were also expected to assist in the school kitchen, either serving meals or washing up plates.

New Canaan Village

New Canaan Village was previously known as the Pipeline Internally Displaced Person (IDP) Camp, home to approximately 1,000 families, made up of IDPs fleeing from the internecine violence stemming from the 2007 Kenyan general elections. The village lies about one kilometre east of Aberdare Ranges Primary School, and many children who attend the school also live there. Initially, shelter in the village consisted almost solely of tents supplied by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. However, as of June 2017, these tents have been replaced by rudimentary buildings. These buildings consist of corrugated iron supported by a wooden frame and cost approximately $900AUD to build.

The PSTs were officially welcomed by the village elders, allowing them to enter the village and go into homes when invited. In addition, many PSTs would walk with the children to the village after school and participate in various activities. The intention of exposing them to a local town that was once a refugee camp was to help them understand the context of the school where they volunteered and the experiences of the children and their families.

Miti Mingi Village

Miti Mingi Village is home to 120 orphaned or vulnerable children. Each of these children comes from a background where, for different reasons, they could not remain with their family or community. The village is located approximately 800 metres from Aberdare Ranges Primary School. All of the children in the village also attend Aberdare Ranges Primary School. The village infrastructure comprises 15 family units, each housing eight children cared for by a dedicated house 'mother'. These women are employed, having left their own families to care for these children. The village was intentionally designed so the children live in family groups and can develop and grow as a family unit.

The PSTs spent time playing with the children at the village after school. Similar to visiting New Caanan, exposure to the children's village was intended to help the PSTs understand the situation outside of school to gain insight into the context of the school.

Giotto Dump Slum

Giotto dump slum is located in Nakuru, Kenya, about three kilometres west of the central business district and approximately 10 kilometres from Aberdare Ranges School. Roughly 140 families live in the Giotto dump slum, ~70% of whom are children. In consultation with community leaders, two locals organised a visit to the dump slum. Following the customary practice of bringing a gift as a sign of respect, each PST contributed 1,000 Kenyan shillings (~$10AUD) to buy bulk amounts of staple items, including oil, flour, salt, rice, soap and sweets for the children. Upon arrival, a community leader welcomed the PSTs, who handed out the gifts. PSTs then spent about two hours walking around the dump slum. For some, this included entering family dwellings, while others spent time playing with the children.

As this is quite a confronting experience, a debrief is held afterwards, facilitated by three locals. The debrief helps the PSTs contextualise what they saw and ask questions. In addition, some PSTs shared their feelings and talked about the experience. The debrief lasted for ~2.5 hours.

Homestays

All PSTs were allocated to homestays in groups of 4-8 for the duration of the two-week immersion. Homestay families provided breakfast and dinner for the PSTs. Each family and each home were different, which allowed for various experiences.

The aim of the homestay was twofold. First, it financially supports local families and the community through payment by the PSTs to the families. Second, it provides the PSTs with another opportunity to learn about the culture by immersing themselves in a local family and developing relationships.

Data Analysis

As a mini-ethnographic case study, it was essential to understand the entire database (pre-, in- and post-immersion). Data familiarisation was achieved through reading and re-reading each dataset (field notes, PST journals and recorded discussions). As most of the database was captured electronically, coding and data extracts were done through thematic analysis (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Thematic analysis went beyond a semantic or purely descriptive account of PSTs experiences to a constructionist account so as to identify underlying ideas, assumptions and conceptualisations (Braun & Clarke 2006).

Discussion

The discussion is presented in the following three themes: critical experiences result in questioning values and heightened emotions; relationships build community and foster positive connections; and relationships are at the core of teaching.

Through Critical Experiences, Emotions are Heightened, and Values are Questioned.

The visit to the Giotto dump slum and multiple visits to the New Canaan Village elicited detailed journal entries from PSTs. In entering these cultural interfaces, PSTs confronted the complexity of human experience and differences in perceived cultural values. The extent of the poverty witnessed by PSTs, including cultural values around

food, wealth, and access to opportunities, became quite vexing. The angst was evidenced in their journal writing and through non-verbal gestures noted in the field journal of the researcher. The sense of unease was described by one PST this way:

Waking up, I knew this was going to be a hard day. I didn't know what to expect or what I was going to be faced with. When I first stepped out of the matatu (van), I felt extremely uncomfortable; I didn't know what to feel, where to look or even if we should have even been there. (PST1)

