# ABSTRACT

Kacey Molloy, HONORING CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN AN INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL: HOW CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PRACTICES SUPPORT TEACHER COLLABORATION. (Under the direction of Dr. Matthew Militello). Department of Educational Leadership, May 2023.

The purpose of the participatory action research project was to use culturally responsive practices to develop and sustain relational trust, recognize and honor the assets of the school community, and cultivate a more equitable, collaborative experience for all constituents in an international school. Traditional international schools cater to culturally diverse students and families and often hire local and expatriate staff. Many international schools encourage collaboration, but the expatriate staff and their norms often dominate collaborative work. International schools are ripe for honoring the assets of their diverse local communities, but too often, these assets are either unknown or unnoticed. Engaging in participatory action research with the leaders, teachers, and instructional assistants in grades PreK-5 in an international school in Ethiopia, I explored processes that fostered personal connections across educator constituent groups to examine how to build relational trust and cultivate more equitable collaboration. As a result, I uncovered cultural dissonance as a significant barrier to our collaborative work and identified humanizing actions that diminished these cultural dissonance barriers. The study is significant because the findings inform our understanding of actions that support more equitable working environments in culturally heterogeneous schools and suggest that these processes might create more equity in diverse international schools.

# HONORING CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN AN INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL: HOW CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PRACTICES SUPPORT TEACHER COLLABORATION

A Dissertation
Presented to the Faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership
East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

By
Kacey L. Molloy
May, 2023

Director of Dissertation: Matthew Militello, PhD
Dissertation Committee Members:
Lawrence Hodgkins, EdD
David Siegel, PhD
Lynda Tredway, MA
Ladan Rahnema, EdD

©Copyright 2023
Kacey L. Molloy

# DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the Ethiopian faculty and staff at the International Community School of Addis Ababa, who welcomed me into their beautiful country with open hearts. Thank you for blessing me with wisdom that carries me forward.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Gratitude to the faculty and staff at ICS who walked this journey with me. To my mentors who provided the encouragement and critical feedback necessary to do this important work—especially Ladan Rahnema and Lynda Tredway. Finally, to my husband and children, Conor, Caelan, and Saoirse, for flooding me with unwavering encouragement, grace, and patience.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

TITLE………………………………………………………………………………... i

COPYRIGHT……………………………………………………………………... ii

DEDICATION…………………………………………………………….…… iii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS………………………………………………….... iv

LIST OF TABLES……………………………………………………………... xii

LIST OF FIGURES…………………………………………………………...... xiii

CHAPTER 1: NAMING AND FRAMING THE FOCUS OF PRACTICE (FOP)…. 1

Rationale and Significance…….…………….…………………………………... 3

Analysis of Assets and Challenges……………………………….…………… 7

Micro Assets and Challenges……………………...….….………... 7

Meso Assets and Challenges…………….………...…………………… 10

Macro Assets and Challenges ………………….……….……………... 13

Connection to Equity………….……………….……………….…………….. 15

Political-Economic Framework of the Focus of Practice….…………… 16

Psychological Framework of the Focus of Practice……….…………… 17

Participatory Action Research Design………………………………………... 18

Purpose Statement and Research Questions……………………………. 18

Theory of Action…………………………………………………….……. 19

FoP Description………………………………………………………… 19

Proposed Project Activities…………………………………………..…. 22

Confidentiality, Ethical Considerations, and Limitations…………….……. 23

Summary………………………………………………………………………… 24

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE…………………………………………... 26

Context and Challenges of International Schools……………………….……. 26

Origin and Types of International Schools…………………………….…. 27

Challenges Facing International Schools………………………………. 29

Mobility…………………………………………………………….…. 31

Mobility Affects Identity……………………………………………… 32

Student Mobility…………………………………………... 32

Identity in New Contexts…………………………….…. 33

Cultural Competence of Teachers…………………………….…. 35

International Perspective………………………………….. 36

Cultural Complexities…………………………….…. 36

Culturally Responsive Practices for Students and Adults…………………….. 38

Defining Culturally Responsive……………………………………... 38

Expanding Cultural Responsiveness to International Schools…………. 40

Teacher Mindset………………………………………………. 40

Relational Trust……………………………………………….. 43

Culturally Responsive Practices………………………………. 47

Community-Building in the Classroom…………………... 47

Teacher-Student Relationship…………………………….. 48

Culturally Responsive Processing………………………… 49

Socially Constructed Learning……………………………. 50

Teacher Preparation……………………………………………….. 52

Conclusion………………………………………………………………….. 53

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN……………………………………………… 56

Qualitative Research Process………………………………………………. 57

Participatory Action Research……………………………………….. 57

Role of Praxis……………………………………………………. 58

Community Learning Exchange Axioms and Processes………… 59

Improvement Science: Networked Improvement Communities… 60

Research Questions………………………………………………….. 61

Action Research Cycles……………………………………………... 61

Participants, Data Collection, and Analysis…………………………... 63

Participants…………………………………………………………... 63

Sampling…………………………………………………………. 63

Co-Practitioner Researcher Group………………………………. 65

Other Participants………………………………………………... 65

Data Collection……………………………………………………… 66

Interviews and Focus Groups……………………………………. 66

CLE Artifacts……………………………………………………. 67

Observations…………………………………………………….. 67

Reflective Memos……………………………………………….. 67

Data Analysis………………………………………………………... 68

Study Considerations and Limitations………………………………... 68

Internal Validity……………………………………………………... 70

External Validity…………………………………………………….. 71

Confidentiality and Ethical Considerations…… 71

Conclusion…… 72

CHAPTER 4: CONTEXT…… 73

School Context…… 73

The Importance of Place…… 74

History of the School…… 74

Current Description of Place…… 78

The Importance of People…… 79

People in the PAR Project and Study…… 82

Co-Practitioner Researchers…… 82

Project and Study Participants…… 87

Conclusion…… 88

CHAPTER 5: PAR CYCLE ONE…… 89

PAR Cycle One Process…… 91

CPR Meetings…… 91

Community Learning Exchanges…… 93

Interviews and Focus Groups…… 95

Data Collection and Analysis…… 96

Cultural Dissonance…… 99

Communication Behaviors…… 100

Voice Level…… 102

Eye Contact…… 103

Power Distance…… 104

- Deference……………………………………………………….. 105
  - Speaking Up………………………………………………. 107
  - Asking Questions…………………………………………. 108
  - Speaking Openly to Supervisors…………………………. 110
- Promoting Competencies……………………………………... 112
- Individualism vs. Collectivism………………………………………. 113
  - Greetings……………………………………………………… 114
  - Dealing with Conflict…………………………………………. 116
- Implications for Collaborative Practices for PAR Cycle Two…………. 118

CHAPTER 6: PAR CYCLE TWO AND FINDINGS………………………………. 121

- PAR Cycle Two Data Collection Process…………………………………….. 121
  - Community Learning Exchanges………………………………………. 122
  - Grade 2 Team Meetings………………………………………………... 124
  - Interviews and Focus Groups…………………………………………... 125
- PAR Cycle Two Evidence…………………………………………………….. 125
  - Connecting on a Personal Level………………………………………... 125
    - The Power of Personal Narratives……………………………….. 127
      - Awareness of Others’ Humanity………………………….. 129
      - Recognition of Strengths………………………………….. 130
      - Stronger Sense of Connection…………………………….. 131
    - Spending Time Together Outside the Classroom……………….. 133
  - Norms for Equitable Engagement……………………………………… 135
    - Pausing………………………………………………………………... 135

Clearly Articulated Agendas…………………………………….. 137

Honoring Voices Leading to Shared Decision-Making…………. 137

Leadership Qualities………………………………………………………… 139

Findings……………………………………………………………………….. 140

Cultural Dissonance……………………………………………………. 142

Processes and Structures that Diminish Dissonance………..…………. 144

Conclusion……………………………………………………………………. 147

CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS……………………………… 149

Enacting the PAR Project and Study……………………………………….. 150

Focus of Practice and Theory of Action………………………………... 150

Methodological Process………………………………………………... 151

Discussion…………………………………………………………………….. 152

Cultural Dissonance……………………………………………………. 154

Strategies that Humanize……………………………….……………… 158

Review of Research Questions…………………………………………. 161

Conceptual Framework for Equity……………………………………... 163

Implications…………………………………………………………………… 163

Practice………………………………………………………………… 163

Lifeworld-Focused Protocols……………………………………. 165

Participant Suggested Actions…………………………………… 166

Leadership Practices……………………………………………... 167

Policy…………………………………………………………………… 168

Research………………………………………………………………... 169

Research Process: PAR Process/CLE-Inspired Protocols……….. 170

Recommendations for Future Research…………………………. 170

Limitations and Possibilities…………………………………………… 171

Context-Specificity……………………………………………… 171

Sample Size…………………………………………………….… 172

Disruptions/Pressures……………………………………………. 172

Leadership Development…………………………………………………… 173

Intentionality in Learning About Others……………………………….. 173

Dialogue Leading to Understanding…………………………………… 175

Amplifying Voices……………………………………………………... 176

Listening……………………………………………………………….... 176

Conclusion……………………………………………………………………….. 177

REFERENCES……………………………………………………………………. 180

APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL……………… 196

APPENDIX B: CITI TRAINING CERTIFICATE…………………………………. 197

APPENDIX C: SCHOOL PERMISSION LETTER………………………………… 198

APPENDIX D: CONSENT FORM…………………………………………………. 199

APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL……………………………………… 202

APPENDIX F: PROTOCOLS TO BUILD UNDERSTANDING AND TRUST…... 204

# LIST OF TABLES

1. Timeline for PAR Cycles…………….……………….…………….……….……..... 62

2. Co-Practitioner Researcher Team Members…………….…………….…….…… 83

3. PAR Cycle One Meetings and Activities…………….…………….…………..…. 92

4. PAR Cycle Two Meetings and Activities…………….…………….…….……. 123

## LIST OF FIGURES

1. Fishbone diagram to address the focus of practice……………..………………… 8

2. Overarching research questions and sub-questions……………..………………… 20

3. Typology of school resources……………………………………...………... 46

4. Conceptual framework of FoP……………..……………..……………..………... 55

5. PAR process: Inquiry cycles……………………………………………………… 64

6. Original American Community School grounds……………..…………………… 76

7. Current aerial view of the International Community School of Addis Ababa……. 77

8. Student profile at the International Community School of Addis Ababa………… 80

9. Data coded in Quirkos…………………………………………………………….. 98

10. Emergent theme, three categories, codes, and sub-codes……………………….. 101

11. Categories that support the theme: Strategies to diminish cultural barriers…..… 126

12. Data on the power of personal narratives……………………………………….. 128

13. Frequency of data on norms for equitable engagement, including adopting norms and other factors that contributed to more effective collaboration…..…... 136

14. PAR cycle categories leading to findings……………………………………….. 141

15. Layers of findings based on Simon Sinek's (2009) Golden Circle theory……… 143

16. PAR inquiry process resulted in two findings…………………………………… 153

17. Conceptual framework for equity in culturally diverse international schools…... 164

18. Data on my humanist leadership development………………………………….. 174

# CHAPTER 1: NAMING AND FRAMING THE FOCUS OF PRACTICE (FOP)

> *When we adults think of children there is a simple truth that we ignore: childhood is not preparation for life; childhood is life. A child isn't getting ready to live; a child is living. No child will miss the zest and joy of living unless these are denied by adults who have convinced themselves that childhood is a period of preparation. How much heartache we would save ourselves if we would recognize children as partners with adults in the process of living, rather than always viewing them as apprentices. How much we could teach each other; we have the experience and they have the freshness. How full both our lives could be.*
>
> –John A. Taylor (1991), Notes on an Unhurried Journey

Children are alive, full of wonder, stories, and gifts, ready to enrich the world. Too often, though, in school, their identities are ignored, their stories unheard, and their gifts unrecognized. Within classrooms, teachers often neglect to understand and magnify the assets children bring with them. Teachers need experiences in honoring each other’s identities, telling their stories, and recognizing their gifts to fully become teachers who shift their classroom practices to recognize children as partners. In an international school, that means relying on the very people who hold the history of the place and of the school and are the glue of the staff— the local teachers and instructional assistants from the host country. As international staff in schools, we are often leaders and teachers from English-speaking countries from the Global North, and we may not fully recognize the cultural context of the school or the gifts our colleagues could bring to bear on the school culture and curricula. By failing to recognize these assets, educators may hold a narrow view of children and perhaps an incomplete view of the assets of their fellow educators. To bring about a more equitable and impactful learning environment, school leaders and teachers should draw first on the complete array of assets—experiences, preferences, knowledge, learning styles, and cultural practices—and infuse them into the learning and pedagogy first for themselves and then for students.

A stated goal at the International Community School of Addis Ababa (ICS) is to personalize learning. Leaders and teachers at the school aim to personalize learning through recognizing that each child is unique. However, teachers are largely unaware that their pedagogical practices are not responsive to the diversity of the student population. The faculty's understanding of how to personalize learning is limited because of an incomplete understanding of the cultural milieu of the host school or many of the students and families in the school. Often, teachers and leaders equate personalized learning to differentiating learning in core content subjects. A more personalized approach would include prioritizing each student's assets and looking at the whole child and what each child brings to the classroom. To address student assets, we first need to support teachers in recognizing each other's assets so that we can offer more culturally responsive curricula and pedagogical experiences to students. In this dissertation, I engaged elementary teachers and instructional assistants in reimagining our school by offering support to local staff and then having conversations with the international staff.

ICS is a culturally diverse international school located in Ethiopia. The student population of roughly 950, ages 2 to 19, includes passport holders from 64 countries. This diversity creates a rich opportunity to draw on community members' backgrounds, perspectives, and cultures to enhance the learning at the school. This context is ripe for shifting to an asset-focused paradigm. Additionally, ICS is an International Baccalaureate (IB) World School implementing the Diploma Program (DP) in high school and the Primary Years Programme (PYP) in elementary. Student agency is a core belief explicitly stated in the guiding documents of the PYP and held by the school faculty. When ICS considers agency, it refers to learners controlling and influencing their own learning, and the consistent input of student voices. However, before teachers could authentically design experiences in which students have voice and agency, we needed to examine the adult practices in the school.

My wonderings about how to strengthen adult practices and honor assets at this level led to the focus of practice (FoP) for this study. In the next section, I describe the rationale, assets, and challenges associated with this participatory action research (PAR). Additionally, I discuss the PAR context and then the connection this study has to equity through political-economic and psychological frameworks.

## Rationale and Significance

The focus of practice is: Use culturally responsive practices in an international school to develop and sustain relational trust, recognize the assets of the school community, and cultivate a more equitable and collaborative experience for all constituents. By naming the teachers and assistants as constituents, I am intentionally leveling the hierarchy and considering them as full participants in all aspects at the school. In this project and study over two cycles of inquiry, leaders and teachers developed an understanding of the cultural assets of the local teachers and educational assistants. By supporting teachers to claim their identities, tell their stories, and use their gifts for the school community, we were able to uncover, understand, and incorporate cultural values in our professional learning practices. We engaged the adults in a set of experiences so that they could in turn shift the school curricula and pedagogy to personalize learning for students.

As a school implementing an International Baccalaureate program, the International Community School of Addis Ababa (ICS) values transdisciplinary skills such as critical thinking and communication as well as dispositions such as being inquirers and open-minded individuals. Yet when teaching teams in the elementary school discussed student learning, the values the faculty and staff claim to uphold were not necessarily reflected in their conversations. The inconsistency between theory and practice was evident in these discussions. Many faculty and staff deem the most critical issues as those that address academic skills, typically in math and literacy. Student inadequacies in these skills were often the focus of teacher conversations, with little time devoted to the non-content-specific assets children bring to the classroom. An example of this deficit language is a teacher who expressed frustration saying, "We don't have time for that," when another team member shared an idea for engagements focused on content-agnostic creative thinking skills. Teachers had even dismissed experiences in which particular children's auxiliary skills and talents might shine, because they wanted the "low kids" to spend extra time addressing content-specific skill development. In addition, children were often pulled out of community meetings or even “passion project” time—a period when students get to explore independent inquiries of interest—to get "caught up." These examples demonstrate the need for strategies that shift mindsets and discussions toward the capabilities of students.

As ICS moved toward a more personalized approach to learning, another factor threatened our ability to authentically move forward: lack of understanding and inclusion of the cultural heritage and assets of host country teachers, students, and families. Established nearly 60 years ago in 1964, ICS is a multicultural Pre-K through grade 12 school comprising roughly 950 students from 64 nationalities. The school values cultural diversity and proudly shares these statistics showing the multitude of cultures represented in the student body. This component of identity is notable in the school's name: International Community School of Addis Ababa. But while most faculty and staff would identify the school's cultural diversity as a principal asset, professional learning community (PLC) conversations rarely recognize the cultural identity of the learners. This failure to involve culture in PLC conversations may be due to teachers failing to understand the importance culture plays in learning, as verified in the revised edition of *How People Learn* (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018). The teaching and leadership staff comprise citizens from around the world, but predominantly from North America and Europe (the Global North), while educational assistants and other staff members come from Ethiopia. With a vast majority of teachers originating from the Global North, diversity in perspective was often missing in our professional learning community (PLC) discussions. Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is an area of growth for ICS; CRT is premised on relationships, further emphasizing the rationale for the project. This project focused on enhancing critical relationships and discussions between and among educators; starting at the adult level is a necessary prerequisite to a more culturally responsive approach to teaching and learning across the entire school.

Cultural diversity, a significant piece of the school's identity, brings another rationale to the project and study. ICS, and international schools like it, cater mainly to working families from around the world. These families typically move every few years due to parental employment, causing a frequent turnover of students. Likewise, the staff from the Global North generally only stay at the school for a short time. The mobility of staff and students further suggests a need to focus on relationship building as a critical factor. Our indigenous teachers and staff are the organizational glue. As others come and go, they are here for the long haul. Their views and input are essential as we consider how to orient new staff to the host culture and blend the local cultural values with the IB curriculum and the school’s value of community.

The rationale for this focus of practice involves the school's location, demographics, and cultural values. As an international school located in Ethiopia's capital, ICS has a unique opportunity to embrace and embed the assets of the host country; however, like many international schools around the world, the school does not draw enough on these assets. The local community's culture, practices, and traditions espouse a communal orientation based on proactive relationship building. Ethiopia’s rich traditions and customs can be better incorporated into the school culture to create more profound levels of knowing. One of these traditions is storytelling, which I drew on in this study through the intentional use of personal narratives. Understanding and appreciating place develops an understanding and appreciation of those in it. This understanding applies to both the school setting as well as the cultural setting in which ICS resides. Bringing together these aspects of being can create a richer experience for children.

This study is significant to the practices and research of international schools. Culturally diverse schools like ICS have work to do to embody their values and missions, which often articulate international-mindedness. Many factors contribute to schools' failures in achieving their goals, with one being a lack of understanding of *how* to do so. In this study, I examined practices that create more equitable, cross-cultural environments, and from the research, I suggest tangible ways of going about this work.

ICS's goal of personalized learning and its aim to develop global citizens should include more equitable experiences for all learners. However, unless faculty and staff place primary value on relationship building and recognition of diverse student assets and cultures over the dominant mindset of content knowledge and skills, we can only partially reach our goals. Equity in classrooms means much more than merely personalizing offerings to meet a large range of skill needs. Equity includes honoring and embedding students' interests, preferences, experiences, and identities. As we contemplate how to personalize the learning path that reflects who our children are, we need first to consider personalizing the experiences of the host country teachers and instructional assistants. To do this, we need to enhance our commitment to positive and trusting relationships.

# Analysis of Assets and Challenges

By highlighting the assets and challenges that affect the focus of practice at the micro, meso, and macro levels, I developed a deeper understanding of how to address the study questions. The micro-level involves the elementary division and smaller teams within it, including the elementary school leadership team (ESLT) and grade level teaching teams. The meso level comprises the entire school, from the early years (2 to 6-year-olds) through grade 12. The macro-level involves the larger structural systems and policies that impact the focus of practice. To explore the focus of practice through the three levels, I held a community learning exchange with members of the elementary leadership team (ESLT) to assist in identifying assets and challenges our school faces (see Figure 1 for an outline of these assets and challenges).

## Micro Assets and Challenges

The school operates in PLCs with grade-level teams in the elementary school meeting daily to examine learning evidence and determine next steps in supporting students. At the outset of the study, the staff was beginning to understand that they needed more than quantitative data for insight into students’ understanding. Teachers had conversations about how qualitative data could help them see beyond content-specific skills and knowledge to consider the children more holistically. For example, examining math problem-solving work, including monitoring and analyzing notes of the behaviors children exhibit when unsure of how to find the answer, provided a more well-rounded image of the learners. By concentrating on the students’ transdisciplinary assets, such as communication and thinking skills that otherwise would have gone unnoticed, teachers collected, analyzed, and responded to qualitative data, including monitoring notes of students' behaviors and conversations. This process highlighted strengths, interests, and growth in content-agnostic skills, but even so, the teachers' reflective language

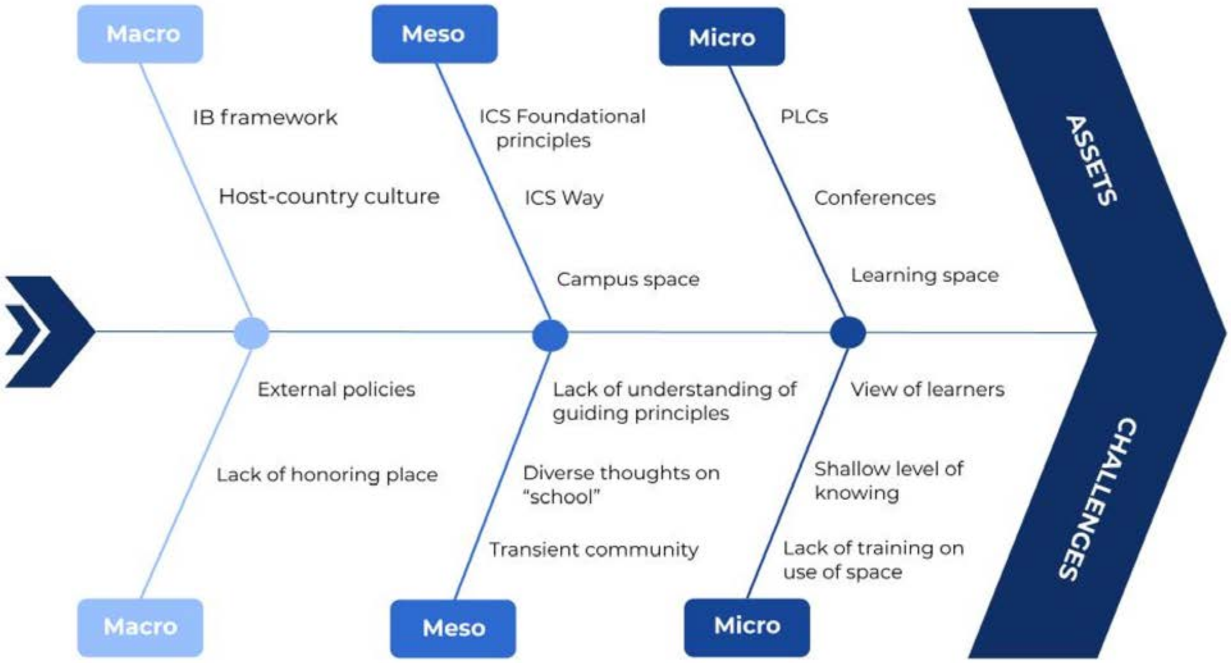

Macro
Meso
Micro
IB framework
Host-country culture
ICS Foundational principles
ICS Way
Campus space
PLCs
Conferences
Learning space
ASSETS
External policies
Lack of honoring place
Lack of understanding of guiding principles
Diverse thoughts on "school"
Transient community
View of learners
Shallow level of knowing
Lack of training on use of space
CHALLENGES
Macro
Meso
Micro

*Figure 1*. Fishbone diagram to address the focus of practice.

remained consistent with a deficit approach; I still heard comments such as "my high/low kids" and "they can't do that" in PLC meetings, and a culture of focusing and building on assets was lacking across the division.

The elementary school educators put structures and opportunities in place throughout the year to support knowing learners. In each school year, we scheduled three conferences for teacher, parent, and student conversations. The first of these conferences, called a *Hopes and Dreams Conference*, at the beginning of the school year allows educators to hear from students and family members about the assets of the children and hopes for the year. Despite the intent, these conferences elicited relatively shallow information from families, mostly involving what the child likes to do and in what content area he or she would like to grow. Leaders and teachers needed to reexamine the conference design to develop deeper relationships with students and their families. By reviewing the conference purpose and, subsequently, the conference structure, they might elicit information that would enable teachers to know their learners and families more fully, including their cultures.

At the other two conferences, teachers shared evidence of learning and personal growth with students and parents and set new goals. These conferences intend to demonstrate the staffs' belief in student voice and developing partnerships with families, but their structures and content could be improved to provide more opportunity for building relational trust and understanding. The school should build upon existing systems to know each learner's uniqueness more fully. Likewise, systems that support knowing the uniqueness of staff could be improved.

The learning space was another asset at the micro level. A new elementary school was constructed and opened in the fall of 2020 to support the school's pedagogical approach. Each grade level had up to 96 children in upper elementary, four homeroom teachers, and four educational assistants in the same space, called a learning hub. Each hub is shaped like a horseshoe with large spaces and smaller rooms that allow for small group sessions. The space was designed to support diverse learning types and includes areas to meet with small and large groups. The hub design reflects the staff's belief that learning should not look the same for every child. While the new building provides the physical space in which to build upon and embed students' assets, the staff is young in its journey toward this novel approach to teaching and learning. The school leadership needs to provide continuous professional learning to support more effective instructional practices within the learning hubs.

The hub structure is useful for many purposes; however, providing a personalized approach for students in groups as large as those occupying each hub was challenging. Although the hubs were designed to foster more collaboration and student-centered learning, teachers continue to struggle with how to operationalize the strategies. Similarly, they grapple with understanding how to develop relationships with so many students. To fully take advantage of the opportunity the space provides, teachers need to learn strategies they can implement to support their relationship development while learning practices to move beyond differentiation to a more personalized and culturally responsive approach.

### Meso Assets and Challenges

At the meso level, which involves the entire school, ICS has foundational principles and statements that support the focus of practice. Still, staff understanding of and investment in these guiding statements varies. The school's vision, rewritten in 2018, reads, *Our best with Africa and our world*. The words chosen for this vision are intentional; the word *our* in the statement strives to be personal to the school constituents while being inclusive, and the word *with* was intentionally chosen over *for* or *in* to convey the belief that international schools do not exist to be *better than,* but to operate in a way that promotes ongoing growth from and with engagement with others. The school states that this vision provides direction to "co-construct projects with mutual benefit, develop a partnership with our community, and believe that ICS' success is Africa's success, and that Africa's success, is ours" (International Community School of Addis Ababa [ICS Addis], 2019, p. 2). This vision is commendable but needs considerable analysis and application across the community to develop a shared understanding so that the school's constituents can live it. Educators must develop a more absolute understanding of this statement to create an environment that supports a culturally diverse learning population.

The leaders and teachers at the International Community School of Addis Ababa developed a statement used schoolwide both in learning spaces and within non-student contact departments such as maintenance and operations. *The ICS Way* reads, "I can make a difference by taking care of myself, taking care of others, and taking care of this place" (ICS Addis, 2018). Teachers and staff frequently used The ICS Way language, and the statement became a driver for a division-wide unit designed to focus on well-being, launched just before the study's implementation. This emphasis on caring for self, others, and place, as stated in The ICS Way, is an asset that can be used to frame personalized and culturally responsive practices.

Another asset valuable to ICS and its constituents is its 15 acres of land, as open green space is a rarity in the populated city of Addis Ababa. The school community capitalizes on this space by holding community events throughout the year, including farmers' markets and occasions such as International Day, where the school celebrates its diverse global representation. The lush outdoor space and pleasant weather allow for groups to gather and connect. One such example is coffee ceremonies, a cultural tradition in Ethiopia, that were held at various points throughout the year for parents and, at times, for teachers. This cultural practice brings adults together and provides an informal environment in which to share stories. Additionally, the Parent Community Link, a group run by parents for parents, held monthly breakfasts hosted by a different global region each month. However, these opportunities for cultural sharing rarely made their way to the student and classroom level. We wondered how more attention to the sharing of stories, first with and among staff and then with students, whether in outdoor space or within the classroom walls, would deepen relationships.

While the globally diverse makeup of students, families, and teachers at the school is an asset that makes for rich learning opportunities, the challenge was providing a learning environment that supported the culturally diverse community population. The student body at ICS represents countries on six continents and over 30 languages. This vast diversity illustrates the necessity of prioritizing culturally responsive teaching. At the time of the study, teachers did not demonstrate adequate levels of understanding of culturally responsive teaching practices. The school’s leadership needed to attend to this issue to ensure all students were successful.

Another example of how cultural diversity manifests is the parents' background experience regarding school itself. Differing schooling experiences through various systems worldwide have formed ideas about how school should look. The teachers and leaders at ICS sometimes face pushback from the parents as they advance understanding and implementation of personalized learning and student agency. When ICS's approach does not match that of what parents deem as the norm, notably students memorizing and practicing isolated subject-specific knowledge and skills, the parents question the methods and hinder progress. Cultural differences come into play and determining how to approach this resistance can be a challenge to navigate.

The transient nature of school constituents posed yet another challenge faced by all divisions. The average amount of time students stay at the school is three to four years, with overseas teachers averaging a three-and-a-half stay. While building relationships takes time, I was interested in this study to prioritize cultivating relationships with adults so that we could have trusting relationships as a prerequisite for engaging in the pedagogical work. The high turnover rate caused an extra barrier in the community's progress toward knowing and embedding its members' assets, especially when these members may only stay for a short time. For those who stay the longest—the indigenous Ethiopian staff—we failed to fully recognize their assets as new leaders and teachers constantly cycled through and priorities regularly shifted.

### Macro Assets and Challenges

Larger structural systems impact the school at the macro level. Many of these systems support the focus of practice and could be better implemented or utilized to address growth areas. The school is an International Baccalaureate (IB) World School implementing the Primary Years Programme (PYP). This framework is conducive to honoring and embedding students' assets in that a cornerstone of the PYP is student agency. The driving IB PYP document, *The Learner*, states, "Teachers recognize students' capabilities through listening, respecting and responding to their ideas. They make thoughtful considerations and decisions with an emphasis on relationships, dialogue, and respect for one another" (International Baccalaureate Organization [IB], 2018, p. 2). Another asset the school draws on is the IB Learner Profile, consisting of 10 attributes one should aspire to embody. This cornerstone of the IB places value on developing attributes that contribute to growing responsible, internationally-minded citizens. The IB’s emphasis on global citizenship promotes understanding and respect. This framework is an asset in the desire to move toward a more culturally responsive approach to personalized, student-centered teaching and learning. Likewise, the IB’s values of understanding and respect could be an asset in building a more culturally responsive school within and among its staff if more fully understood and implemented.

A vital asset to the school is the culture of the host country in which it resides. Ethiopian culture lends to relationship building, and the traditions and practices bring people together. Storytelling has historically played an important role in the lives of Ethiopians. The phrase *teret teret*, translated from Amharic to *story story*, is commonly used to pull people together to hear a tale. The tradition of gathering and listening to oral storytelling is part of the rich culture and is a practice alive in many other cultures. This custom is an example of a culturally responsive practice that was missing from many schools. ICS could draw upon this and other rich cultural practices, such as the essence of the Ethiopian coffee ceremony described previously, to draw out the assets of school constituents while simultaneously embedding the country's cultural assets. Too often, international schools such as ICS overlook the unique opportunities to learn from the assets of the country in which the school resides.

Other macro-level challenges include external curriculum and policies that take up teachers’ time, leaving little room for engagements not focused on skill-based work. Although there is minimal standardized testing at ICS at the elementary level, the impact of what Anderson et al. (2013) refer to as a "new global policy environment" (p. 44) has made its way into the school and affected teachers' perceptions of what is most important. Reforms such as No Child Left Behind resulted in the reallocation of time in classrooms away from important areas. As Anderson et al. (2013) state, "Even when test scores improve in mathematics or reading, it is often at the cost of spending less time teaching other subjects" (p. 48). The impact of this "new global policy environment" has made its mark on ICS and resulted in reduced time and attention dedicated to relationship building, less recognition of student assets, and more focus on "fixing" children whom educators perceive as having learning deficits in math and reading.

In conclusion, throughout the participatory action research, I explored building on the assets described above to advance the study. I carefully considered the challenges and made decisions that helped to avert these roadblocks when possible. Recognizing these challenges in advance was important in planning for success, and they are vital to describe as they provide context for why this study is needed to advance toward more equitable and culturally responsive international schools.

## Connection to Equity

International schools such as the International Community School of Addis Ababa are rich in diversity; however, due to many factors, the school does not fully embrace diversity and celebrate it in ways that inform the school's pedagogy. Most teachers are not proactive in getting to know the learners in their classrooms at deep levels. We place value on predetermined skills and knowledge that provide a small window into children's abilities and strengths, resulting in an inequitable view of learners and the opportunities offered to them. Additionally, teachers are unaware of how practices they implement in the classroom might be devoid of cultural responsiveness.

This same lack of recognition and understanding seems to exist at the professional working level. Expatriate leaders and teachers are often unconscious of how systems, structures, and practices perpetuate a narrative that fails to embrace and honor the cultural diversity of their counterparts, particularly the indigenous faculty and staff. A shift in the school staff's mindset and understanding is necessary to provide equitable access to learning for all children and equitable collaborative environments for all adult community members. Time and attention devoted to encouraging leaders and teachers to get to know their colleagues, students, and families more comprehensively as individuals will support a shift to an asset-based, culturally responsive approach in schools. Two equity frameworks supported the need for the focus of practice: political-economic and psychological. First, I explore the political-economic framework and education reforms that have contributed to a deficit view. Second, I discuss the psychological framework and the role mindsets play in developing equitable schools.

## Political-Economic Framework of the Focus of Practice

Political and economic education policies have shifted over time and made their mark in schools globally, influencing approaches that may make things more equal but not necessarily more equitable. Anderson et al. (2013) describe how reforms following World War II, such as the Education Reform Act of 1988 in England and No Child Left Behind in 2001 in the United States, brought about unintended equity concerns as the focus shifted from what they describe as an "inputs" to an "outputs" approach to education. Prioritizing outputs has resulted in factors such as standardized testing driving teaching and learning.

Education reforms that underscore outputs emphasize skill development in disciplines most clearly represented in standardized tests, typically math, language arts, and science., Teachers express feeling stress because they do not have time to implement alternative learning methods; the time constraints limit their teaching to specific, relatively narrow pre-selected standards. Assessments might show improvement in areas such as reading or math, but when we examine the allocation of learning time, we see that schools have stripped attention from other subject areas and learning opportunities (Anderson, 2013). While the international school in Ethiopia is not as driven by outputs as United States schools, educators and parents do place emphasis on standardized test scores, especially in high school, as students consider higher education. In addition, teachers and families come from schools around the globe, many from systems where outputs are considered the most critical factors of success.

These factors, in turn, result in a deficit approach that highlights improvements needed in math and reading but dismisses our students' assets and talents that could be represented in the pedagogy to empower and engage students. Too often, teachers only know their students in terms of limited academic measures. Strengths, interests, and personal stories often go unknown. This belief—that academic measures are the only thing important enough for educators to discuss in their valuable PLC time—results in the omission of conversations built to establish relational trust. In the PAR study, I aimed to shift the focus to better knowing educators' assets—personal and cultural—and using those to inform practices at ICS to provide a more equitable environment.

### Psychological Framework of the Focus of Practice

The mindsets of teachers and school leaders significantly impact equity in schools. McKenzie and Scheurich (2004) named four "equity traps" into which educators consistently fall. One of these is a "deficit view," depicting how teachers tend to view students through what they cannot do rather than the gifts they bring to the classroom. Teachers develop a deficit view primarily because they do not prioritize getting to know students. "Therefore, to eliminate deficit thinking as an equity trap, school staffs need to get to know their students and their students' families and community on a personal level" (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004, p. 609). Interestingly, this equity trap is identifiable at the school leadership level through deficit conversations regarding teachers.

In the PAR project and study, we focused first on leadership and its work with teachers. It is imperative to begin at the school leadership level in the process of developing a schoolwide asset-based lens. Then, we spent time building relational trust through sharing personal narratives at the teacher level, which we expect will eventually result in shifts in teaching practices toward a more culturally responsive and personalized, student-centered approach. As a school leader, I wanted to know whether the intentional modeling of the strategies focused on the sharing of personal narratives with leaders and teachers would transform school practices.

## Participatory Action Research Design

As described by Herr and Anderson (2014), participatory action research (PAR) involves cycles of inquiry "in which each cycle increases the researcher's knowledge of the original question, puzzle, or problem, and, it is hoped, leads to its solution" (p. 5). The research questions that I developed and share later in this section worked as a guide to outline the cycles of inquiry. I worked with Co-Practitioner Researchers (CPR) to go through these cycles in search of solutions related to the Focus of Practice (FoP).

### Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of the Participatory Action Research (PAR) project was to use culturally responsive practices to develop and sustain relational trust, recognize the assets of the school community, and cultivate a more equitable, collaborative experience for all constituents. Our long-term hope as leaders and teachers was to learn new ways of connecting and honoring assets so that we could implement those practices with a personalized, student-centered, and culturally responsive pedagogical approach. The school leadership team at ICS was committed to a personalized approach to learning; developing an understanding of ICS's definition of personalization and what it looks like in practice for adults was a necessary step for actualizing this goal. As a school leader, I worked with a co-practitioner researcher (CPR) team to identify and implement strategies, including cultural practices of our host country of Ethiopia and cultural practices significant to our community members, to draw out the assets of our staff. The overarching research question and the following sub-questions (see Figure 2) of the PAR were: How can international school educators honor and utilize the assets of a diverse international school community to co-create a more equitable, cross-cultural, collaborative environment?

- How does a leadership team use culturally responsive practices to recognize community assets and challenges in a culturally diverse environment?
- To what extent does a staff build understanding and strengthen collaboration in a cross-cultural environment?
- How do I grow as an educational leader in supporting leaders and teachers to build relational trust and deepen their cultural understanding?

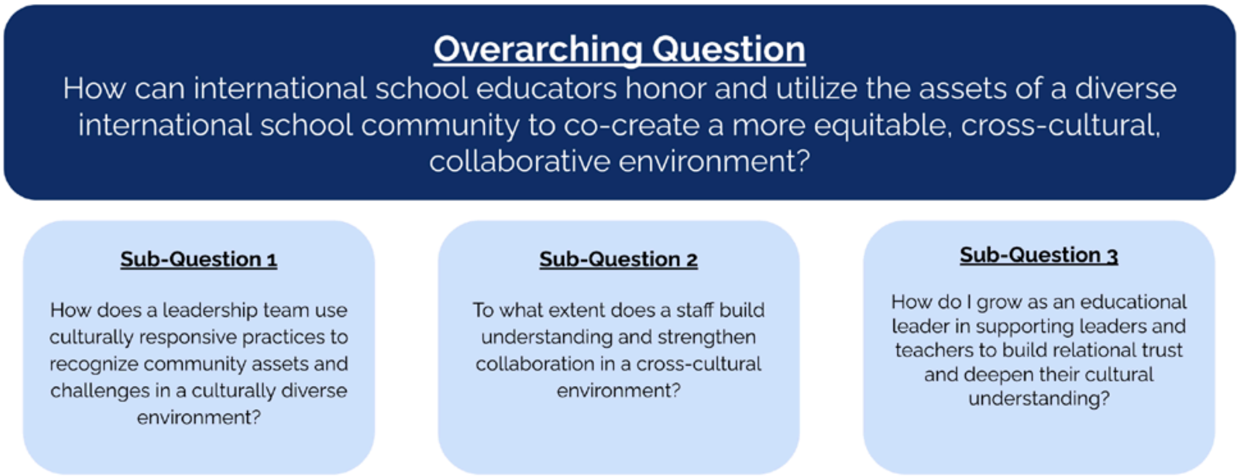
These questions guided the participatory action research. I explain more details regarding the project and activities next.

## Theory of Action

The theory of action for the PAR was: *IF* leaders and teachers in an international school use processes to foster personal connections among a diverse staff, *THEN* they will build understanding and strengthen collaboration in a cross-cultural environment. My supposition was that this deliberate attention to developing relational trust would positively impact educators to develop the mindset necessary to shift their practices as adult educators.

## FoP Description

In Fall 2017, a new Head of School, Dr. Timothy Stuart, assumed leadership at The International Community School of Addis Ababa (ICS). Dr. Stuart brought with him a passion for a personalized approach to learning. His leadership, coupled with the October 2018 release of the IB PYP Enhancements, *Principles into Practice*, and its emphasis on agency complemented



**Overarching Question**

How can international school educators honor and utilize the assets of a diverse international school community to co-create a more equitable, cross-cultural, collaborative environment?

**Sub-Question 1**

How does a leadership team use culturally responsive practices to recognize community assets and challenges in a culturally diverse environment?

**Sub-Question 2**

To what extent does a staff build understanding and strengthen collaboration in a cross-cultural environment?

**Sub-Question 3**

How do I grow as an educational leader in supporting leaders and teachers to build relational trust and deepen their cultural understanding?

*Figure 2*. Overarching research questions and sub-questions.

the need I identified: leaders and teachers at ICS must review their relationships with each other as a prerequisite for changing their pedagogical practices. Subsequently, we co-defined learning as “learning is optimized when it is meaningful, authentic, reflective, collaborative, conceptual [sic] transdisciplinary, active, and personalized” (ICS Addis, 2019, p. 1). The school implemented a schoolwide Personalized Learning Experience (PLEx) initiative this same year. Through this experience, educators intended to honor student voice and choice by opening the curriculum and timetable for five weeks to allow learners to pursue areas of interest. The experience centered on the use of transdisciplinary skills and the ICS Learning Process of inquiry, action, and reflection.

Another driving objective that emerged under Dr. Stuart's leadership was to become both a highly effective and learning progressive school by working through a Professional Learning Community (PLC) framework (Stuart et al., 2018). This goal demanded that educators adhere to a robust set of standards and develop scope and sequences to guide learning and teaching. Through a PLC framework, teachers used these standards to examine learning evidence to determine students' depth of understanding and how to respond. The guiding documents, known as the school’s "viable and guaranteed curriculum" (ICS Addis, 2019, p. 1), intended for staff to work through a progressive learning approach in which students had agency in both the learning contexts they explored and processes through which they did so. This intention can be a challenging feat because "all too often the idea of personalization is vague and unclear, leaving administrators, teachers, parents, and, more importantly, students without a focused understanding and direction" (Stuart et al., 2018, p. 26). While the aim was to be a highly effective and progressive school, staff understanding of how to achieve this was limited; they needed considerable professional learning in this area.