This quote is viewed as high-intensity dissonance (Kiely, 2005). This uncertainty reflected the incongruence between participants' frame of reference and the new experience. The PTSs were grappling with their inner feeling and personalised their emotions and feelings (Kiely, 2005). through both verbal and written expression. Another way to view this is as psychological culture shock (Adler, 1995). The dissonances prompting such shock include environmental, social, physical and economic factors (Kiely, 2005). In attempting to process these visits, PST journal entries included the use of questions, illustrating that their values were being challenged. One example is, 'you just look around and see that people are living in such terrible conditions, and you question how is that possible. How is anyone able to live on a dump site?' (PST11). Journal entries reflected on the dichotomy between privilege and poverty. PSTs questioned their privilege concerning the experience and using questions allowed for an internal dialogue that attempted to reconcile their feelings. One PST noted:

It was so hard; I couldn't help but compare what I had to the little that they had. Why is this the case? What could we do? These people don't deserve this, we're all humans, and it's just the circumstances we happened to be born into. We were just born in a better place. (PST17)

Emergent in the data were apparent shifts in individual frames of reference. A majority of the PSTs, (80%) used the terms 'guilt' and 'gratitude' to articulate both shifts in perspective and internal feelings. Such frames are grounded in an awareness of the disparity between their lives and those encountered during the immersion. For many, guilt was experienced as emotional distress, most apparently manifested as crying. As a feeling, guilt was disrupting PSTs' sense of self.

In an attempt to counterbalance the disruption to their sense of self, they juxtaposed the idea of guilt or shame with the need to express gratitude:

I think, sadly, in our world today gratitude is something that's truly missing. It's about being grateful for what I have, rather than being guilty, but also knowing that I'm in a position of privilege and I am able to do something about it. (PST4)

Reflections further included factors that lead to happiness:

I have really started to question my own happiness. You walk through the camp, and you can just feel the happiness; it really highlights how materialistic we are. It doesn't matter what physical items we have; it is the connections that you make that essentially make you. (PST12)

The journal entries revealed that regardless of participants' previous frame of reference regarding happiness, they now understood it as something separate from

material possessions. For example, the above quotation reflects an understanding that happiness is attained through human connection. This idea was articulated by PS3: *I've contemplated and thought about people having the bare minimum. I struggle with what the bare minimum is, what is the bare minimum, when we have so much. I feel that they have so much that we don't have. Their sense of community and independence and their sense of connection is something we miss back home. (PST3).* The dissonances experienced during the dump slum visit and visits to New Canaan Village placed participants in situations that caused them to reflect deeply on social change and their role as educators.

The discussions that occurred directly after the visits were structured to allow PSTs to process their thoughts, express their emotions, and give them time for quiet reflection. Interestingly, while clearly confronted by the experiences, participants began to take a more philosophical view, which led to a further shift in PSTs' frames of reference. The feelings of guilt or shame were replaced with attempts to find a sense of hope; something within this intense experience that could make them feel optimistic.

The visits to the Giotto dump slum and New Canaan Village caused participants to grapple with economic and social dissonance, articulated through an expression of feelings. Feelings initially centred on notions of guilt and shame were gradually replaced with a more philosophical perspective. This perspective was enhanced through a cultural contextualisation provided by Kenyan nationals that facilitated the debrief and centred on concepts of gratitude and happiness. The researcher made the following note at the time:

We all need to be students of life. We need to ensure everyone knows they have the right to be happy. When you start smiling, others smile; when you are peaceful, others are peaceful, and this is how you change the world. (Researcher Fieldnotes).

Relationships Build Community and Foster Positive Connections

A key facet of the immersion was homestays. Staying with local families enabled participants to build cultural understanding and form relationships with their host families. Sharing stories over meals and spending time with the family fostered the development of relationships:

We stayed in the houses throughout our time there and I think without that it wouldn't have been the same trip because you did get to know the community that you were staying in. The family that you stayed with gave you their personal stories and just walking through the town to get home you got to see different things, meet different people. Everyone was so welcoming, and they are so accepting and happy and willing to share their stories. (PST6)

The sense of community was also emphasised at New Canaan Village. PSTs spent time walking through the village, and many were invited to visit the school children's homes. Beyond community connections, at the familial level, PSTs noticed the depth of the bond that existed between people: 'I think one thing that has really stuck out for me has been the sense of community and belonging (amongst) the people here' (PST7), which led them to make comparisons with their cultural frame of reference. Such a cultural juxtaposition, reflective of Western cultural values that tend to support individualism over collectivism, was articulated by PST19:

Sometimes in our society, we can feel as individuals fighting our own battles. But here, they come together as a community and help each other and there is a sense of belonging within a community beyond their immediate family members.