The initiatives undertaken through Dr. Stuart's leadership were meant to bring about more equity for students; however, as teachers grappled with rigor and what it meant for learners, alongside outside challenges compounding their stress, a deficit approach focused on student ability persisted. Identifying power standards that the faculty initially drew solely from the school's adopted scope and sequence documents added to this narrow view of essentials, as these standards were primarily subject-specific skills and knowledge. Shortly before the PAR project and study's onset, the school's leaders identified that conceptual understandings are the building blocks of the curriculum. This shift slowly began changing teachers' mindsets to form a broader view of essential learning targets. This shift resulted in a step toward a more holistic understanding and helped teachers see how concepts can allow for more entry points into the curricula. While the school's faculty has taken steps in this area, it still has work to do. The PAR focus of practice emerged from the need to develop a more asset-based culture to better lead to the highly effective and learning-progressive school we were hoping to become.

The focus of practice centered on relational trust as a leading force in developing an asset-focused culture. I wondered how relational trust would lead to honoring and utilizing the assets of the diverse community and contribute to culturally responsive practices that would eventually result in personalized, student-centered learning. To begin, we explored the contribution this intentional focus on relationship building had on drawing out and embedding leaders' and teachers' assets in the school. We needed more focused attention on building relational trust at ICS, and faculty needed to reimagine their understanding of culturally responsive practices. We aimed to direct attention to these matters through the focus of practice.

## Proposed Project Activities

An existing structure at the school supported our work: Professional Learning

Communities (PLC). Educators operated through a PLC approach and collaborated daily in teams to support learners. I used this collaborative approach throughout the project to approach the research. I formed a co-practitioner researcher (CPR) team composed of elementary school leadership team (ESLT) members. These members worked together to implement and reflect on the project in two cycles of inquiry. The project required the team to undertake the work with open minds, an IB principle, as we considered new ideas, learned about our host country of Ethiopia and the cultures of our school community, and shifted thinking with an asset lens to gain cultural understanding.

The project began with the ESLT engaging in the sharing of personal narratives to further build relational trust. We drew upon our host country's cultural, community-oriented practices during this process. We collated these practices and later shared and drew upon them when working with teams. These practices had the potential for use in classrooms and possibly in other departments across the school. As the project progressed, the unit of analysis shifted from the leadership team to teachers and educational assistants. We explored how personal narratives transferred to our work with teachers. Then, with our focus on teachers, we examined the extent to which the learning acquired from engaging in personal narratives transformed our mindsets and practices.

## Confidentiality, Ethical Considerations, and Limitations

The security and privacy of individuals who partook in the study was of utmost importance. I protected their confidentiality throughout the study and ensured all participants filled out consent forms before participation (see Appendix D). Participants were permitted to leave the study at any point in time with no questions asked and without consequences. I kept the information gathered throughout the study in a secure location. I used peer debriefing and shared an executive summary with leaders at the school.

Before conducting the PAR project, I submitted a formal request to engage in the study at the International Community School of Addis Ababa and received a permission letter (see Appendix C). I completed a Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) course to ensure I was prepared to complete an ethical study (see Appendix B). I share more details about the confidentiality and ethical considerations in Chapter 3.

Of vital important was my attention to existing or potential limitations. I used methods that checked for accuracy of findings to ensure both internal and external validity. Guba and Lincoln (2000) describe internal validity as “best demonstrated through an isomorphism between the data of an inquiry and the phenomena those data represent” (p. 376). I used approaches including triangulation, member checking, clarification of potential researcher bias, prolonged time spent in the site, and peer debriefing to support internal validity. I collected data through multiple sources to verify data and discussed the results with participants. I describe each of these approaches in further detail in Chapter 3. External validity was the primary process we used throughout the PAR study. This study was site based, so the outcomes are specific to the school involved in the study. However, as suggested by Guba and Lincoln, I provide a rich description of the context of this study to help support my suggestion that the hypotheses gleaned from the study are transferable to another setting with similar characteristics.

## Summary

As Maya Angelou once said, "We all should know that diversity makes for a rich tapestry, and we must understand that all the threads of the tapestry are equal in value no matter what their color." As educators, we place value on certain threads in the tapestry while often neglecting threads that may bring about unique learning opportunities. To recognize and embed the diverse assets of children, we needed first to emphasize relational trust among adults. Knowing and implementing processes to develop more profound levels of knowing between and among students and teachers was essential; personalizing adult learning spaces preceded our ability to do so in classrooms. To begin understanding the importance of deeply knowing the unique humans in our midst, we must begin with each other. The PAR sought to explore this concept; we examined to what extent the use of personal narratives contributes to honoring and responding to educators' diversity.

In Chapter 2, I expand upon the extant literature and how it contributed to the PAR study. In Chapter 3, I discuss the methodology of the participatory action research project. In Chapter 4, I describe the context that was an essential component to the research. In Chapters 5 and 6, I explain the two cycles of inquiry in the project and the findings, and finally, in Chapter 7, I discuss the findings, implications, and my journey as a leader.

# CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of the study was to use culturally responsive practices to develop and sustain relational trust, recognize the assets of the school community, and cultivate a more equitable, collaborative experience for all constituents. International schools are unique in that their student population can be quite diverse; while the support staff, educational assistants, and some teachers are from the host country, most school leaders and teachers are from the Global North or Western cultural contexts. Additionally, a sizeable percentage of their students are not citizens of the school's host country.

International school diversity can be rewarding but can present challenges for schools in determining the best ways to support their staff and students. International schools have an opportunity to draw on the assets this diversity provides to enrich the learning experience. The literature review supports the participatory action research study as I build on prior research about the assets and challenges of the international school context. I have organized the review in two principal areas: the context and challenges of international schools and culturally responsive practices for students and adults. While the long-term goal of our work is to design and implement personalized learning environments for students, I determined from the PAR study that we had largely ignored personalizing the professional environment for the indigenous Ethiopian staff members. In so doing, we had compromised the one key goal of international education—to build capacity across the globe for cultural understanding.

## Context and Challenges of International Schools

Globally, international schools are continually increasing in number and vary in type, size, location, and purpose for existing. Brummitt and Keeling (2013) charted the growth of international schools: in 2000, 2,584 international schools served nearly one million students and had about 90,000 staff as teachers. By 2013, “the total marker had increased to 6,400 international schools teaching 3.2 million students and employing 300,000 full-time teaching staff” (Brummitt & Keeling, 2013, p. 27). The exponential growth Bunnell (2020) referenced in these statistics published by ISC Research, a research company originating in England, estimated over 11,000 international schools existed worldwide, with this number predicted to rise substantially in 10 years. What attributes constitute international schools, though, are debatable. The title of international school is self-proclaimed; schools tend to give themselves this appellation for many reasons ranging from the curriculum provided, the student body makeup, or even the desire to compete with other schools in the region (Hayden, 2006). Defining *international school* is essential in explaining the context in which this study is based as the challenges the FoP aims to explore relate to the school’s settings and circumstances. The findings of the study may have implications for other schools similar in nature. To analyze international schools, I examine the origin of the schools and three types of international schools. Then I examine three challenges that international schools face: mobility, identity, and cultural competence.

### Origin and Types of International Schools

The origin of international schools is difficult to establish due to unclear parameters defining such schools; however, Hayden and Thompson (2008) stated that the schools could have started as early as the mid-nineteenth century. According to these authors, the International School of Geneva and Yokohama International School were two of the oldest schools that created what we know today as international schools, both formed in 1924. They note that these schools were relatively small, with only eight and six children attending, respectively. Expatriates desired to educate their children in particular methods, which pushed them to establish these schools (Hayden & Thompson, 2008). Since that time, international schools have grown considerably in number and have been formed for different reasons.

Although international schools can be challenging to describe due to their variance, two sets of researchers classified them. Hayden and Thompson (2008) described international schools through the lens of three types: traditional, ideological, and non-traditional. The first type they explained, traditional, are schools that cater to expatriates, most of whom have relocated for a period due to work. These schools tend to be culturally diverse and not-for-profit. The second type Hayden and Thompson described, ideological, are those formed to promote international-mindedness and foster world peace. These are fewer in number globally. Finally, as defined by Hayden and Thompson and expanded upon by Bunnell et al. (2016), the third type of international school is non-traditional. This type of school has more recently emerged in the international scene as investors have identified schools as a place of profitability, capitalizing on a worldwide trend toward market-driven responses to education reform (Brummitt & Keeling, 2013; Schneider & Berkshire, 2020). These for-profit schools tend to serve primarily students native to the country in which they reside (Bunnell et al., 2016). Brummitt and Keeling (2013) assert that this final type now dominates the international school sector but that this relatively new arrival confounds the understanding of the term *international school*. As Hayden and Thompson (2013) argue, the diversity in this field is so vast that "the *only* characteristic all international schools can be argued to have in common is that the curriculum offered is not of the home country" (p. 9).

As international schools expanded, they offered a British or American curriculum to which local families who had financial resources could send their children so that they could learn English and perhaps secure admission to Western-based universities. While the

International Community School of Addis Ababa has a limited number of Ethiopian-only passport holders in the student body due to government restrictions, a sizeable number of students identify as Ethiopian and, like other international schools, the school has a substantial number of persons on staff as teachers, educational assistants, and support staff who are Ethiopian. This profile is common for a traditional international school, and this PAR study focuses on the disconnect between the cultural norms of the Ethiopian and the largely Western (or Global North) teachers and leaders.

Identifying the type of international school is helpful to avoid confusion and to draw attention to how the characteristics of this type of school impact the rationale for the PAR project and study. In this study, I use traditional international school to refer to schools like the first type defined by Hayden and Thompson (2008), as this most adequately describes the type of school in which the study occurred. The findings from the study therefore might be most applicable to schools of similar typology. The school in which the project took place catered to expatriate families; thus, the student population is culturally and linguistically diverse, with students holding passports from around the globe. Students tend to stay for only a few years, and the school is not-for-profit. Schools like the one in which this study is based have distinct attributes contributing to their benefits and challenges, many of which contribute to the rationale for the PAR.

## Challenges Facing International Schools

Traditional international schools have many benefits, but along with these come challenges. One of the benefits involves exposure to learning and interacting with peers from cultures different from one's own. In a small-scale study of 48 undergraduate students at the University of Bath who attended traditional international schools before university, Hayden and

Thompson (1995) found that engagement with peers from other cultures was a dominant factor contributing to what they describe as an international attitude. Students in this study routinely identified this as a benefit of their schooling. Carder et al. (2018) described this interaction of students from around the globe as rewarding in that children are continually exposed to differing world views, although they say that this is only fruitful for all when language proficiency is not a prohibiting factor. Moore and Barker (2012) confirmed these findings of positivity regarding cultural exposure upon studying the cultural identity of adults who spent their formative years as students in traditional international schools. Other benefits of traditional international schools surfaced in this study, including the opportunity for students to become multilingual and the focus on developing open-minded individuals. While the literature identified many benefits to traditional international schools, many challenges exist.

The challenges traditional international schools face relate in many ways to the characteristics defining such schools. Frequent mobility of families results in students and staff constantly transitioning, which introduces factors schools are not always equipped to tackle. This mobility affects students' formation and understanding of identity, which adds a layer of complexity to schools working to develop confident children who know they belong. Additionally, challenges arise for traditional international schools as they consider the best approach to embracing, honoring, and respecting the host country and its values and customs. These challenges and their implications on traditional international schools are widespread and imply a need for further attention in identifying strategies to combat them. This need informs the PAR. As I describe these challenges in more detail, I identify the source of the challenges and the current action steps proposed in literature.

### ***Mobility***

The incessant mobility of some traditional international school community members poses a continual challenge to schools. This mobility disrupts teaching and learning and affects students, teachers, and the cohesion of school programming. However, only certain persons in the international school move frequently—expatriate teachers, leaders, and families. The indigenous staff—including some teachers, educational assistants, and service personnel—remain; they are typically from the local culture and provide organizational cohesion. They bring considerable assets that are not always appreciated or supported (English, 2021; Killoran, 2019). First, however, I provide a brief description of the people attending traditional international schools as this contributes to understanding the challenges faced by schools.

The increase in number of traditional international schools globally over time has inevitably been a result of a rise of students living outside the country of which they hold passports. Coined "Third Culture Kids (TCK)" by Useem and Downie (1976) and, of similar meaning, *global nomads* by McCaig (2002), these children tend to live in other countries for a significant amount of time during their formative years. Children may be designated TCKs or global nomads for reasons stemming from parents attending university abroad, parental involvement in religious missions, parent work opportunities, or refugees escaping from war (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001). In the traditional international school sector, mobility typically derives from opportunities in a globalized work arena as opposed to families driven out by conflict and crises in their home countries.

The clientele in traditional international schools generally face mobility due to parental employment (Hayden & Thompson, 2008). McLachlan (2007) used the term *internationally mobile* to depict the families these children belong to and described internationally mobile parents as commonly transitioning from one country to another due to employment, often taking their children along with them. Gordon and Jones (n.d., as cited in Hayden, 2006), used three categories to describe the type of international move made: reasonably short, frequent and shortish, and lengthier or indefinite. The first two types signify that traditional international school students commonly experience change.

### *Mobility Affects Identity*

Traditional international school students often experience frequent geographic changes related to familial professional opportunities. These families' mobility typically relates to privilege as opposed to necessity. Pollock and Van Reken (2001) described the families as usually planning to return to their home country to permanently reside, but while living abroad, often experiencing an advantaged lifestyle in which the logistics of living are supported either by the parent's employer or by the host culture. This lifestyle often results in these families living in a bubble of sorts.

The adults, or parents, in this case, experience challenges associated with constant transitioning as described by authors such as Hayden (2006). But, for this study, I narrow in on the challenges particular to children, especially in international schools. I use the term *Third Culture Kid* or TCK when describing these internationally mobile children.

**Student Mobility.** Mobility, named frequently in literature, is a critical issue affecting learning and a significant challenge international schools face. Hattie (2009), in his meta-analysis of factors that either help or hinder learning, identified mobility as the factor with the greatest negative impact on student learning. For that reason, mobility is identified time and again as a challenge for traditional international schools. Although not every student in the school experiences frequent mobility, McLachlan (2007) noted that "many [internationally mobile] families live in a constant state of transition. . . leaving one country for another" (p. 234). Several facets of mobility impact Third Culture Kids. These include issues involving the transition out of one location and the transition into a new one. As children move away from one setting, they struggle with lost security, cherished items, and contact with people important in their lives (Ezra, 2003). Children often experience grief as they leave the familiar, and they experience grief when their closest friends move away from *them* (Ota, 2014). TCKs often accompany their parents on home leave, sometimes every summer, during which time they visit relatives, only to say goodbye to yet another significant set of people in their lives after only a short time together (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001). Pollock, as quoted in Ota (2014), stated that "many TCKs have experienced more loss in their developmental years than most adults experience in a lifetime" (p. 2).

**Identity in New Contexts.** Adding to the challenges of moving *away from*, Third Culture Kids face challenges moving *into*. Anxiety about acceptance, potential language barriers, and struggle with their identity are common concerns (Ezra, 2003). Ebbeck and Reus (2005) followed eleven children through their first eight weeks as international school children in Singapore and found that children feel vulnerable when entering into a new school in a foreign country. Especially significant to this finding, children attending traditional international schools often repeat this transition over and over. They used a model from Pollock and Van Reken (2001) to codify the children's responses, with the feelings *passive* and *outcast* described most frequently at the beginning of the eight-week period. A positive finding of the study was that by week eight, all 11 children reported that they had made friends and adjusted to new routines; however, this finding came with a caveat from the authors that negative emotions still existed among the children concerning the academic aspects of the school. Ebbeck and Reus suggest that more time should be spent on the social-emotional aspect of the transition into a new school than academics during these beginning weeks.

The research on the mobility of students highlights a critical challenge facing traditional international schools and suggests a need for well-designed transition programs. According to Ota (2014), mobility is a top factor for the Hattie (2009) list because often schools do not plan adequately to address the issue. Ota (2014) asserted that "comprehensive school-based programs for handling the challenges associated with moving rarely exist" (p. XL). He explained one reason why programs may be nonexistent: because grief is a prominent factor in transitions, staff members may try to avoid it as much as possible, resulting in a lack of interest in spending time on endeavors such as transition programs. He urged schools to confront the need affecting almost all within the mobile-laden world of traditional international schools; he proposed helping students feel that their life stories are heard and valued. Ota's work contains practical steps to support schools in designing programs, stressing that it is the responsibility of international schools to establish and sustain transition programs. Ezra (2003) added to the conversation by positing that schools must consider language, culture, and personality when determining how best to support TCKs in transitions. Ezra suggested that sensitivity on behalf of the teacher is critical and simple strategies, such as pairing up transitioning children with children who speak the same language, can help to reduce the apprehension often experienced by students in transition. She urged schools to consider developing transition teams composed of staff members responsible for supporting students and families. She suggested that the same team be responsible for better preparing teachers to support their students, stating, "Teachers should have access to information about the values, accepted [behaviors] and school systems of their students' home countries" (Ezra, 2003, p. 142). These recommendations highlight a need to identify methods and practices international schools could embed into their ethos to help students maneuver through frequent transitions.

Traditional international schools have work to do to support students in transition, and some recommendations do exist to assist schools. The authors of these works agree that schools need to develop and implement robust transition programs that recognize and support students as individuals with varying needs. Transition programs play an important role in helping students transition more quickly and with more success. A central aspect of these programs involves building quality relationships among the students, their peers, and teachers. While the literature does provide some specific strategies, what is missing is a well-developed, practical resource containing strategies that can be implemented inside the classroom to support students in telling their stories and in building relationships. As well, as a result of this project and study, we hope to ensure that we are providing resources for adults to learn from their peers—the indigenous staff who have been at the school and represent the cultural context in which the school is located.

### *Cultural Competence of Teachers*

Another pitfall facing traditional international schools involves human capacity from a professional side: teachers' competency in culturally responsive teaching. “All the main influences on international education today have been from sources conventionally categorized as culturally Western” (Pearce, 2013, p. 69). As described above, international schools are rich in cultural and linguistic diversity. To meet the needs of learners and avoid the assimilationist trap (Carder et al., 2018; Kendi, 2019), teachers and leaders must have the professional capacity to develop culturally responsive classrooms and schools. Carder et al. (2018) asserted that most traditional international school teachers come from English-speaking countries, and few teacher preparation programs in these countries adequately prepare teachers to teach culturally and linguistically diverse students—particularly in the international context. Further discussion and learning are needed around culturally responsive teaching within an international school context.

**International Perspective**. The diverse nature of traditional international schools brings forth a critical discussion about the role of educators in recognizing and responding to cultural differences. The mission statements at many traditional international schools note the importance of diversity and include phrasing such as *international-mindedness* or *global citizenship* as founding beliefs driving their operations. The International Baccalaureate (IB), a framework implemented by many international schools, names international-mindedness as a cornerstone element. Drake (2017), the Head of Curriculum Innovation and Alignment at the IB, defined the IB's understanding of international-mindedness as this:

> International-mindedness is a world view in which people see themselves connected to the global community and assume a sense of responsibility to its members (humans, other living things and the planet). It is an awareness of the inter-relatedness of all nations and people, and recognition of the complexity of these relationships. (para. 7)

This definition, and others like it, acknowledges the intricacy of human diversity, but it is not accompanied by actionable ways schools can respond.

**Cultural Complexities.** The discussion regarding culture in international schools is beginning to make its way to the forefront, and research findings suggest the need for more attention to this issue. Deveney (2007) examined preparation in an international school in Thailand that has a culturally diverse student population. An alarming finding of her study was that one-third of the teachers were ignorant of different learning styles. She found that some of these teachers even admitted that they do not provide the same rigor in curricula or expectations for their Thai students because they were not always responsive to questions asked, and teachers thought they needed simplified lessons. Following another study examining intercultural sensitivity in an international school in Korea with over 40 different nationalities represented, Morales (2017) found that nationality plays an important role in individuals' intercultural sensitivity. He recommended that teachers in international schools receive more training on the importance of intercultural sensitivity. These studies and their findings exemplify the need for teacher development in teaching with cultural diversity in mind.

Another discussion in the international school sector involves the role of values. Fail (2010) discussed the challenge international schools face when discussing this topic and explained the struggle many schools confront as they recognize values as being primarily cultural in nature. With a vast range of cultures represented in traditional international schools, it is challenging to determine which values should be highlighted. Cavendish (2011), in her dissertation study, presented an understanding of culture in international schools downplaying home culture and emphasizing "the interaction of different cultural worlds at play at any given time" (p. 120). She described the student, school, and teachers whose backgrounds and experiences influence the classroom; these interactions influence classroom culture and values.

There is no doubt that culture is important in international schools. What seems to be missing in the current discussion is how to prepare teachers for acknowledging, valuing, and responding to this essential element and most especially the cultural milieu of the country and culture in which each international school is located. In the PAR project and study, this critical challenge was our focus as the co-practitioner researcher team considered how we could use culturally responsive practices with leaders and teachers to contribute to better understanding of students and their cultural identities. While culturally responsive teaching and learning was our ultimate goal, in this study, adult understanding and actions in a culturally diverse setting was critical.

## Culturally Responsive Practices for Students and Adults

Countries globally are becoming increasingly more diverse. According to the International Organization for Migration (2017), as of mid-year 2020, migrant numbers worldwide reached 280.6 million. The rising movement of people across borders has implications for many businesses and community organizations, not the least of which is schools. Demographics within schools have changed significantly with the continually rising numbers of migrants. While this migration has not followed a predictable or even pattern, this historical trend highlights the importance of dynamic classrooms responsive to their diverse learners (Paine et al., 2017).

### Defining Culturally Responsive

We must understand the cultural context of the school and the indigenous staff as well as the diverse culture of expatriate students and families in each international school if we are to foster and sustain school environments and pedagogy with those cultures in mind. The term *culturally responsive*, introduced by Cazden and Leggett (1976), highlighted the need to attend to students' learning styles from various cultural backgrounds by stating:

> The goal is education that will be more responsive to cultural differences among children. Specifically, school systems are asked to consider cognitive and affective aspects of how different children learn so that appropriate teaching styles and learning environments can be provided that will maximize their educational achievement. (p. 3)

Several years later, Au and Jordan (1981, as cited in Ladson-Billings, 1995b), used the phrase *culturally appropriate* to describe the methodology used in Hawaiian schools of embedding cultural practices into reading instruction. *Culturally congruent* instruction (Mohatt & Erikson, 1981), as cited in Ladson-Billings (1995b), is a term that developed simultaneously. These researchers studied teachers working with Native American students who used cultural language patterns to inform teaching and learning practices. Jordan (1985, as cited in Ladson-Billings, 1995b), introduced another term when reporting on the achievement experienced by Hawaiian children and teachers upon using *culturally compatible* practices. These researchers, using different terminology, have identified a similar concept needing more attention.

Other authors introduced similar ideas and terminology. Irvine (1990) described culturally responsive pedagogy as a theory that "rests on the assumption that cultural variables are powerful, yet often overlooked, explanatory factors in the school failure of minority children" (pp. 18-19). Ladson-Billings (1995a) recognized earlier researchers and added new considerations to this concept when suggesting that some particulars were missing. She proposed that in addition to student achievement, pedagogy should focus on affirming cultural identity for students while challenging inequities. She calls this *culturally relevant pedagogy*. Ladson-Billings (1995a) further explained that teachers implementing this approach use a student's culture as a "vehicle for learning" (p. 161). Gay (2000) has extensive research on this topic and asserts that systematic reform needs to happen to better provide robust education for minority students. She suggests an approach of *culturally responsive teaching*, which she defines as "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them" (Gay, 2013, p. 31). Although each of these researchers adds suggestions, they share the conviction that cultural awareness and responsiveness are missing in schools and that this oversight impacts the learning for too many minority children. Traditional international schools were not examined as part of the original research around culturally responsive teaching, but as described later, they face similar issues. For this study, I use Gay's phrasing of *culturally responsive teaching* when referencing this concept.

## Expanding Cultural Responsiveness to International Schools

Although most of the initial research on culturally responsive teaching was based in the United States, the emphasis on culturally responsive is now being emphasized in international schools. Paine et al. (2017) argue that the need for culturally responsive teacher development no longer stems solely from the migration of people and goods but from ideas regarding teacher education that have crossed boundaries. Due to an increasingly interconnected world, they assert that teachers now have the duty of preparing their students as national citizens while preparing them to participate in the global community.

Culturally responsive teaching involves many layers. In order to enact it effectively, teachers and school leaders need a radical shift in their thinking about their school community—in other words, their mindsets about culture and assets in any school community need to shift. To make these fundamental changes, school constituents must establish relational trust. Only then can elements of culturally responsive teaching and learning practices be internalized to the point that mindsets and practices can change. Shifting teacher mindsets and building relational trust are the necessary foundations to effectively implement culturally responsive teaching and learning.

### *Teacher Mindset*

Culturally responsive teaching is more than a list of instructional strategies; it is a *mindset* (Fullam, 2017; Hammond, 2015). To understand what this specific mindset entails, it is first important to understand what the term *mindset* means. Dweck (2008) describes mindsets as beliefs or views one adopts. She describes the power mindsets have in transforming the way one moves through life. Stembridge (2019) used other research to support his description of mindsets as a makeup of "concepts, assumptions, beliefs, methods, and notations. . .that contribute to our subjective views of the world and are always in play at every moment of our lives" (p. 10). Both authors describe mindsets as malleable with the ability to evolve. Stembridge argued that this evolution of mindset does not evolve without concerted effort and attention and described this process as an emotional one due to the necessity for close examination of personal beliefs and assumptions. This description of mindsets applies to culturally responsive teaching.

A core tenet of culturally responsive teaching is shifting or developing a mindset from deficient-thinking toward asset-thinking, particularly regarding students of color (Gay, 2013; Hammond, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995a). Believing that all children are competent is the first step toward delivering an educational experience equitable for all students. Culturally responsive teachers believe in the capabilities of all children and therefore hold all students to high expectations; they do not water down curricula due to misguided assumptions that some children are less competent than others (Fullam, 2017; Gay, 2013; Hammond, 2015). Rather than a deficit mindset centered on the need to "fix" students due to their perceived deficiencies of low intelligence and family dysfunction, cultural responsiveness involves developing a school culture that believes all students should receive the same access to a robust educational experience (Hammond, 2015). This mindset is such that there is no doubt that regardless of race, gender, or circumstance, each child is able and has the intelligence to succeed. Culturally responsive teaching is a matter of equity, and this begins with mindset.

A connection between cultural responsiveness and poverty is a false one. Culturally responsive teaching research is based on assets and should not center on families in poverty or the misguided belief that their situation stems from a deficiency in intelligence or integrity

(Hammond, 2015). Hammond (2015) asserted that this erroneous idea has contributed to the construction of a deficiency-oriented mindset of students of color, as the poverty level of people of color is disproportionately higher than that of Whites. According to the United States Census Bureau (2020), consistently, there is an imbalance of groups represented in poverty data. They report that non-Hispanic Whites have continually been under-represented while Blacks have been over-represented. Gorski (2013), in his work on what he calls equity literacy, declared that the idea of a culture of poverty, a common assumption by many, is misguided and harmful as there is great diversity within impoverished people. He stressed that the disparities in this so-called culture, in fact, stem from inequities. Gorski pronounced that people must consider their biases and beliefs to meet all learners' needs. Sato and Lensmire (2009) made a similar assertion relating to mindset toward the poor; they declared there is a tagging of children coming from poverty as "grossly overgeneralized, deficit-laden characteristics that put them at risk of being viewed as less capable, less cultured, and less worthy as learners" (p. 365). These authors urge that a shift in mindset toward competency is necessary to bridge the gap prevalent between economic groups. Although a deficiency-oriented mindset is generally not related to poverty in traditional international schools, this mindset does exist in the approach that the staff and faculty take with students by focusing on their areas needing improvement. Acknowledging the rich representations of culture and diversity in schools formed the basis of the focus of this study. In the PAR study, I engaged international school leaders and teachers in culturally responsive practices and reflection to draw out biases and shift mindsets toward an asset-based approach.

The effect teacher mindset has on student learning has been studied robustly. Gay (2013) referenced many researchers, including Villegas and Oakes, who have examined this very topic, summarizing that the research proves the importance of asset-based thinking in student achievement. She stated:

> Positive attitudes about ethnic, racial, and gender differences generate positive instructional expectations and actions toward diverse students, which, in turn, have positive effects on students' learning efforts and outcomes. Conversely, negative teacher beliefs produce negative teaching and learning behaviors. (Gay, 2013, para. 20)

Although the international school context of this study will not necessarily show inequities in terms of poverty, some of the strategies that can be gleaned to address inequities around cultural responsiveness revolve around the shifting of mindsets toward believing all students are capable. Shifting mindsets takes time. Relational trust plays a critical role in the process of this change, which I discuss next.

### *Relational Trust*

According to Gorski (2013) and Sato and Lensmire (2009), assuming an asset-based mindset is essential to culturally responsive teaching and learning. These authors urged educators to reflect on their personal biases as a starting point for this change so that they could engage with others and form bonds of relational trust, which are central to becoming more culturally responsive. Bryk and Schneider (2003) asserted that relational trust is essential for school improvement. They spent nearly a decade in over 400 elementary schools and four years in 12 communities examining the benefits of relational, or social, trust and the factors contributing to building it. Through this long-term study, they found that social trust significantly and positively impacts the extent to which school reforms are adopted. They found that teachers in schools with a strong sense of relational trust were more willing to explore new practices and that teachers in these environments engaged more frequently in dialogue around teaching successes and challenges; teachers' willingness to express vulnerability increased.

Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000) named multiple factors driving trust, contributing to its definition: willingness to risk vulnerability, confidence, benevolence, reliability, competence, honesty, and openness. These authors assert that each of these facets depends on the type of relationship between two parties, including the level of interdependence between them. Diversity is an important element Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000) discussed when writing about levels of trust. They stated that "people have a tendency to extend trust more readily to people they perceive as similar to themselves" (p. 560). Awareness of this finding is significant when discussing cultural responsiveness and considering ways to develop competence among school staff. Tschannen-Moran and Hoy named other elements that affect the level of trust, including one's disposition to trust and one's moods and emotions. These components each play a role in establishing the depth of trust between two parties.

Although knowing the factors contributing to building trust is important, this knowledge on its own does not point to how relational trust is formed. Actions must be taken for this to happen. Behavior is a driving force for building trust. In the context of schools, Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000) contend that administrators' behaviors must first support trust building. They suggest consistency, integrity, concern, communication, and sharing control are five essential behaviors for initiating relational trust. In a study exploring the interrelationships of trust between different school constituents, Tschannen-Moran (2014) found that administrators play a critical role in the level of trust among school constituents. The findings of this study suggest that teachers' perceptions of their students and families improved when they found their administrators to be trustworthy. In addition, the study found that trust in parents and students correlated to staff trust in their colleagues. In discussing teacher behavior, Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000) assert that teachers' behaviors have more impact on students and their learning than do the behaviors of administrators, but that school trust begins at the leadership level. Tschannen-Moran and Hoy name benevolence and openness as two behaviors strongly contributing to trust between teachers and their colleagues that then impact their work with students and parents.

Adding to the research supporting the importance of relational trust among school personnel, Fournier et al. (2019) declare that positive relationships among staff can improve student achievement. They discuss how positive relationships can build trust that encourages teachers to grow collaboratively as educators and note that positive staff relationships often result in less teacher turnover. In addition, Fournier et al. urge this relationship-building in schools as positive modeling for students. In studying six schools described as having students who exhibited strong social skills and a sense of belonging, Fournier et al. found that the school leadership consistently devoted attention to intentional relationship-building among staff. They described strategies implemented by leaders, such as surveys and informal events like potlucks, as contributors to the development of these relationships. They even found that leaders in these schools described using strategies with teachers that they expected the teachers to use in classrooms with students. This modeling of relationship-building strategies can be strategic in affecting the development of positive, relationship-rich classrooms.

Finally, relational trust is a resource in a school that is foundational for school reform (see Figure 3). Grubb (2009) examined how relational trust affected the use of other school resources and asserts that, without relational trust, schools cannot achieve other goals and the monetary resources spent on professional learning or student curriculum are often less than

**Typology of Simple, Compound, Complex, and Abstract Resources**
**to Support Durable Reform Efforts**

*Money can buy simple resources, but these resources are actually some of the weakest predictors of educational outcomes. Money is a necessary but insufficient resource for improving schooling outcomes. Over time, if there is no attention to complex, compound, and abstract resources in schools, additional money resources make little to no difference in schooling outcomes.*

Grubb (2009)

| **Simple** School Resources<br>Resources that money supports -- best if the monetary resources are bolstered by complex, compound, and abstract resources; otherwise the monetary resources may be squandered. | **Complex** School Resources<br>Resources that support teachers and leaders in achieving their individual and collective goals for students |
|---|---|
| • School budget processes, including equity-based budgets<br>• Pupil-student ratio<br>• Teacher salary level<br>• Multiple support positions (coaching, social worker, family liaison, etc.)<br>• Social services for students and families | • Teacher and/or leader use of time<br>• Innovative teaching<br>• Academic press / rigor<br>• Teacher classroom management<br>• Teacher sense of efficacy<br>• Support for innovation from administration or department<br>• Curricular and programmatic coherence<br>• Levels of distributed leadership<br>• Student connectedness to teachers and school personnel |
| **Compound** School Resources<br>Resources that grow (like compound interest) over time because of repeated attention to key factors that support school improvement. | **Abstract** School Resources<br>Resources that cannot be bought but can be nurtured/co-created. In combination with compound and complex resources, these can contribute to strong outcomes. |
| • Teacher experience<br>• Teaching in field of preparation<br>• Planning time<br>• Professional development time<br>• Types of and assignment to educational tracks (academic, vocational, general)<br>• College and career readiness | • Stability of leadership and teachers<br>• Relational trust<br>• Racial, class, and ethnic climate<br>• Positive school climate<br>• School attendance<br>• Positive discipline structures and reduced referrals<br>• Parental engagement<br>• Positive relationships with communities |

*Note.* Adapted by Tredway from Grubb (2009).

*Figure 3.* Typology of school resources.

useful in achieving improved outcomes in schools. In his typology for school resources, he terms relational trust an abstract resource. Like school climate—including building racial, class, and ethnic climate—these resources must be co-created by the school staff to focus on building and sustaining relational trust over time. Investing in developing culturally responsive practices can support such efforts.

### *Culturally Responsive Practices*

The shift to or building of an asset-based mindset toward all learners, supported by strong relational trust within the school, is essential to instituting culturally responsive practices. Four features of culturally responsive teaching in the classroom that I discuss next are: development of classroom community, teacher-student relationships, culturally responsive processing techniques, and socially constructed learning. While primarily discussed in relation to the classroom setting, these practices are essential to working with school staff. Because adult relationships were the focus of the PAR study, knowing these culturally responsive practices so that we could transfer to adult relationships was critical to the study.

**Community-Building in the Classroom**. Relationships hold a crucial place in culturally responsive learning. Research has targeted two features of relationships: building community between learners in the classroom and the teacher-student relationship (Berryman et al., 2018, Edwards & Edick, 2013; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995a). Gay (2002) and others describe community building within classrooms as an essential element of culturally responsive teaching. They state that building these communities upon the understanding that cultural differences are enriching and should be valued is essential. Ladson-Billings (1995a), following her three-year study examining teachers identified as exceptional at teaching African American children, identified that a key characteristic of culturally responsive teachers is their belief in building community between learners; she noted that these teachers make community-building one of their priorities. Edwards and Edick (2013) suggest that the creation of community is the first step in supporting individual learners who understand that each person in the community is unique and, although they may not all learn the same material at the same time through the same methods, they share the experience of being in a learning process. These come to understand that they have a responsibility to one another (Ladson-Billings, 1995a).

These practices assist in building community. The strategies teachers use to build community in classrooms are vast, but regardless of their exact nature, their role in student learning is decisive. The focus of practice for this project centers on community-building through culturally responsive practices with leaders and teachers with the aim of determining if the learning from these engagements leads to better supporting cultural understanding in traditional international schools.

**Teacher-Student Relationship.** Another critical aspect within the realm of relationships in culturally responsive classrooms centers on the connection between teacher and student. Fullam (2017) insisted culturally responsive teaching is a requirement for teachers; they need to know their students well and take what they know to respond to the unique learners in their classrooms in ways tailored to their assets and needs. Edwards and Edick (2013) support this: "As soon as a teacher begins to ask how to teach ‘each student’ rather than asking how to teach ‘students’ then he/she begins to move toward a more interactive classroom" (p. 3). The interdependency and fluidity between teacher and student have been cited as two features vital to success (Berryman et al., 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995a) and creating space in the classroom for dialogue between these key players is necessary (Berryman et al., 2018). Hammond (2015) further emphasized the importance of relationships and dialogue in noting the significance of building a "culture of care" through what she termed a "learning partnership" (p. 75). She emphasized that building trust and developing an alliance with students is the only way to get a glimpse into their thinking. Berryman et al. (2018) and Hammond (2015) stressed the critical role of *listening* when describing strategies that support this relationship building. They shared that building trust takes time, and the daily interaction teachers create with students results in strong relationships. Knowing learners can then allow teachers to implement responsive pedagogical strategies.

The literature supports the need for developing and sustaining relational trust among teachers and teachers with their students. However, the literature—practice and research—is normative in nature. We need examples of tangible strategies to use in classrooms, specifically traditional international school settings, to develop deeper levels of knowing, including culture. This study seeks to name some of these practices for adult practices that teachers, educational assistants, and instructional coaches can then transfer to classroom use.

**Culturally Responsive Processing**. Developing the relationship between teacher and student is one of the first steps in creating an environment rich for learning. Teachers then use their knowledge of student assets to implement strategies that promote learning. As discussed above, culturally responsive teachers have a mindset that includes affirming the capability of all students to achieve at high levels. Therefore, culturally responsive classrooms focus on building independent learners with the goal of learning how to learn as a top priority (Hammond, 2015). The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2018) investigated the brain and its functionality, resulting in information as to how people learn, and particularly how learning is cultural. They note the individuality of the human experience and how learners bring their background and experiences to contribute to their meaning-making. Defining culture as "the learned behavior of a group of people that generally reflects the tradition of that people and is socially transmitted from generation to generation through social learning" (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018, p. 22), this diverse committee of 16 members asserted that individuals identifying within a specific cultural group can be quite diverse and different. Hammond (2015) declares that it is vital to consider learners as unique so that teachers can honor the cultural funds of knowledge of learners and make learning relevant to individuals (Moll et al., 1992); the same is true for how Global North-oriented teachers and leaders work with indigenous teachers, educational assistants, and support staff in a culturally diverse international school.

Taking on an inquiry approach as a teacher-researcher, the teacher should identify the student's unique needs and strengths and respond accordingly (Cochran-Smith, 1995). This student-centered approach to learning is a responsive one. Using the tenets of information processing theory to support her claim, Hammond (2015) provided examples of strategies to help learners draw on their schema to make meaning. These revolved around what she calls "macro level instructional strategies," naming them "ignite, chunk, chew, and review" (Hammond, 2015, p. 128). According to Hammond (2015), practices that draw on learning traditions of oral cultures help students develop processing techniques rooted in cultural responsiveness. She argues that practices like storytelling, chanting, and engaging in dialogue lead to deeper levels of processing. Albeit a few examples of many, practices such as these promote culturally responsive processing strategies that ensure rigor for all students and help transform dependent learners into independent learners.

**Socially Constructed Learning**. Another feature essential to learning present in culturally responsive classrooms is the social construction of understanding. Referencing sociocultural theory, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2018) explain the shift in thinking among education researchers by stating that "all learning is a social process" (p. 27). They relate this to culture by explaining the social interaction of cultural practices and how this exchange causes learning. Collectivism, a view prioritizing a group over individuals, and connectedness, or a feeling of belonging, are standards held in high regard in many cultures; in considering minority groups in the United States, where most of the research on culturally responsive teaching has taken place, this has taken a position of significant importance when discussing this concept (Gay, 2000). Although collectivist societies may differ by region and culture, Hammond (2015) declares that cooperative learning and relationships play significant roles in all of them. In consideration of this, culturally responsive teachers implement strategies that encourage learners to socially construct understanding with their peers. The use of dialogue and collaborative engagements can enhance learning in this way. This study aims to explore culturally responsive practices rich in dialogue and collaboration to uncover how these impact learning.

When discussing culturally responsive teaching practices, it is important to note that these practices may not come to fruition without well-delivered teacher preparation programs and professional learning environments for the adults who work with students. The concept of culturally responsive teaching is foreign to many or, if known, not well understood or implemented. With increased attention to cultural ways of knowing and doing, the PAR project and study was useful in developing a stronger understanding of cultural practices that could inform adult personal and professional interactions. The project and study promoted learning that teachers and educational assistants could transfer to classrooms. However, teacher preparation needs to improve so that teachers are more familiar with cultural responsiveness as a cornerstone of what they learn as they learn to teach.

## Teacher Preparation

Research on culturally responsive teaching has become more prominent in the discussion of best practices for teaching and learning; however, more dedicated preparation is necessary to better equip teachers. Ladson-Billings' work in 1995 found that many teachers not only demonstrated inadequate understanding of equity but failed to even recognize inequities. Fortunately, schools are beginning to recognize the diversity of their students and the need to provide an educational experience considerate of this diversity. Teachers and leaders need better preparation and modeling to positively respond to the many assets of a diverse teaching staff and student body (Sato & Lensmire, 2009).

McKoy et al. (2017) gathered data on the effect of professional development targeted at culturally responsive teaching capacity-building. As a result of professional learning sessions, teachers showed growth in understanding the importance of culturally responsive teaching, but they indicated that they needed more professional learning to help them feel equipped. This study indicated that this kind of development positively impacted the participants and is necessary for moving practice forward. Howard (2003) promoted the practice of reflection for in-service teachers and student-teachers. He urged educators to self-reflect in order to draw to the surface beliefs and attitudes to improve themselves. Howard argued that this act of reflection could demonstrate how committed teachers are toward the success of students.

Fullam (2017) describes this process as transformative. He explained how examining beliefs is necessary for culturally responsive teaching development. Several authors specifically address deficit thinking when discussing professional development in culturally responsive teaching. Sato and Lensmire (2009) suggest that professional development for teachers should focus teacher attention on the assets of children as opposed to deficits. Fullam (2017) stresses the careful planning of professional development opportunities to ensure teachers do not feel that they are being called out for racist beliefs/deficit mindsets and therefore immediately become defensive. Like the strategies suggested for teachers to implement in classrooms, Fullam encourages dialogue as a driving practice among teachers. Cochran-Smith (1995) suggests collaborative approaches to teacher learning communities focusing on a conversation around improving schools and classrooms and explains that growing in this practice of professional dialogue should be an essential piece of teacher training. Professional development targeting the power of asset-based discussions in learning communities could go a long way in growing teacher capacity in culturally responsive teaching. This study, with a leadership team using and modeling culturally responsive practices to assist in teachers' professional development, was a starting point for our school in shifting our practices.