Beyond human connectedness, food is integral to cultural identity (Burton, Forney, Stock, & Sutherland, 2020). Often the sharing and exchange of stories, which facilitated the building of connections, was done over a meal. An essential aspect of the school day at school was the communal lunch. The school provided lunch to ensure that all children had at least one meal daily. As a result, PSTs were able to reflect on the importance of food, on their values and perspectives in their home culture:

I was extremely shocked at the portion sizes. At the school, I was told that in some cases, this meal was their only one for the whole day and that is why the portions are always large. This information shocked me, and I was upset and a bit frustrated because I had not even thought about the lives that each child may be living when they return home. It made me think about all the lifestyles each child would have and how different it would be from the children back in Australia. (PST2)

In the PSTs' culture, access to food is generally assured; however, when placed in a context where access to food is scarce, participants articulated a greater appreciation for it:

Normally, I am a fussy eater but when you are put into another country where food is so scarce you just enjoy it and eat it and when you are given a meal that is prepared for you, you just eat it and enjoy it, you appreciate the food more. (PST 11)

PSTs' reflections on human connectedness were framed through articulating experiences with both their host family and with members of the broader community. This connection contrasted with the perceived absence of connection in their culture. Their reflection on food was part of a broader perspective and discourse around privilege.

Relationships are at the core of teaching.

An experiential understanding of the importance of relationships that PSTs encountered in the community further strengthened their knowledge of the importance of relationships as part of pedagogy.

During their time at the school, PSTs could practice aspects of their teaching. Specifically, they applied and honed their engagement, connection and communication skills. They also built valuable experience in English as an additional language (EAL) pedagogy. PSTs' journal entries focused on building relationships with the children and the importance of language when engaging the children in activities: "when interacting with the children, I've noticed how important non-verbal communication can be when teaching EAL. Just a smile is such a strong connection and way of communication" (PST11). A key aspect of fostering effective relationships and communication was to ensure that a degree of understanding existed between the PST and the children:

The children had a lot of trouble understanding us if we were using English, so we would take them outside and use actions which they were then able to copy. With sharing stories, we used a lot of actions to tell the story, which the children really liked. (PST14)

Experiencing success in classrooms, where the language of instruction is not English, enhanced PSTs' confidence in their teaching practice. As one PST wrote, *'One*

challenge from this trip was the language barrier and being able to make it through lessons where the kids knew zero English, was such an achievement and gives me confidence when teaching' (PST13).

It was being placed in classrooms where they could not draw on language to facilitate learning, leading to increased professional knowledge and efficacy. PSTs discerned that professional knowledge centred on the strategies that fostered a degree of understanding between them and the children. Forming and building relationships substantiated both their knowledge and their efficacy. The relationships with the children at the school were vital to the participants' overall experience.

Conclusion

Including a range of critical experiences that both influenced and heightened the degree of dissonances encountered. Fundamental to these experiences was a connection between PSTs and local community members, which challenged the PSTs' belief structures. Challenging existing belief structures has the potential to influence PST's future careers positively. By making genuine connections in the school and the community, PSTs had to grapple with how their lived experiences shape their life and context. Experiencing absolute poverty firsthand, juxtaposed with their own perceived privilege, led to visceral and emotional dissonances, which corresponds with previous research (see Kiely, 2005). Each of the critical experiences resulted in high-intensity dissonance, which challenged the PSTs to respond to, reflect on and ultimately learn from the discordance. Experiences were deeply felt, which elicited emotions that required participants to reconcile the incongruencies in their worldviews and what they were experiencing. Any transformation that resulted from the dissonances can be attributed to the intensity of those experiences, which were all incongruent with their cultural frames of reference (Hartman & Kiely, 2014).

Encouraging journaling and mediating group discussion allowed PSTs to process the range of emotions they experienced. Group discussions were significantly enhanced when mediated by three Kenyan nationals. The Kenyan mediators contextualised cultural dimensions of the experience, which contributed to the PSTs shifting their frames of reference. These shifts were both personal and professional. As a result, PSTs questioned and challenged their cultural values, developed greater knowledge of the importance of relationships to build community and recognising the importance of relationships in their future profession.

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