The research on culturally responsive teaching underscores the importance of recognizing students as unique individuals. Researchers urge teachers to develop relationships that support deeper levels of cultural understanding and suggest that implementing strategic practices can contribute to greater success for all students. The PAR study sought to determine how we could honor and incorporate the assets of a diverse community to engage leaders, teachers, and educational assistants in developing stronger relationships with each other. Building on the cultural assets of the indigenous staff, we could more fully embrace the context of our international school and better work with the families and children we serve.

## Conclusion

Traditional international school settings are ripe for honoring and utilizing the assets of the diverse cultures represented by their constituents and host countries; however, the literature suggests that traditional international schools have work to do to better support their constituents. We need to understand how to engage adults in culturally responsive practices. Relational trust is a vital component of high-functioning schools, yet often minimal time is spent engaging in practices that purposefully work to build these relationships. This study aimed to explore how we can work with the adults in an international elementary school to understand the cultural assets of the host country and our colleagues to foster culturally responsive practices in adult learning spaces that we intend to transfer to classrooms. Figure 4 details the conceptual framework of the study.

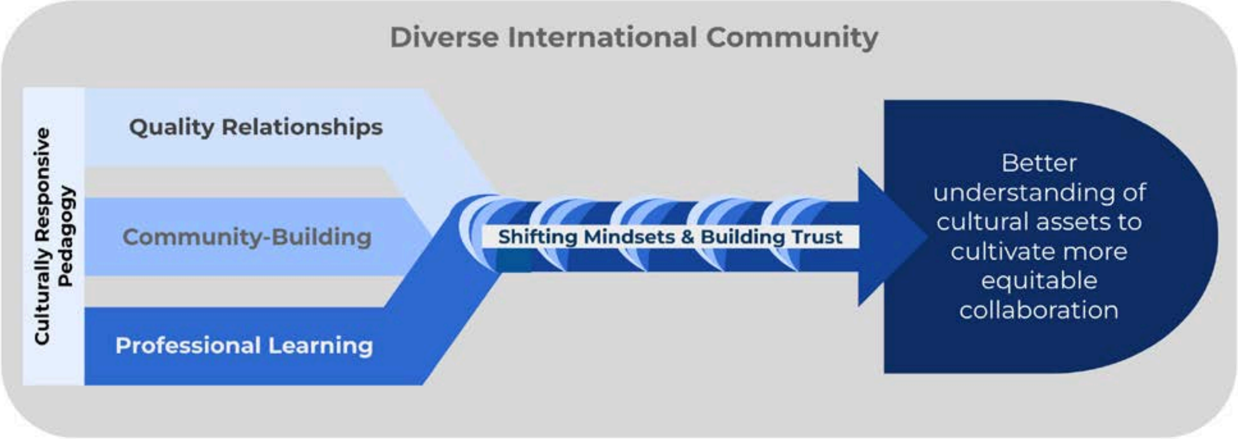

Diverse International Community
Culturally Responsive Pedagogy
Quality Relationships
Community-Building
Professional Learning
Shifting Mindsets & Building Trust
Better understanding of cultural assets to cultivate more equitable collaboration

*Figure 4*. Conceptual framework of FoP.

# CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN

In this participatory action research (PAR) study, I explored this focus of practice (FoP): Use culturally responsive practices in an international school to develop and sustain relational trust, recognize the assets of the school community, and cultivate a more equitable and collaborative experience for all constituents. I use the term constituents intentionally as a term that means all school personnel with a vested interest in the study's outcome as we learn to be more democratic and inclusive in our processes. I implemented the study in the elementary division of the International Community School of Addis Ababa, located in Ethiopia. The school’s student body is culturally diverse, representing over 60 nationalities from six continents and speaking over 30 languages. Study participants included members of the elementary leadership team, teachers, and educational assistants.

The theory of action for the PAR study: *IF* leaders and teachers in an international school use processes to foster personal connections among a diverse staff, *THEN* they will build understanding and strengthen collaboration in a cross-cultural environment. We conducted action and activist research concurrently using a participatory action research (PAR) approach. This method involved providing opportunities for leaders and teachers to engage with one another to share personal narratives and examine how our collaboration developed over two inquiry cycles.

In this chapter, I provide an overview of the participatory action research methodology (Hunter et al., 2013; Herr & Anderson, 2014). First, I describe how I used community learning exchange axioms (Guajardo et al., 2016), the improvement sciences, and the role of *praxis* (Freire, 1970/1993) as methodological tools to support participants and answer the research questions. Then, I describe the participants, outline the data sources we used, and explain how I analyzed the data. Finally, I conclude by discussing the potential limitations of the study.

## Qualitative Research Process

Creswell and Creswell (2018) described qualitative research as an inductive process that responds to emerging questions. Using this research approach, researchers collect and analyze data from their setting and use it to make meaning and decisions about change efforts. Qualitative research was the primary methodology for this study as I, the lead researcher, was situated in the study site, and I reported on the complexity of the issue for the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Using qualitative evidence, I examined the issue by "exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe" to the phenomenon being explored (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 4).

### Participatory Action Research

As described by Hunter et al. (2013) and Herr and Anderson (2014), action research is a research approach that emphasizes *with*. According to Hunter et al. (2013), extracting information from sites or working to build capacity within them without involving the participants is often harmful; thus, action research is "done *by* or *with* insiders to an organization or community, but never *to* or *on* them" (Herr & Anderson, 2014, p. 3, emphasis in original). hunter et al. (2013) emphasized that participatory action research rests on the understanding that *all* participants play an important role in sharing knowledge. Kemmis et al. (2014) described critical participatory action research as social—a methodology that brings people together as co-participants to collectively examine an issue. The process involves collaborative learning with the goal of collectively changing inequitable practices (Kemmis et al., 2014) and acting to change a social justice issue. I chose the approach of participatory action research (PAR)—termed activist action research by Hale (2001) and hunter et al. (2013)—because it involved participants in the process, aligned with the values of the school in which the study was based, and explored an issue of equity. According to hunter et al. (2013), this approach shifts the role of the researcher from a passive observer toward an "active instigator of change" (p. 21) and encourages relationship-building between the researcher and participants. In the PAR process, researchers engage in what Freire (1970/1993) described as a *humanist* approach; thus, the participants play critical roles in the research rather than having change imposed on them. I chose a participatory action and activist research approach because the role of the community participants was paramount in creating change. In my role as the lead researcher, I engaged co-practitioner researchers (CPR), who acted as guides in decisions and conducted member checks for accuracy of data analysis (Guba & Lincoln, 2000).

In addition, participatory action research, based on the work of Freire (1970;1993), is a form of social action that emphasizes the use of dialogue, action, and reflection (Herr & Anderson, 2014). PAR methodology is rooted in reflective and collaborative structures and practices that offer opportunities for generative dialogue that informs actions. Specifically, I anchored the study in praxis, elements of the improvement sciences, and the CLE axioms to guide and enhance our work.

### ***Role of Praxis***

The practice of reflection was another core value at the study site. Reflection was embedded in the curricular framework, identified as one of three key components of the school's published learning process, and regularly employed by staff and students. Similarly, PAR compels the researcher and participants to utilize collective reflection as a practice to facilitate the identification of challenges and opportunities for growth. The combination of reflection and action is what Freire (1970/1993) described as praxis and is a critical component of PAR. By placing power in the hands of the participants, unlike traditional research approaches, I developed the capacities of participants to act in response to their beliefs and concerns (hunter et al., 2013). The co-practitioner researcher (CPR) team engaged in critical reflection to help determine the steps necessary in each inquiry cycle. I practiced the fluidity and multidirectional nature between action and reflection that is at the essence of praxis with the CPR team and subsequently with the constituents with whom we worked.

As the lead researcher, I regularly wrote reflective memos to reflect on and document the process I took as a leader. I used memos to gather data on my growth as a leader in supporting leaders and teachers to build relational trust and deepen their cultural understanding. The use of praxis helped to ensure that my actions were meaningful; as Freire (1970/1993) stated, "reflection – true reflection – leads to action" (p. 40).

### ***Community Learning Exchange Axioms and Processes***

I used the Community Learning Exchange (CLE) axioms as foundational beliefs that influenced how I went about the work throughout the project and study, and I used community learning exchange (CLE) processes as a data collection activity. Community learning exchanges are experiences that encourage learning through the exchange of ideas and knowledge. Five CLE axioms are identified and described by Guajardo et al. (2016): Consider learning as leadership and action, engage in and acknowledge conversation and dialogue as critical for relationships and pedagogy, draw upon local knowledge and action, encourage the crossing of borders, and build hope and open possibilities through asset-thinking. I introduced these axioms to the CPR team as a starting point to guide our work together.

Just as participatory action research builds relationships between the researcher and participants, the CLE processes helped me to build relationships by bringing community members together to "openly examine their common challenges, collective gifts, and then freely exchange successful approaches and tools that can drive changes within themselves, their organizations (including schools), and their communities" (Guajardo et al., 2016, p. 3).

### ***Improvement Science: Networked Improvement Communities***

Improvement science was another construct we used to guide our work, which I found to complement the PAR process. As Bryk et al. (2015) explained, improvement science focuses on bringing practitioners and experts in disciplines together to explore a specific inquiry to improve practice. We know from extant research that schools whose educators come together with colleagues to address a collective goal of improvement produce better student outcomes (Russell et al., 2017). Bryk et al. (2015) argued that direct involvement from educators at all points of the change process would result in more willingness from all stakeholders to embrace change.

Bryk et al. (2015) point to the formation and operationalization of networked improvement communities (NICs) as a powerful tool in innovation and improvement. NICs include a group of practitioners who identify a common problem with the goal of using collective expertise to solve it. The co-practitioner researchers operated as a NIC by working together to implement the study to address the challenges the school faculty faced in two iterative cycles of inquiry. The PAR project and study represented four key characteristics of network improvement communities: a focused goal, a deep understanding of the problem to guide us, discipline in the process, and coordination in testing and refining approaches (Russell et al., 2017).

Bryk et al. (2015) described improvement science research as an iterative process that includes several cycles of inquiry, often taking place over a significant period of time. As a CPR team, we used the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) inquiry cycle to structure the PAR (Russell et al., 2017). As Russell et al. (2017) described, this structure involved planning to introduce a change, enacting the change, gathering data to examine the effects of the change, and concluding with analysis and reflection to decide how to proceed. Within these cycles, I used iterative data analyses to guide each step; thus, we repeated the PDSA several times within each cycle.

## Research Questions

The overarching research question of the study was: *How can international school educators honor and utilize the assets of a diverse international school community to co-create a more equitable, cross-cultural, collaborative environment?* This question drove the engagements we enacted in the inquiry cycles and informed our data collection process. As sub-questions to the study, we examined:

1. How does a leadership team use culturally responsive practices to recognize community assets and challenges in a culturally diverse environment?
2. To what extent does a staff build understanding and strengthen collaboration in a cross-cultural environment?
3. How do I grow as an educational leader in supporting leaders and teachers to build relational trust and deepen their cultural understanding?

The PAR design was focused on collaboratively gathering and analyzing data to generate knowledge regarding these research questions.

## Action Research Cycles

The PAR study consisted of two cycles of inquiry with recurring steps, each of which followed the process of Plan-Do-Study-Act. At the start of the project and study, I set out to center each cycle on particular research questions; however, the cycles were iterative in nature and research questions were at play throughout these cycles. In that sense, the learning from the two cycles overlapped throughout the duration of the PAR project and study (see Table 1). In

Table 1

*Timeline for PAR Cycles*

| Research Cycle | Time Period | Activities |
|---|---|---|
| PAR Cycle One | September 2021 – June 2022 | • Name the goals and objectives of the PAR study<br>• Clarify the theory of action of the study<br>• Personal connection activities with the ESLT in CPR meetings and CLEs<br>• Develop knowledge about culturally responsive practices to guide selection of practices to use with teachers<br>• Facilitate CLEs<br>• Collect and analyze CLE artifacts<br>• Conduct observations<br>• Use PDSA process to reflect and act<br>• Conduct interviews and focus groups |
| PAR Cycle Two | February 2022 – October 2022 | • Personal connection activities with the ESLT in CPR meetings and CLEs<br>• Personal connection activities with teachers and EAs<br>• Facilitate CLEs<br>• Collect and analyze CLE artifacts<br>• Conduct observations<br>• Conduct member checks<br>• Use PDSA process to reflect and act<br>• Conduct interviews and focus groups |

*Note.* ESLT= Elementary School Leadership Team.

detailing the specific Table 1 activities of each cycle, I discuss the participants, the data collection methods and instruments, and the process for data analysis (see Figure 5 for a visual representation of the iterative process).

## Participants, Data Collection, and Analysis

Entering the study, I knew that thoughtful consideration of the participants, data collection sources, and data analysis processes were vital to a robust study. With that in mind, I chose study participants through a combination of purposeful selection and convenience sampling. Data collection processes included observations, interviews, documents, CLE artifacts, and reflective memos. I analyzed data independently and then shared the analyses with the CPR team for their input. I used an open-coding approach to identify themes (Saldaña, 2016).

### Participants

The participants involved in the PAR study included members of several constituent groups. The elementary school leadership team (ESLT) members composed the co-practitioner researcher (CPR) group. Leaders, teachers, and educational assistants were participants who shared personal narratives and participated in individual interviews and the community learning exchanges (CLEs). I describe the role of each participant group in greater detail and the sampling methods I used to determine the participants.

#### *Sampling*

I used a combination of purposeful intentional sampling and convenience sampling in the study. Patton (1990) describes qualitative research as focusing on small samples, typically through purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling, as Patton (1990) explained, involves a deep dive into “*information-rich cases*” (p. 169, italics in the original) that can provide critical information about issues that are fundamental to the study’s purpose. To support the PAR

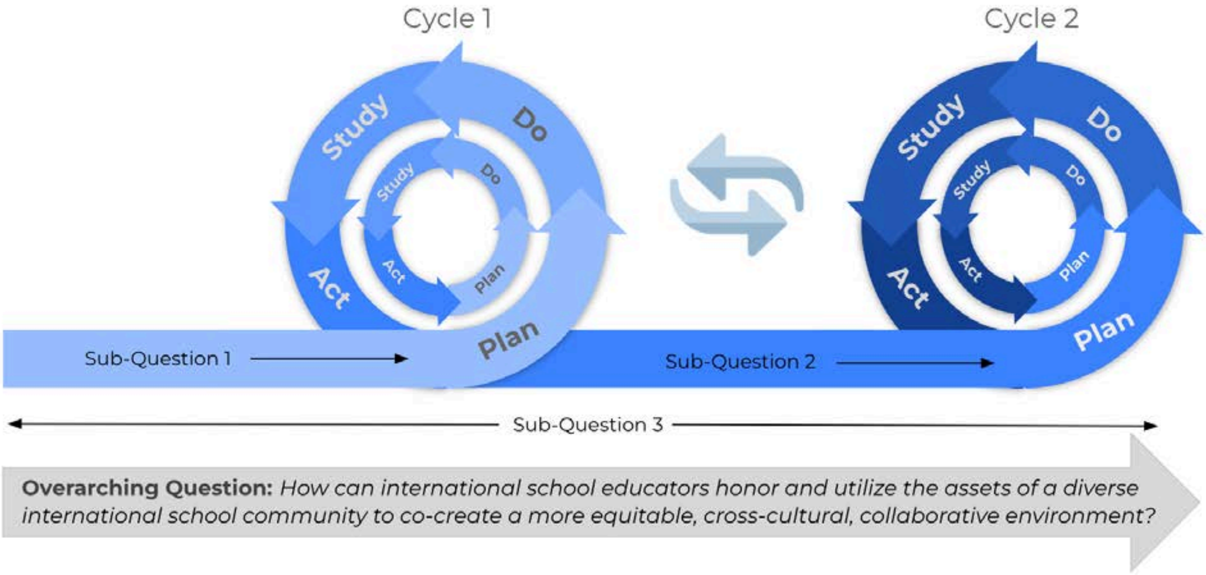

Cycle 1
Cycle 2
Study
Do
Act
Plan
Study
Do
Act
Plan
Study
Do
Act
Plan
Study
Do
Act
Plan
Sub-Question 1
Sub-Question 2
Sub-Question 3
**Overarching Question:** *How can international school educators honor and utilize the assets of a diverse international school community to co-create a more equitable, cross-cultural, collaborative environment?*

*Figure 5*. PAR process: Inquiry cycles.

methodology and its supporting framework of the community learning exchange axioms, I used intentional sampling as the study was rooted in the understanding that people closest to the issue are in the best position to do the work (Guajardo et al., 2016). I selected CPR participants through intentional and purposeful sampling due to their positions in the school. Because the PAR project and study aimed to foster personal connections as a way of honoring and utilizing the assets of all constituents of the diverse school community, we needed to begin at the leadership level. The co-practitioner researchers were in different leadership positions in the school, which was important as these leaders worked in different roles and with various constituent groups. I selected other participants, including teachers and educational assistants (EAs), on the basis of convenience sampling, which is a method of choosing conveniently available participants to participate in the study.

### *Co-Practitioner Researcher Group*

The Co-Practitioner Researcher (CPR) group consisted of elementary leadership team (ESLT) members at the International Community School of Addis Ababa. The group included leaders holding different school roles, including principals, instructional and curriculum leaders, and counselors. These were the only roles in the school that I purposefully sampled from the totality of school employees. The CPR group totaled six members. I describe these individuals and their backgrounds and assets in greater depth in Chapter 4.

### *Other Participants*

Another important group in the PAR project and study was the elementary teachers and educational assistants (EAs). As constituents with different roles and from diverse backgrounds, I needed their input and reflections. Working with the CPR team, I engaged teachers and EAs in culturally responsive practices such as personal narratives and observed how learning from these experiences promoted greater recognition of assets. In addition, as indicated in subsequent chapters, the individual interviews with the Ethiopian staff members were a critical part of the data collection and analysis. In the PAR project and study, we focused on recognizing assets across constituent groups; the inclusion of teachers and EAs was essential. Teachers and EAs engaged in CLEs and other collaborative spaces. Analysis of the data from this group informed the steps we took in the inquiry cycles.

## Data Collection

Qualitative studies require researchers to "collect multiple forms of data and spend a considerable time in the natural setting gathering information" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 186). In this PAR study, I used several methods to gather data, including interviews, focus groups, and CLE artifacts from different activities. Using these data collection instruments, I had a comprehensive view from which I could analyze the various data points. I protected confidentiality in the data collection process through the collection of consent forms (see Appendix D) and ensured participants knew that they could remove themselves from the study at any point without repercussions.

### *Interviews and Focus Groups*

During both PAR cycles, I conducted interviews with leaders, teachers, and EAs. The purpose of these interviews was to gather insight into the learning that occurred after engaging in culturally responsive personal narratives, and to inquire about their reflections on participation in CLEs and other experiences. These intimate settings provided a safe space for participants to voice struggles and concerns, and the Ethiopian participants in the interviews were a primary source of data in informing the study. I used an interview protocol to guide the conversation (see

Appendix E), but our discussions were responsive to the individuals. I coded transcripts from these interviews and focus groups to help with data analysis.

### *CLE Artifacts*

The CLE artifacts included original work that CLE participants created. These artifacts gave insight into individual participants' thinking. Using the evidence from these artifacts, I coded and analyzed leaders' and teachers' understandings. We used these artifacts with other data to reflect and act. I used agendas to guide each CLE and provide continuity in the experience.

### *Observations*

In the PAR study, I conducted observations throughout the inquiry cycles. Observations, as described by Queirós et al. (2017), are "a systematic process of collecting information, in which researchers observe a given phenomenon in their natural environment" (p. 376). I observed the implementation of culturally responsive personal narratives to build relational trust with leaders and, subsequently, teachers during the PAR cycles. During PAR Cycle Two, I examined the extent to which leaders' and teachers' engagement in experiences that strengthened personal connections influenced collaborative work. This involved observations in team meetings and daily interactions between staff.

### *Reflective Memos*

Reflective memos are introspective researcher documents, and researchers can use these to inform and reflect throughout the research process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Throughout the PAR study, I took reflective notes of my experiences to use as supporting evidence and to examine the research question about my leadership. These were in the form of formal researcher memos and reflective notes or field notes. As a result, I explored my implicit assumptions, biases, and prejudices about the PAR. Practicing reflexivity in this way encouraged me to support the CPR team to explore and reflect on their assumptions and biases in order to diminish the effects of researcher biases in tainting the data collection and analysis process (Guba & Lincoln, 2000).

### Data Analysis

Creswell and Creswell (2018) describe a five-step process for data analysis that I used as a guide. First, I organized the data collected in various forms and prepared it for analysis by putting it into a coding program conducive to examination. Second, I read the data to glean an overall sense of emerging themes. During this step, I looked for opportunities to pre-code (Saldaña, 2016), which helped me identify potential codes. In step three, I coded data using open coding in iterative cycles. I used Quirkos, a program that supported me in storing and analyzing the data. Then, I identified themes and wrote a study description to detail the setting and the participants. Finally, for the fifth step, I represented the themes and findings in this dissertation.

Saldaña (2016) compared codes to titles of books; these single words or short phrases serve as samples to capture the essence of the data and help translate it. I used an open-coding approach to determine codes as they developed in the process. I then worked to make sense of the data and identify categories emerging from the codes. Throughout this fluid process, I followed the advice given by Saldaña to be open to recoding and re-categorizing. I used Quirkos to create a codebook, or compilation of codes as described by Saldaña, which helped me identify categories, then themes, and finally determine findings. I describe this process with more specificity in Chapter 5.

## Study Considerations and Limitations

Study considerations included positionality and validity. Herr and Anderson (2014) highlighted the importance of considering positionality in all forms of research, but in action research, examining relationships between researchers and others offers “clarity about them [the relationships, and] is necessary for thinking through issues of research validity or trustworthiness, as well as research ethics” (p. 37). My positionality as lead researcher in this study is what Herr and Anderson (2014) described as an “insider in collaboration with other insiders” (p. 45) as I researched within my organization’s setting alongside other leaders and teachers. In considering my positionality, my role as a member of the elementary leadership team was not a deterrent when working with the CPR team, as this group consisted of my peers on that team; however, I was aware of how my role might affect the study when working with teachers and EAs. I acted transparently so that they understood the study's goals and knew that the data I collected was never term for reprisal.

Working with the CPR team for the PAR study involved the collective examination of data. This approach mitigated potential bias and allowed for multiple perspectives when determining the steps to take as the study progressed. Validity was a point of conversation among the CPR team throughout the study, and as the lead researcher, I enacted measures to protect credibility.

I was aware that additional limitations might arise during the data collection process. Ross and Bibler (2019) pointed to cases in which interviewees’ responses are influenced by what they deem the interviewer wants them to say. Additionally, Ross and Bibler (2019) discussed that participants might change their behaviors when they know they are being observed. To the best of my ability, I worked to offset this limitation by creating open and trusting environments where participants felt free to work and share. I took measures such as engaging in informal dialogue before interviews began, and I monitored my body language throughout, as suggested by hunter et al. (2013), to ensure interviewees felt comfortable. As hunter et al. (2013) urged, I approached the interviews, and the PAR study in general, with a “methodology for listening” (p. 94).

### Internal Validity

Creswell and Creswell (2018) described validity as a strength of qualitative research and a topic often written thoroughly about in the literature. According to Ross and Bibler (2019), internal validity relates to the accuracy of the study results. I used these approaches to check for accuracy of the findings: triangulation, member checking, clarification of potential researcher bias, prolonged time spent in the site, and peer debriefing.

Triangulation involves examining different data sources to determine themes. I used data gathered personally and from the CPR team to look for themes. The data came from various sources such as observations, interviews, focus groups, artifacts from community learning exchanges and other collaborative engagements, and reflective memos. Using multiple sources of qualitative evidence ensures validity.

The essence of PAR ensured that participants were part of the whole process of research. This collaboration strengthened validity as I invited people to examine the findings and check for validity. The PAR team helped examine themes, and I shared the study findings with other participants to ensure they agreed with the results. This process of member checking supported the validity of the study.

Acknowledgment of research bias is a crucial action in research. A core component of PAR is reflection, and I adhered to this practice by writing regular reflective memos. This encouraged me to continually reflect on my own bias as the lead researcher. To combat bias, I explicitly asked the CPR team members to be on the lookout for bias that I might bring to the study and call it out if it arose.

A powerful indicator of validity is spending prolonged time at the research site engaging with participants in their natural setting (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The study took place over 13 months and included daily interaction with participants. This extended time provided adequate time to complete two robust cycles of inquiry. Thus, the time and process contributed to accurate findings.

## External Validity

External validity refers to the "generalizability of results from the study's sample to the larger, target population" (Ross & Bibler, 2019, p. 262). The study took place in one international school, so the specifics are not transferrable to another setting, but the process of enacting the PAR is transferable. Other site-based researchers could use the process in other contexts to place the people at the forefront of the research; the outcomes, however, depend upon the unique features of the site where the process is used. The study's validity is inclusive of its utility to both the practitioners within this study's setting and to practitioners more democratically (Herr & Anderson, 2014). As supported by Herr and Anderson, using a PAR approach has the potential to evoke both organizational change and institutional transformation.

## Confidentiality and Ethical Considerations

The study participants were practitioners at the school site. I took measures to ensure I protected their confidentiality throughout the study. I secured approval to enact the study from East Carolina University's Institutional Review Board (see Appendix A) and the school via a formal permission letter (see Appendix C). I met with the CPR members before the study to ensure they fully understood their role and agreed to partake without feeling any coercion. These members filled out consent forms (see Appendix D) before the study began. Other participants included teachers and educational assistants. To protect confidentiality, I ensured I received consent forms before engaging them in interviews. Participants were permitted to leave the study at any point in time with no questions asked and without consequences.

Ethical considerations included safeguarding against researcher bias. I used member checks, regularly wrote reflective memos, and included peers in reviewing the data to control for possible bias. The CITI certificate (see Appendix B) provides evidence of the steps I took to prepare for conducting an ethical study. I took other ethical measures, such as keeping data in secure locations. Confidentiality was critical to the study; the steps listed above ensured it was maintained.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I detailed the methodology and research design of the PAR study. In this study involving a co-practitioner researcher team, teachers, educational assistants, and other staff, I aimed to answer the overarching question: *How can international school educators honor and utilize the assets of a diverse international school community to co-create a more equitable, cross-cultural, collaborative environment?* I enacted the study over two cycles of inquiry and included elements of improvement science and community learning exchange axioms. Each cycle included data collection and praxis in determining the next steps. I detailed data collection sources and explained measures I took in the study to consider confidentiality and ethics. In subsequent chapters, I provide further information about the study's context and participants, and I detail the implementation of the study and the findings

# CHAPTER 4: CONTEXT

For the PAR project and study, I examined practices and strategies impacting collaboration among educators in international schools. The International Community School (ICS) of Addis Ababa was the primary setting. Although I knew the school to be a culturally diverse international school, I was unclear about the level of the staff's knowledge and practices in incorporating culturally responsive practices in their work. I began the project and study aiming to examine practices at the student level; however, the rich and telling data from the adult level was cause for reflection and pushed me to focus on the adult collaboration.

For this participatory action research project and study, I used the Community Learning Exchange (CLE) axioms developed by Guajardo et al. (2016) to frame the work, holding firmly to the third axiom that the people most closely connected to the issue are those most primed to address the dilemmas they face. Driven by this understanding, I involved key people in enacting the project and study, and they agreed to be the Co-Practitioner Researcher (CPR) group. Other staff members participated in community learning exchanges (CLEs), interviews, focus groups, and meetings. In this chapter, I share specifics about the context and how that contributes to the study's focus of practice. In describing the context of the study, I discuss the place and the people involved. In Chapters 5 and 6, I discuss the evidence related to the CLEs and other sources of data.

## School Context

I conducted this project in a culturally diverse international school in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. To fully understand the school context, one must be familiar with key factors of place and people that contribute to the study, including the history leading up to the school's inception, the demographics of the families, students, and staff, and the specific people involved in the PAR project and study. The people and place are of paramount importance to the research and findings; therefore, I provide a thorough summary of these components in this chapter, starting with a description of the place, followed by the people.

## The Importance of Place

Addis Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia, is located in the center of the country at the base of Mount Entoto. The capital's current population is estimated to be 3.6 million, with a total of 4.6 million in the metropolitan area (World Population Review, 2022). The city has experienced significant growth in the past 10 years, and the country of Ethiopia is currently named one of the fastest growing countries in the world (World Population Review, 2022). Ethiopia is an ethnically diverse country. Various ethnic groups call Ethiopia home, including but not limited to the Oromo, Amhara, Somali, Tigray, Sidama, Gurage, Welayta, Afar, Hadiya, and Gamo (World Population Review, 2022). The capital, Addis Ababa, is a cosmopolitan city composed of citizens from many of these ethnic groups, along with a sizeable number of expatriates, including people working in diplomatic missions, non-governmental organizations, and businesses. The African Union Headquarters is located in Addis Ababa, as is the United Nations Economic Commission in Africa. Ethiopia is one of the world's largest United Nations (UN) country programs. Today, 115 embassies are present in Addis Ababa (EmbassyPages, n.d.), making the city one of the largest diplomatic centers in the world. The large international working community in Addis Ababa brings many non-native children requiring education. The International Community School (ICS) exists primarily to serve this population.

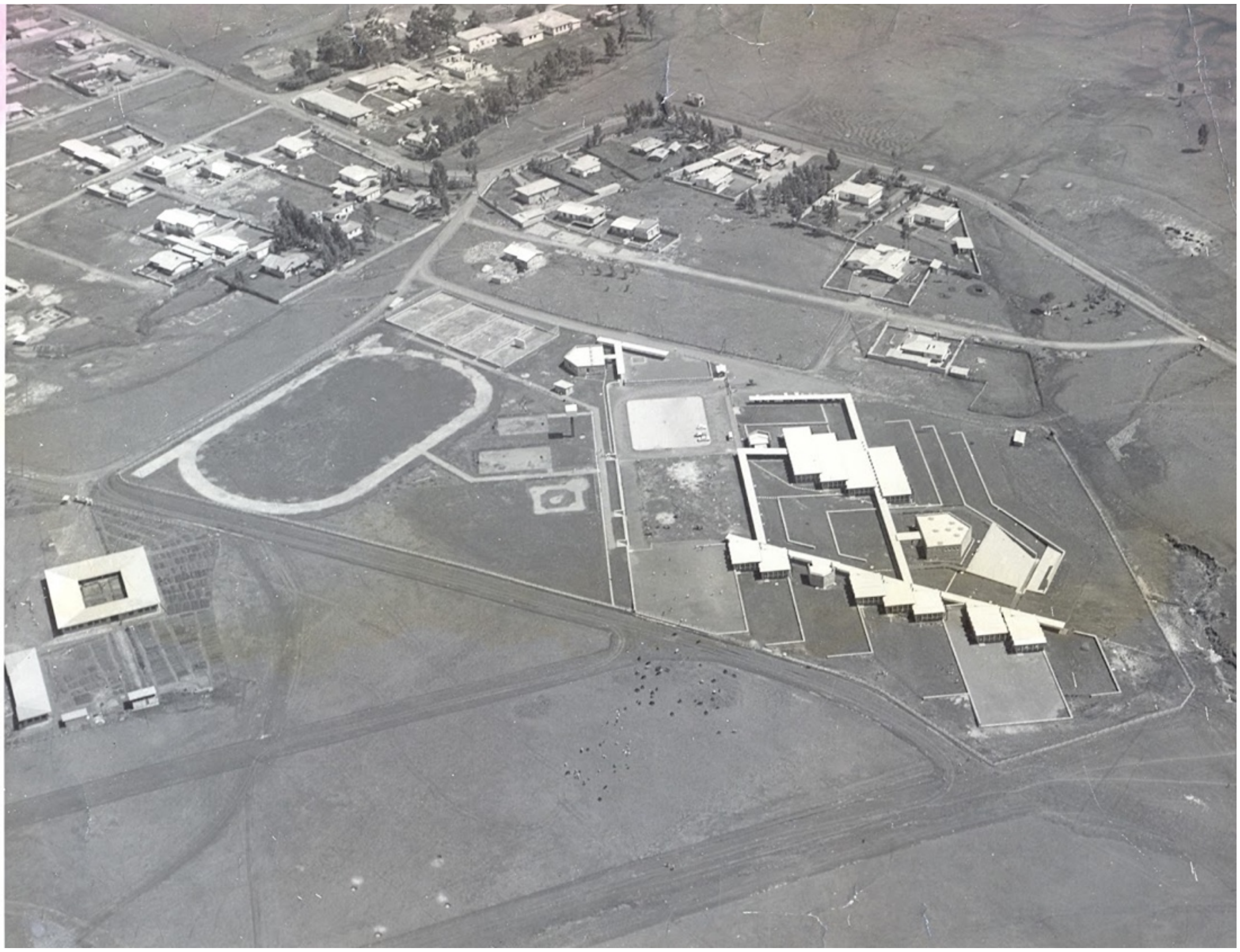
### *History of the School*

The history of what is now known as the International Community School of Addis Ababa dates back to the early 1960s. The school acquired 15 acres of land in 1964 when

Emperor Haile Selassie I donated the property for the development of the school. His goal was to support the international community in hopes of developing a vibrant, diplomatic city (ICS Addis Ababa, 2018). Originally named the American Community School, the institution officially opened its doors in 1966 to serve 362 children attending kindergarten through grade 12. Emperor Haile Selassie I's vision came to fruition, with the student body continuing to grow in subsequent years (ICS Addis Ababa, 2018). The school changed its name in the academic year 1978-79 to the International Community School to better represent its diverse student body, which I expand upon later when discussing the school's demographics.

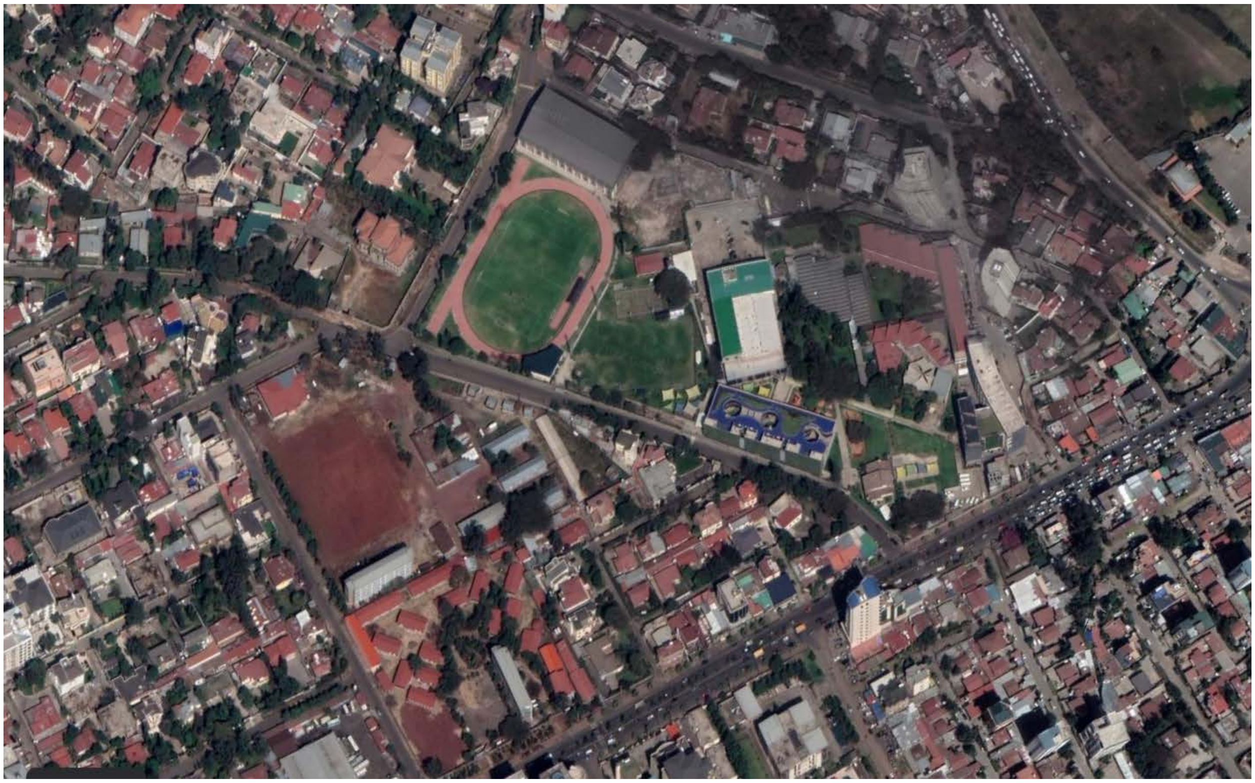
The school was originally surrounded by open, green space with few residences. Figure 6 shows the school shortly after it opened. At that time, only villas granted to wealthy Ethiopians through the then feudal system existed near the school (B. Mamo, personal communication, June 2, 2022). Over time, the city expanded and the population increased, resulting in the construction of houses and businesses surrounding the property, as shown in a recently retrieved map from Google (n.d.) as Figure 7. The neighborhood in which ICS is located is now called Old Airport because of the presence of a decommissioned airport now used as a military base. Old Airport is considered affluent, primarily due to the location of the school and the clientele whose families reside nearby. Rent prices for simple neighborhood housing are deemed expensive by even the affluent community. However, unlike cities designed through a planning process that may result in exclusionary zoning, Old Airport still manages to house less affluent families whose children attend local public schools, one of which is located directly across the street from ICS.

The ICS staff hired from outside Ethiopia generally live in Old Airport. The school provides housing primarily in that area, with only a few residences in an adjacent neighborhood. Local staff members live further away, with some commuting up to 40 kilometers (24.9 miles) to work.



*Note*. [Photograph of the American Community School] (ICS/ACS Alumni, n.d.). https://sites.google.com/icsaddis.edu.et/alumnilink/welcome/history-of-icsacs

*Figure 6.* Original American Community School grounds.



*Note*. [Current photograph of the International Community School of Addis Ababa] (Google, n.d.).

*Figure 7.* Current aerial view of the International Community School of Addis Ababa.

### *Current Description of Place*

ICS is now a haven of green in the middle of a bustling city. With sunny skies and daily high temperatures in the 70s (Fahrenheit) for most of the school year, the outdoor space is a community asset. Students, parents, and staff utilize the outdoor areas regularly. Community members are often on campus outside school hours, both on weekends and in the evenings. A well-maintained outdoor track (named after Olympian Haile Gebrselassie), soccer fields, outdoor basketball courts, open-air meeting spaces, and playgrounds throughout campus provide ample spaces for learning, playing, exercising, and socializing.

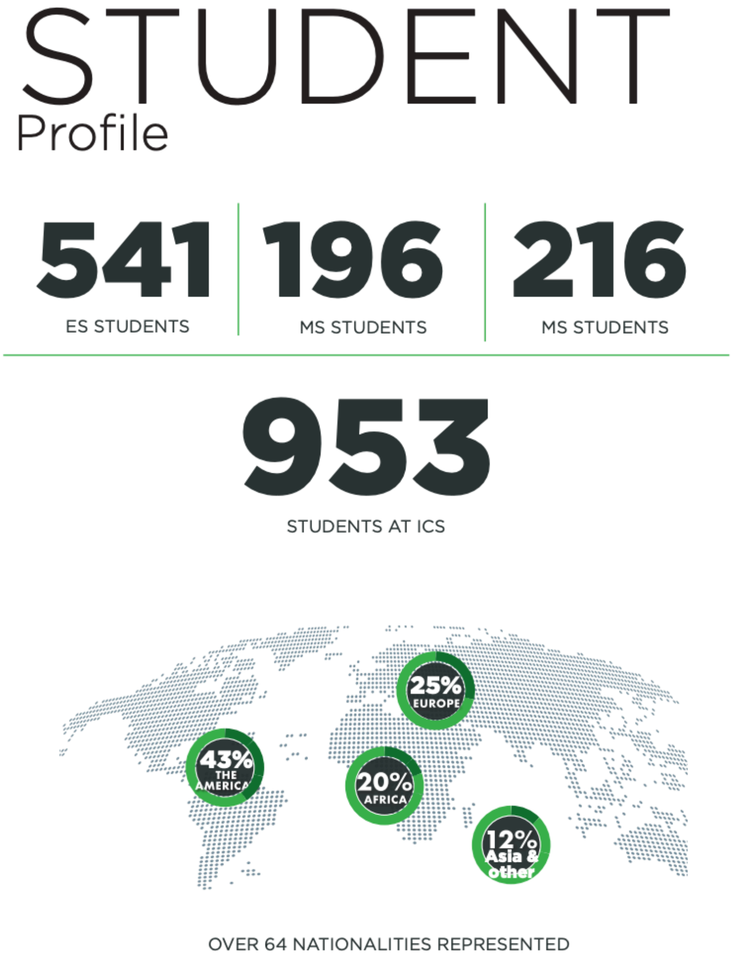
The buildings at the International Community School of Addis Ababa have undergone many renovations over time. Within the past five years alone, several major construction projects for new buildings were completed: a new four-story middle school building, a state-of-the-art elementary school, a recreation center, and a building that stores athletic equipment and provides a viewing area over the track and field. During this same period, existing structures were renovated to accommodate the growing school and the desire to offer more programs. These included an early years center that permitted the earliest learners to move from a separate, nearby campus onto the main grounds; a third level added to an already existing building to house administrative offices and a new exercise facility; the library, which moved locations to a building fitted to better serve its needs; and the reconfiguration of several rooms throughout campus to serve as new locations for services such as a health office, a high school math hub, and an Office of Learning conference room. With these renovations and construction projects, many stand-alone buildings were torn down. The demolition of these structures provided room to construct other amenities, such as a swimming pool and new high-rise teacher housing that broke ground in the spring of 2022. The structural renovations throughout the campus have enhanced the ability to provide a more diverse program and have consolidated many stand-alone classrooms into single buildings with multiple levels, allowing some of the campus to return to green space.

## The Importance of People

The International Community School of Addis Ababa expanded in student and staff numbers to accommodate the growing expatriate community and their children. The student body became more diverse through time, and the staff makeup slowly started diversifying. Cultural diversity among staff was a fundamental element of this study. Even though this is an area for growth, the study revealed significant findings with implications for the future. A vital concern of the study was to understand more about the people at the school. In describing the study body, staff, and CPR team members, I focus on the diversity of the school demographics and present details about the CPR team members.

ICS's student body represents the international character of Addis Ababa, supporting roughly 950 children from over 60 nationalities at the time of the study. Regional percentages are depicted in Figure 8, an image taken from the school’s Annual Report (ICS Addis, 2019, p. 19). ICS serves children from the early years to grade 12. The elementary and early years program is the largest division, with approximately 540 children in grades EY2 to five. The middle school division of grades six to eight has a student population of around 200, and the high school, grades nine to 12, serves roughly 210 students. Each division's student population represents the culturally and internationally diverse student body.

The diverse makeup of the student population is partially influenced by Ethiopian legislation. Government laws restrict Ethiopian-only passport holders from attending the school unless they receive a permission letter from the Ministry of Education or are enrolled as part of a



*Note.* From “Annual Report,” by ICS Addis, 2019.

*Figure 8.* Student profile at the International Community School of Addis Ababa.

scholarship program in the high school, a program that offers merit-based, full-tuition scholarships each year to four incoming grade nine students from local schools. These 16 Ethiopian scholarship students continue at ICS until graduation. Other students in the school identify as Ethiopian but register at the school under foreign passports. These regulations, coupled with the school's admissions policy stating that 90% of the student body schoolwide must be international, define the international nature of the school (ICS Addis, n.d.).

The staff at ICS, though not nearly as diverse as the student population, includes individuals who are from multiple geographical locations they call home. At the time of the study, the foreign teaching and administration staff numbered 136, 78% of whom were expatriates originating primarily from North America and Europe (ICS Addis, 2019, p. 20), representing Australia, Austria, Bolivia, Canada, England, Bulgaria, Denmark, France, Germany, India, Italy, Kenya, Latvia, Romania, Spain, Sweden, The United States, and Uganda (U.S. Department of State, 2022). Five percent of these expatriates were hired as local foreign hires, meaning that these individuals were hired to work at the school after moving to Ethiopia for other reasons, such as a partner's work or marriage to an Ethiopian national. The rest of the expatriates were considered overseas hires and came to Addis Ababa for the purpose of working at ICS. The remaining percentage of teachers and administrators employed at ICS were Ethiopian nationals, considered local hires. The expatriate staff's average tenure was 3.5 years (ICS Addis, 2019, p. 20), demonstrating the amount of turnover regularly experienced at the school.

Many positions beyond administrators and teachers are needed to ensure the school's functions. At the time of this project and study, teachers and administrators made up roughly a third of the school's 372 total staff members (U.S. Department of State, 2022). The remaining positions were teaching assistants and departmental roles, including human resources, admissions, finance, communications, technology, and maintenance. Ethiopian nationals fill most of these positions, with only three expatriates supervising the admissions, communications, and technology departments. Additionally, the school contracted with external local companies for the janitorial, gardening, and food service needs, and Ethiopian nationals typically staff those areas.

## People in the PAR Project and Study

In the participatory action research (PAR) project and study, I focused on the elementary division, which has a student body and staff mirroring the larger school percentages. Many elementary staff members, including teachers, educational assistants, and leaders, participated in the study. The elementary school was structurally organized with a leadership team helping to guide decision-making. The leadership team consisted of a head principal, a deputy principal, two primary years program (PYP) coordinators (one of whom was me), one early years coordinator, and two counselors. I identified these individuals as co-practitioner researchers (CPRs) in the project and study (n=6) to engage in the project's PDSA cycles. In Table 2, I describe these individuals. In addition, other participants were central to the study. Next, I introduce these organizational actors and provide context of their experiences and assets.

### Co-Practitioner Researchers

The six members of the CPR team were all members of the elementary leadership team during the implementation of the PAR project and study. I had worked closely with all but one of these individuals in years prior, and we had developed a functioning, collaborative team. I chose this group as the CPR team as I was interested in how to enhance relational trust on a leadership team and how our work together might transfer to teaching teams in the school. I hoped that this

Table 2

*Co-Practitioner Researcher Team Members*

| Name | Role | Description |
|---|---|---|
| Calley | Principal | • Second year at the school, first year as principal<br>• Previous roles: math teacher, instructional coach, deputy principal<br>• Assets: creativity and clarity |
| Yodit | Deputy Principal | • 11 years at the school, first year as deputy principal<br>• Previous Roles: elementary teacher, instructional coach<br>• Assets: motivational speaking |
| Rianne | PYP Coordinator | • Seventh year at the school, second year as PYP Coordinator<br>• Previous Roles: elementary teacher, PYP Coordinator (in another school)<br>• Assets: open-mindedness and empathy |
| Laura Jo | Early Years Coordinator | • Fourth year at the school, third year as the Early Years Coordinator<br>• Previous Roles: early years teacher<br>• Assets: unwavering belief in the image of the child |
| Heidi | Lower Elementary and Early Years Counselor | • Second year at the school<br>• Previous Roles: elementary teacher, early years teacher, counselor (in other school)<br>• Assets: proactive and participatory |
| Daniel | Upper Elementary Counselor | • First year at the school and as a counselor<br>• Previous Roles: PE teacher<br>• Assets: passion for social emotional learning |

process would contribute to the awareness and growth of all leadership team members and that our learning might lead to sustainable actions. Each individual on the CPR team came with assets that enhanced the school and provided a different perspective to move the study forward.

Calley served as the head principal of the elementary division. This was her first year in the role, moving into the position after serving one year as a deputy principal at the school. Calley joined the elementary division after teaching mathematics at the high school level for over 10 years. Calley began her international career as a Peace Corps volunteer in Cameroon, where she taught math in a village. While in the Peace Corps, she met her now-husband, and together the couple continued pursuing work in the field of education. They taught in Sudan, Mali, India, and now in Ethiopia. Calley experienced much movement herself as a child, living for periods in Montana, Wyoming, California, and Alaska. Many formative learning opportunities helped to develop her character, especially her experience in a gifted and talented program in northern California that cultivated her interest in arts and creativity. Calley uses this creativity as a principal to consider novel approaches to problems. She believes in confronting issues head-on and uses her strong belief in the importance of clarity to discuss actionable steps with staff.

Yodit, the deputy principal, was in her first year at the principal level after serving several years as a learning coach and, before that, as an upper elementary teacher both in Ethiopia and the United States. A citizen of the United States, Yodit is of Ethiopian heritage and grew up in Addis Ababa. She attended an international school herself, albeit not ICS. Yodit’s personal experience working under an exceptional principal strongly influenced her passion for coaching and leadership. One of Yodit’s many assets is public speaking, an interest influenced at a young age by watching her mother work as a host on an Ethiopian educational television and radio program. Yodit began honing her own skills in this area while still a child, following in her mother’s footsteps by presenting on a children’s educational television program. Yodit utilizes her asset of public speaking to inspire others in the community, both at the school and beyond. She is passionate about using the power of the spoken word to encourage others to grow.

Rianne, a Primary Years Program (PYP) coordinator with whom I closely worked, was in her second year in this role at ICS; however, she had previous experience in the PYP coordinator role from her time working in Colorado. Rianne resided in Addis Ababa for seven years and originally joined ICS as a second-grade teacher. Ethiopia was her first international posting. She was inspired to move to Ethiopia with her family in 2015 following encouragement from the then-serving principal at ICS, who had experience working with Rianne in Colorado. Although ICS was Rianne’s first employment experience abroad, the international scene was not new to her. Growing up in a military family, Rianne spent time living in Germany as a child. One vital asset Rianne brought to the school was her open-mindedness and empathetic approach toward others. Rianne employed this asset through her work with all members of the community. She used mindful listening to connect with students, parents, and staff and was appreciated by the community for her confidentiality.

Laura Jo (LJ), the early years coordinator, was in her third year in this role. She joined ICS in 2018 as an early years teacher and part-time coordinator, moving into the full-time coordinator position the following year. This full-time position was new to the school when LJ assumed the role; the early years program needed focused attention for expansion and development. LJ grew up in New Mexico, observing how her mother, also an educator, engaged with children through a playful, hands-on approach. LJ attended high school just outside the Navajo reservation, surrounded by diversity. She saw these pieces of her background come together when she was introduced to the world of international teaching by her now husband, who grew up attending international schools. Before Ethiopia, LJ had international teaching experiences in Asia, working in South Korea and Singapore. An impactful asset LJ brought to ICS was her deep belief in the power of belonging and a strong image of the child. She worked with the early years educators to deconstruct these terms and helped the team write a pedagogy statement centered on these beliefs. She coached teachers on pedagogical practices aligned with the identified beliefs.

Heidi, the lower elementary and early years counselor, was in her second year at ICS. Heidi grew up in Australia surrounded by children attending her family's daycare center. A powerful experience in a psychology class in high school inspired her to enter the field of education and later decide on counseling. Heidi began her teaching career in Australia as an elementary school teacher. There, she met a Korean child learning English for the first time, prompting her to seek different kinds of education abroad. She joined the international teaching sector after acquiring a work visa in the United Kingdom. She continued her journey by moving to Southeast Asia and working in several different countries, including the Philippines, China, Vietnam, and Thailand, before moving to Ethiopia. Heidi and her husband are connected to Ethiopia through their son, whom they adopted in the country. Heidi was proactive in supporting children and parents in social and emotional development, and she supported teachers with strategies to help every child succeed. Her participatory nature was an asset recognized and appreciated by many. Heidi offered assistance and expertise freely to many throughout the day and brought the elementary counseling program forward in her two years at the school.

Daniel, the upper elementary counselor, moved to Ethiopia at the beginning of this school year. Daniel came from North Carolina, where he lived until joining the military after high school. After the military, Daniel started working with children with special rights as one-on-one support for children with autism. This experience working with children spurred an interest in pursuing education. Daniel entered the teaching profession initially as a physical education teacher, a position he held for many years in various schools worldwide, teaching in the United States, Taiwan, Singapore, and Germany. While working as a physical education teacher, Daniel developed a desire to impact children's social-emotional growth; his work as a teacher and his reflections on his own childhood experience brought this desire to the surface. He attended university a third time to get his counseling degree, graduating just before joining ICS. Daniel brought his passion to his work at ICS to support all children's social-emotional growth. He connected with students through their struggles and successes and continued supporting ICS to grow the elementary counseling department.

### Project and Study Participants

Other individuals in the elementary school played important roles as project and study participants. These included teachers and educational assistants across the elementary division. The participants were critical to the process of revealing issues and offering suggestions for growth.

Educators from diverse backgrounds and with wide experiences participated in the project and study. The tenure of the participants ranged from new arrivals that school year to employees of 36 years. The mix of individuals with different roles and nationalities provided insight into the working environment of the school from varying perspectives. The educational assistants, all Ethiopian, played an essential role in the project and study as their voices provided insight into underlying issues that had largely gone unrecognized by the expatriate staff. In addition, Ethiopian teachers, some of whom were initially hired to assume a teaching role, and others who had started as educational assistants and became teachers, were critical study participants. Their perspectives were vital for understanding the cultural dimensions of the school. The expatriate teacher participants with degrees of tenure provided another lens for the study.

The CPR team members and study participants included individuals across the elementary division, including principals, coordinators, counselors, teachers, and educational assistants. This wide scale of participation contributed to a robust project and study with data from a broad perspective. The enthusiasm of the staff to engage in the project and study was an indication of the widespread desire for continued improvement.

## Conclusion

The place and the people specific to the PAR project context are significant to the study findings. The cultural makeup of the staff, the school setting, and the history of the school's progress contributed to data that was particular to the context of the school at that moment in time. However, the cultural composition is not unique to ICS when considered in the larger international school context. While I conducted the study in only one international school, the findings and implications suggest that comparable experiences exist in other international schools and that those schools could use our processes to achieve more cultural awareness of their local staff and incorporate their learning into the school structures.

# CHAPTER 5: PAR CYCLE ONE

In the school year 2021-22, I conducted the data collection and analysis process through two iterative inquiry cycles involving leaders and educators in the elementary school. In this chapter, I report results from the first cycle of inquiry, including the data collection and analysis process with leaders and educators in the elementary school. We deepened our levels of understanding of each other, particularly the conditions we needed to support open and honest dialogue among all participants, and, in this phase of the inquiry, I documented the emergent theme of cultural dissonance. A driving belief of PAR methodology is: “Collaborative research of this nature requires a high degree of intimacy and trust that can be only achieved through ongoing dialogue” (hunter et al., 2013, p. 2). Most CPR team members were on the elementary leadership team and had close working relationships; we had established norms of open dialogue. However, by being more intentional about cultural norms and levels of agency, we achieved an even stronger foundation for our collaboration.

Because the PAR project and study took place during my sixth year working at the school, I had established relationships and trust with leaders and teachers. The efforts to develop trust before the study implementation created a necessary precondition for entering the PAR project and study. Trust played a critical role in all aspects of the study as participants engaged in honest conversations during interviews and Community Learning Exchanges (CLEs). Trust contributed to open dialogue among the CPR team as we examined and responded to data. More importantly, my ability to have one-to-one conversations with Ethiopian CLE participants furthered our work. As a result, we heard more direct input from staff members who were study participants, many of whom are Ethiopians, and developed deeper understandings of factors that we had not previously considered as essential to collaboration. One participant gradually opened up to others and shared her internal struggles. I asked her about qualities or individuals with whom she felt comfortable speaking honestly, and she said that it was my ability to hold confidences that made her feel comfortable; she said: “You! You don’t have a reputation for saying what you hear all over, so it makes [me] feel comfortable. I feel comfortable speaking to you” (Participant 1, Team meeting, May 3, 2022). Thus, this cycle of inquiry provided a stronger foundation for openness and improved our collective ability to face differences we had not yet fully explored.

hunter et al. (2013) describe a PAR approach as requiring an activist mindset to enact change but ensuring that actions are based on informed decisions made during the process. Ongoing data collection and analysis contributed to the PAR team’s understanding of the complex issues revealed through the data. However, as I reviewed the PAR Cycle One data, I observed that we initially had a shallow understanding of how cultural differences created barriers to collaboration in a diverse international school. In the PAR Cycle One process, I included a variety of data collection strategies that produced sufficient evidence to identify particular cultural behaviors and norm disparities that caused tension among the school staff. The teachers and leaders from the Global North were unaware of the tensions, yet the Ethiopian teachers and other local staff had been feeling them for many years. As the lead researcher, I coded the data and shared them with the CPR team for further analysis. This process of a member check informed the actions of PAR Cycle Two.

The recurrent processes of gathering, analyzing, and responding to data with the CPR team during both cycles helped to provide ongoing member-checking opportunities. In this chapter, I describe the data collection process, including the activities from which I gathered data and the process I used to code. Then, I outline the analysis of the data and introduce salient categories and codes that provide evidence for the emergent theme for PAR Cycle One: cultural dissonance.

## PAR Cycle One Process

In PAR Cycle One during the 2021-2022 school year in the International Community School of Addis Ababa, four components involving various school community members contributed to the data collection process: CPR team meetings, CLEs, interviews, and focus groups. By diversifying data collection methods, I collected and analyzed comprehensive data to substantiate existing issues within the school's working environment. In this section, I illustrate how the methods provided a complete picture of the inquiry process. Establishing safe spaces to hear all participants provided a critical turning point in the project and study (see Table 3 for a schedule of all activities in the 2021-22 school year).

### CPR Meetings

Throughout the school year, I held regular meetings with the co-practitioner researcher (CPR) team to ensure the research followed a PAR approach and to provide a consistent member-checking structure (see Table 3). I began meeting with the CPR team in early September 2021 and directed my attention toward strengthening relational trust among the team members. Using personal narratives as a relational trust-building approach, I created the space for members to reveal their stories of identity and experience and hear their colleagues' stories. I used a variety of different personal narrative engagements during each CPR meeting throughout the cycle to continue nurturing and sustaining trust; I believed that encouraging more profound levels of knowing one another would lead to better communication. The team identified that personal narratives fostered a deeper understanding and were a powerful method for approaching some of the challenges we encountered in sharing our responses.

Table 3

*PAR Cycle One Meetings and Activities*

| | September/ October 2021 | November December 2021 | January/ February 2022 | March/ April 2022 | May/ June 2022 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Meetings with CPR Team (n=5) | ● | | ● | ● | ● |
| Community Learning Exchanges (n=3) | | | ● | ● | ● |
| Interviews & Focus Groups (n=11) | | | ● | ● | ● |
| Team Meetings (n=5) | | | | ● | ● |
| Memos | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |

Another goal of the CPR meetings was to uncover the group's understanding of culturally responsive practices and work to collectively build a deeper understanding of the indigenous practices. I collected data using a mind-mapping activity during the first CPR meeting, which revealed different levels of understanding of *cultural responsiveness*; most team members had heard the term used in various settings but only understood the concept at a surface level. These data informed subsequent steps I took to help the team reach a shared understanding, including engaging in dialogic learning anchored by videos and texts about culturally responsive practices. I collected data throughout this process to examine growth in the group's understanding of culturally responsive practices.

The same members elementary school leadership team composed the CPR team throughout the study; however, the goals of the CPR team meetings shifted to examining and responding to data. I used an iterative process of bringing data to the team for response, which created a process of member-checking that helped to validate the evidence as the study progressed (Saldaña, 2016). The CPR team gathered for five sessions explicitly directed toward the study; however, the group met multiple times weekly as a standard practice for all of their work in the school. This regular collaboration provided ongoing opportunities for discussion, many of which contributed to furthering the PAR project. We followed a PDSA (Plan Do Study Act) model throughout the year, prioritizing reflection to collectively identify the subsequent iterative actions based on evidence (Bryk et al., 2015).

### Community Learning Exchanges

A second method for collecting data throughout the study was Community Learning Exchange (CLE) artifacts. Guajardo et al. (2016) describe CLEs as intentional community gatherings that "provide time and space for everyday people to come together and join in deep and purposeful conversations that are very difficult to have within the blur of our hectic daily schedules and lives" (p. 3). These gatherings aimed to create a relational environment in which participants nurtured trusting relationships and challenged themselves and others to make changes in their communities. As previously mentioned in Chapter 3, these five axioms, or truths, guided our CLEs:

1. Learning and leadership are dynamic social processes.
2. Conversations are critical and central pedagogical processes.
3. The people closest to the issues are best situated to discover answers to local concerns.
4. Crossing boundaries enriches the development and educational process.
5. Hope and change are built on assets and dreams of locals and their communities.

Guided by these axioms, I organized three CLEs with teachers between January and May of the school year, educational assistants (EAs), and leaders in the spring of 2022. Similar to the intentions of the initial CPR meetings, I began this series of CLEs with a focus on relationship-building. I arranged the room intentionally to be conducive to building community and invited participants into the space for reciprocal storytelling. In a journey line activity to discuss how their backgrounds contributed to where they are today, participants voiced parts of their experiences and perspective and heard those of others. Then, they collectively engaged in reflection on the experience.

In each CLE, I aimed to nurture trust between and among participants while building cultural understanding. Using dialogue as a primary learning approach, I constructed and facilitated the CLEs to support participants in uncovering how culture influences interactions and collaboration. Intentional prompts and storytelling protocols encouraged participants to reflect on their perspectives and build awareness of their own and others' cultures. In the final CLE of the school year, we examined data generated in preceding data collection activities and identified actionable steps for addressing a critical issue we surfaced. I present this issue and the proposed actions in the next chapter.

### Interviews and Focus Groups

I used interviews and focus groups as other data collection methods essential in the process. In the particular cultural setting of this project and study, the intimate settings provided a safe environment for participants to share their experiences, which led to many of them sharing their stories, observations, and concerns—concerns they had not voiced previously. Several Ethiopian educational assistants stated they were hesitant to join larger groups of staff members in experiences such as CLEs, expressing discomfort with the vulnerability required to participate. They shared that they felt comfortable speaking with me in a more private setting because of the relationships and trust I had established during my time at the school. Throughout the spring, I met with several teachers and educational assistants for one-on-one interviews and in focus groups of two or three for those who felt comfortable (n=18).

By creating a safe and comfortable atmosphere for participants to share during interviews and focus groups, I was able to ask them to tell stories about their transition into ICS and then critical moments in their work lives up to the present. Eventually, I was able to focus on their perspectives on the collaborative environment at ICS. In the interviews, I asked questions regarding personal assets and their recognition and utilization in the school context. We often discussed leadership practices and how those practices related to relational trust and the recognizing and utilizing of their assets. In the interviews I conducted over the year, I collected and analyzed data that, when combined with other data sets, informed the actions of the CPR team and helped me frame the final CLE.

## Data Collection and Analysis

Iterative data collection included four sources: CPR meetings, CLEs, interviews, and focus groups. I digitally recorded and transcribed sessions and gathered artifacts from the CPR meetings and CLEs. I wrote reflective memos throughout PAR Cycle One to gather my thoughts, reflect on my role as a researcher, and record potential next steps. In addition, I documented spontaneous conversations with individuals, many of whom had participated in CLEs or interviews and were eager to reflect on the experience. These activities and memos provided ample data to sift through and analyze; from these data, I created codes and, eventually, categories and themes.

To code during PAR Cycle One, I followed a phased analysis approach (Braun & Clark, 2006). First, I transcribed and read the evidence to gain initial ideas of the essence of the data; then, I moved to phase two to generate initial codes. In this early coding phase for transcripts, artifacts, and memos, I first employed initial coding, described by Saldaña (2016) as remaining open to all possibilities. Beginning with the initial coding round and continuing through the data analysis, I utilized a data analysis software called Quirkos. This program supported me in housing the data and visually displaying my thinking about the data. The first coding round resulted in a multitude of codes that were displayed as disconnected nodes running across the screen in Quirkos.

In a second coding round, I identified commonalities and relationships between and among the codes, a process Saldaña (2016) describes as second-cycle coding. As I examined the data a second time, I recognized codes that were in fact similar, though I had initially given them names with minor nuances. I often found that “more accurate words or phrases were discovered for the original codes” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 234), and I renamed these codes to describe the data more precisely. In this round, I merged some codes with conceptual connections (Saldaña, 2016). This process of grouping and connecting allowed me to discern emerging trends.

In the second round of coding, I used Quirkos as a support. I merged and regrouped codes and was visually able to determine trends through Quirkos’ design of growing nodes or bubbles. Using the program, I identified the frequency of codes and graphically displayed them, with the nodes expanding as the frequency of the code or category grew. In this second round of coding, I began moving nodes to particular areas on the screen as I saw connections, but I did not yet link nodes in the program. Braun and Clark (2006) describe this step of “re-focus[ing] the analysis as the broader level of themes” as phase three. Later in the second round of coding, during what Braun and Clarke (2006) call phase four, I began linking nodes and identifying and assigning initial names to emerging categories. As I continued collecting data, I regrouped, renamed, and added categories to refine description of the emergent theme (see Figure 9).

Saldaña (2016) describes a theme as “an outcome of coding, categorization, and analytic reflection” (p. 198). I did not begin determining a theme for the data until later in the process as I analyzed the data a third time and began identifying patterns in the codes and categories. I assigned names to these emerging themes as I discovered the meaning behind the patterns. In this round, I used a similar process of regrouping, collapsing, dividing, and renaming codes and categories. Through this process, I eventually understood how the data fit together and what theme was emerging. As a researcher assuming an active role (Braun & Clark, 2006), I identified trends and determined which were relevant in answering the driving questions of the study.

To determine the emergent theme, the CPR team and I conducted sufficient data

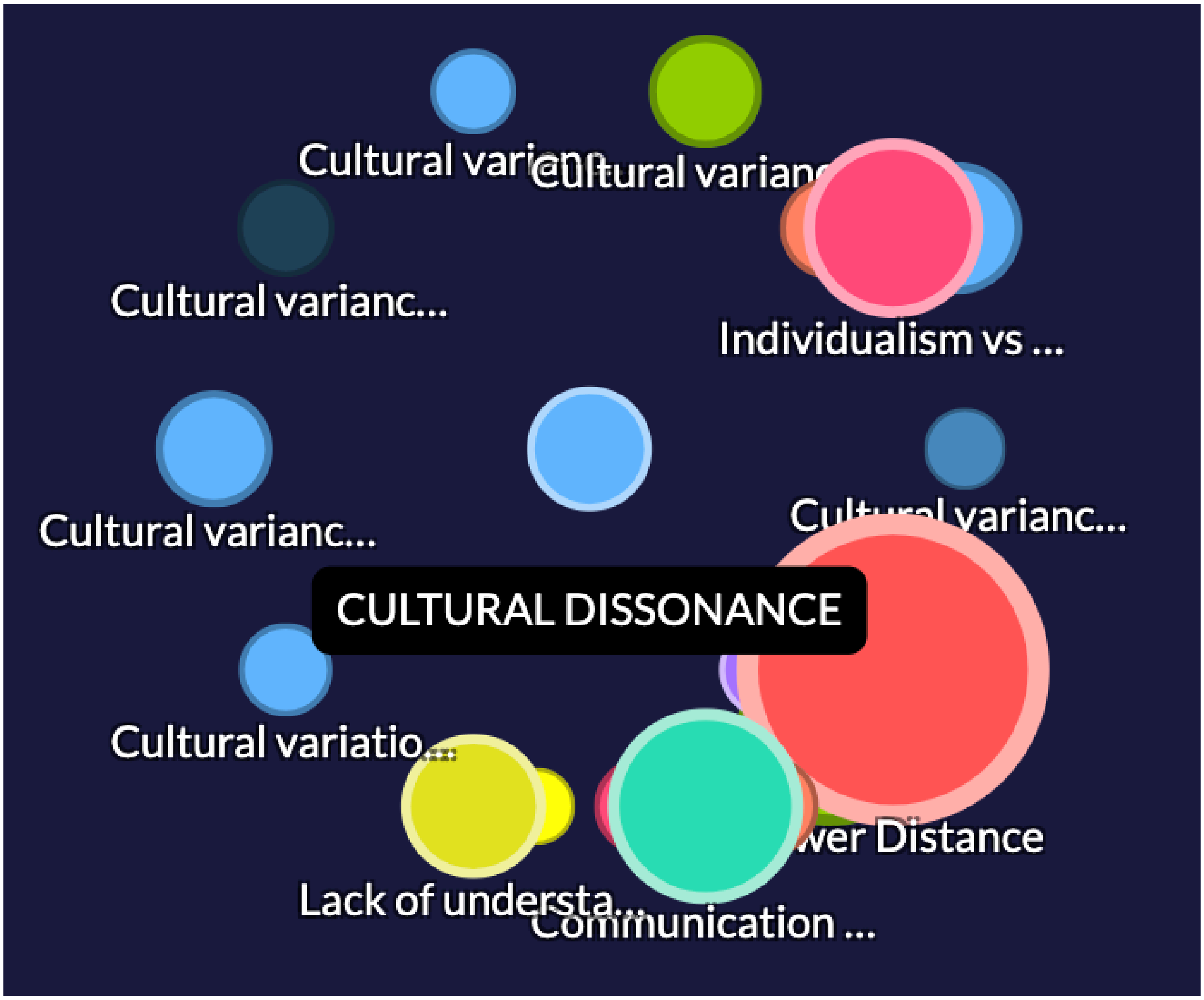

Cultural varianc...
Cultural varianc...
Cultural varianc...
Individualism vs ...
Cultural varianc...
Cultural varianc...
CULTURAL DISSONANCE
Cultural variatio...
...wer Distance
Lack of understa...
Communication ...

*Figure 9.* Data coded in Quirkos.

collection activities to produce comprehensive data. Through the coding process, categories began to emerge. As described in the previous section, the node's size indicates the frequency of the code across the data. In analyzing these data, I examine three salient categories and unpack them with codes and subcodes. I present these three categories and evidence to support the emergent theme of cultural dissonance.

I surfaced connections between codes during the second coding round, and one concept frequently arose in the data—cultural variance. As I regrouped and refined the names of codes and categories, I gained clarity on the nuances between the cultural variances apparent in the data. This process led me to the three categories. I analyze each by presenting the frequency of the data and the qualitative evidence to support each category, code, and sub-code.

During the coding process, I used the FoP and guiding research questions as anchors while allowing unexpected codes and categories to emerge. Following an inductive approach, my "research question[s] . . . evolve[d] through the coding process" (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 84) as I analyzed new data, and my understanding of the issues surrounding relationship-building in international schools continued to refine. As a result, the emergent theme of cultural dissonance between the local Ethiopian cultural norms and the largely Western and white staff surfaced.

## Cultural Dissonance

Cultural dissonance means "a sense of discomfort, discord or disharmony arising from cultural or perception differences or inconsistencies" (Ade-Ojo & Duckworth, 2017, p. 391). The term helped me to summarize the underlying struggles I observed in the data. Three categories contribute to a deeper understanding of cultural dissonance:

1. Communication behaviors are mannerisms used when expressing oneself; many of these behaviors relate to cultural norms or rituals.

2. Power distance describes the extent to which societies tolerate unequal power distribution (Hofstede, 2011).
3. Individualism vs. collectivism describes the juxtaposition between how persons from diverse cultures prioritize the individual or the community.

Figure 10 depicts the categories and supporting codes.

To further the understanding of the cultural dissonance, I discuss three topics: communication behaviors, power distance, and individualism vs. collectivism. I delineate the data that support each category. Then I discuss how these three categories support the theme of cultural dissonance. Although I interviewed both expatriate teachers and leaders as well as Ethiopian teachers and educational assistants, I primarily use the evidence from conversations with Ethiopian staff to illustrate the theme of cultural dissonance. In the process of this project and study, uncovering the extent to which the Ethiopian staff had remained quiet for years about their discomfort was a critical steppingstone to understanding how the school and values of the Global North have dominated our school culture.

### Communication Behaviors

Throughout PAR Cycle One, participants continually referenced the role culture plays in communication, with a frequency of 18% of the evidence referencing cultural dissonance. Other issues pertaining to cultural dissonance had a lower frequency in the data. Cultural nuances impacted how faculty and staff within an international school interacted, although this was not well understood by most at the outset of this study. Communication nuances influenced personal perception and how individuals interpreted information their colleagues expressed. In the first coding round, I surfaced the relationship between culture and communication, while in the second round, I determined a more granular level of particular communication behaviors

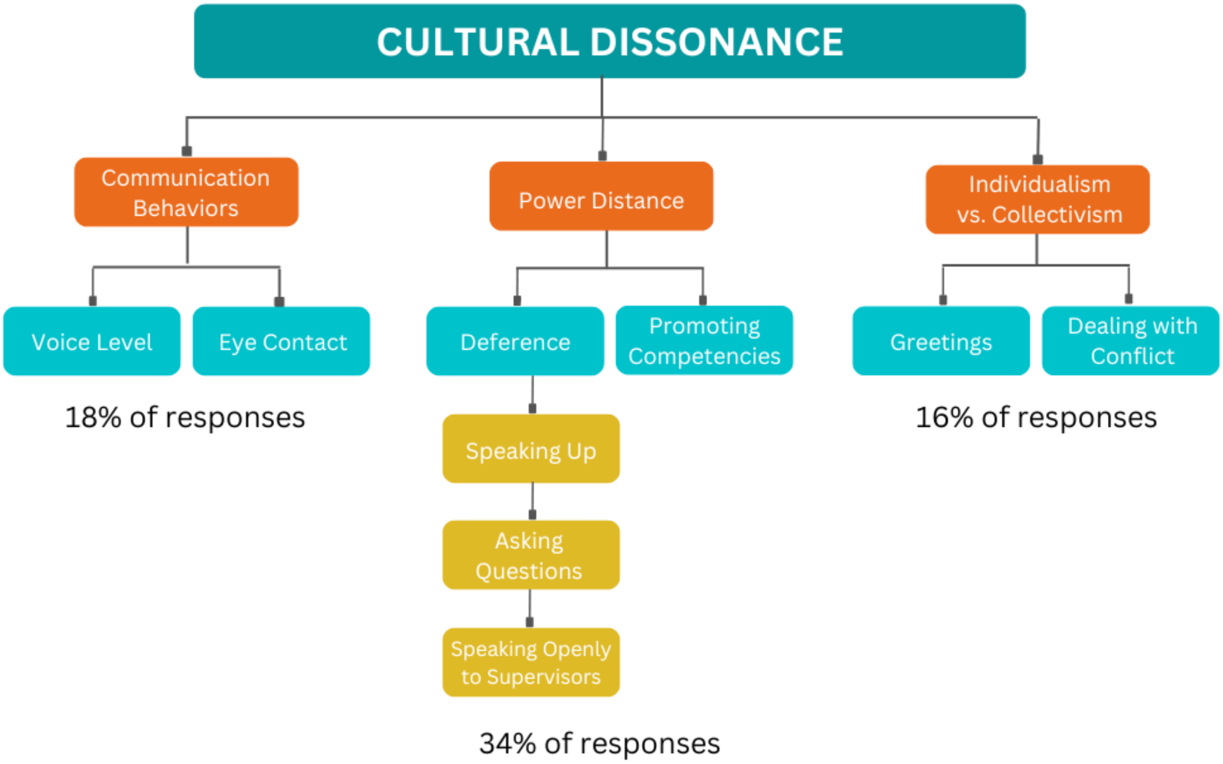

CULTURAL DISSONANCE
Communication Behaviors
Power Distance
Individualism vs. Collectivism
Voice Level
Eye Contact
Deference
Promoting Competencies
Greetings
Dealing with Conflict
18% of responses
16% of responses
Speaking Up
Asking Questions
Speaking Openly to Supervisors
34% of responses

*Figure 10.* Emergent theme, three categories, codes, and sub-codes.

contributing to this category. I employed simultaneous coding (Saldaña, 2016) because the data suggested more than one meaning, particularly as communication behaviors relate to power distance. Two codes exhibited higher frequency within this category: voice level and eye contact.

### ***Voice Level***

The challenges communication differences play in a culturally diverse, collaborative environment surfaced throughout the entirety of PAR Cycle One, and voice level—or volume of speech—was a key factor, particularly for Ethiopian nationals. Not only did the role of culture influence how educators in international schools expressed their ideas and thoughts, but different cultural expectations about speaking volume were apparent. One individual who had moved away from Ethiopia at a young age but has since returned described a shift in her mannerisms as reflected in her conversation with another Ethiopian colleague:

> The other thing we've talked about is the way you speak, your voice, because a lot of Ethiopians are soft-spoken. And I was telling her, I'm like, in between two cultures because, you know, I left when I was young. And . . . I was young to know other cultures. But then I also know this soft-spoken [demeanor], I was very soft. I was so embarrassed to even talk when I was in the US. But now my husband tells me I'm loud! (Participant 2, CLE, March 22, 2022)

A comment from an American participant swiftly followed this reflection: “Actually, have you noticed a restaurant in the US versus a restaurant here? Someone is saying something, and you're like, "I can't hear you!” (Participant 3, CLE, March 22, 2022).

The data suggested that expatriate faculty were not entirely unaware of cultural differences in expectations regarding voice level; however, Ethiopian staff were more cognizant than expats of how this communication difference impacted their lives. In interviews, focus groups, and community learning exchanges, Ethiopian participants connected voice level to feelings of discomfort. They shared the disconnect they faced between professional and home settings. They described that they were expected to have strong speaking voices in the work setting. However, speaking up and speaking strongly or loudly were challenges to overcome, as exemplified when one Ethiopian educational assistant described her early years working at the school: "I was so quiet and shy. I couldn't express myself in front of people, and I had [a] big anxiety of speaking in front of people" (Participant 4, focus group, May 3, 2022). Individuals shared experiences of being expected to speak in settings such as meetings and interviews. As participants disclosed these challenges, promoting competencies often coincided, which I explain further when discussing the category of power distance.

### ***Eye Contact***

Eye contact is a form of nonverbal communication interpreted differently depending on cultural context. The topic of eye contact surfaced in PAR Cycle One as participants shared expected communication behaviors and their influence on interactions with colleagues and supervisors. The data suggested that eye contact is considered respectful and expected in some cultures while signifying defiance in others. Educators discussed this difference during PAR Cycle One and noted its challenges in their cross-cultural work. At times, educators had previously referenced expectations regarding eye contact in working with students in the classroom setting. However, we were not as aware of the ways that differing expectations played out among adults. Members of the group verbalized tensions between behavioral expectations or eye contact in various settings, as demonstrated by an Ethiopian educational assistant:

> For us to have . . . eye contact is like a disobedience, not confidence. You don't have to stare [at] adults like this, you have to . . . kind of look down. So that's a way of showing

> respect for authority. . . So if they [expatriate colleagues] don’t know this culture—for instance, if I am working with you and if I don’t give you eye contact—you might think that I am doing something that I shouldn’t do, right? (Participant 5, CLE, March 22, 2022)

Another Ethiopian participant expressed a similar sentiment as she shared the way she previously interpreted eye contact: “There used to be a time that I would really, like, want that person not to look me in the eye and talk to me, and I [felt] like I [was] being disrespected” (Participant 6, interview, January 17, 2022).

Differences in communication behaviors is more often recognized in the educational setting when discussing students and the influence culture has on their engagement and behaviors in the classroom (O’Connor, 1989; Valverde, 2005; Wahyuni, 2018), but rarely does the topic make its way into the literature regarding the educators themselves. However, the PAR Cycle One data suggest that the nuances of cultural communication regarding voice level and the meaning of eye contact impact adult communication and should be considered when engaging with staff from diverse backgrounds. Misinterpreting soft voices or the meaning behind eye contact or lack thereof impacted our collaborative work setting.

### Power Distance

In the process, participants sometimes referenced power as playing a role in behaviors and mindsets. Some evidence was overtly recognizable as connected to power and culture, while other examples were less immediately identifiable as contributing to the power distances that individuals feel in cross-cultural interactions; in total, 34% of the responses demonstrate references to power distance. As I made sense of the data, Hofstede’s (2011) work applied to the dynamics at play in the study setting. He describes power distance as “the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations and institutions… accept and expect that power is distributed unequally” (Hofstede, 2011, p. 9).

Hofstede articulated varying degrees of power distance, with high power distance societies accepting inequality and viewing authority as necessary and unquestionable. Lower power distance societies, on the other hand, view authority as necessary in keeping order but see authoritative roles as ones that can be questioned and believe that, at times, roles can be reversed. Hofstede explained that respect is a critical behavior taught to children in large power distance societies, while independence is viewed as essential in small power distance societies (Hofstede, 2014b).

Thus, I use the term power distance as the name of this category because the concept plays a significant role in how educators within a culturally diverse international school operate, and it therefore necessitates further consideration. Most expatriate faculty in the study setting operated within the cultural norms of small power distance societies. In contrast, Ethiopian faculty and staff operated within the cultural norms of a large power distance society. Two elements of power distance are relevant to this context: deferring and promoting competencies.

### *Deference*

Throughout PAR Cycle One, participants acknowledged various behaviors in themselves or their colleagues that either contribute to or obstruct strong collaborative teams. I recognized behaviors connected to deference as a cultural expectation for some; for these individuals, respect for elders or those deemed superior in society’s hierarchy of status required that, out of respect for their status, they defer to those persons. When examining how deference is related to power distance, as explained by Hofstede (2014b), culture significantly influences one’s mindset and, subsequently, influences behaviors regarding compliance. This manifests in culturally diverse collaborative settings like international schools by some voices constantly dominating the conversation and other voices being viewed as "less than" others. We tended to have fewer constructive disagreements because the people in certain positions were almost unfailingly deferential; however, their perceived agreement was a result of the cultural expectation regarding deference.

These data helped to identify and understand behaviors resulting from cultural differences, particularly about deference to others to whom one pays attention and does not challenge. One Ethiopian teacher described the mindset she and many of her fellow Ethiopian colleagues possess:

> You know, there is a cultural difference. Like, in [the] culture where I grew up, it's like, your supervisor, or a boss, your parents, your teachers, and God, [are] equal. You just listen to what they say every time. Whatever they say, . . . you go for that. That's the culture where I come from. (Participant 7, focus group, March 4, 2022)

She continued, "When we [Ethiopians] go to school, the teacher tells us one plus one is two. But we don't ask why one plus one is two." This participant shared this cultural norm concerning her work, and as she discussed it, the group members recognized how they contribute to barriers to effective collaboration. Likewise, an Ethiopian education assistant shared how she acts according to the nature of her cultural upbringing, which socialized her to be submissive:

> Sometimes I feel like I can make decisions, but I don't want to . . . go outside my lines of authority and boundary, so I ask my immediate supervisor or whoever. I feel it's up to the hierarchy because I want to make sure . . . I'm not going beyond what I am supposed to do. So there are things like, you know, I can probably [just do], but there's still that, you

> know, ingrained things that someone is higher up than me and should, you know, sign off, like, metaphorically. (Participant 1, team meeting, May 3, 2022)

The data suggested that the deference to authority expected in some cultures impacts the behavior of individuals in the workplace. This can cause a rift in a work setting with substantial cultural diversity. Individuals from other cultural backgrounds or those with low power distance expect open and honest discussion regardless of seniority or role. Without understanding these cultural differences and their impact on behavior, differing expectations can result in frustration. I expand upon some of these behaviors, which I named as subcodes: speaking up, asking questions, and speaking openly to supervisors.

**Speaking Up.** In PAR Cycle One, I surfaced evidence that culture influenced how often educators in the study setting spoke up and what they chose to share. Fifty-six percent (56%) of the responses for power distance indicated deference about speaking up as an issue. Because deference is a critical cultural component in Ethiopian society, most (81%) of those responses were from Ethiopian participants. The concept of speaking up became more apparent as participants shared how their cultural expectations and experiences contributed to their comfort in sharing ideas and promoting themselves. Ethiopian staff primarily discussed their reserved natures and how this cultural trait impacts participation in a collaborative work environment. One Ethiopian educational assistant (EA) described this when saying,

> I could say that in my culture, personally, I wasn't being told or appreciated to speak up in a meeting or in front of [others]. Even if I have something to say or to share with the group, I would still keep it [to myself] because I feel like I would be interrupting. (Participant 4, focus group, May 3, 2022)

Other Ethiopian participants shared similar sentiments regarding their verbal contributions during meetings, particularly in group settings.

The opposite perspective of the role of culture in speaking up was apparent from expatriate staff. Although less frequent in the data, these participants acknowledged how they expressed themselves. An expatriate teacher of a European nationality shared,

> The other thing that I wanted to say about my culture is that we're direct. We say what we see; we say what we think. And I told them, it's because my country's past has been a repressed speech for 35 years ago, so now everybody just talks. We talk maybe too much. (Participant 8, CLE, March 22, 2022)

The data exemplify how culture contributes to engagement and help to explain the variance in active and passive participation in collaborative settings. Differing norms on speaking up created an imbalance in teams that many noticed.

Communication variance related to speaking up often contributed to discussions about challenges related to collaboration among diverse team members. As stated by an American CLE participant who grew up abroad: “. . . if Americans are like, ‘let's do this, let's do that,’ then they’ll [Ethiopian colleagues] never talk. And I feel like it's such a struggle” (Participant 3, CLE, March 22, 2022). Individuals expressed these struggles when sharing their challenges in communicating with colleagues of differing backgrounds or how they recognized a communication challenge present within a team setting. Concerning power distance, those who expressed personal struggles were mainly from countries with a larger power distance. In contrast, those from smaller power distances either shared frustration or were at a loss for how to address the lack of participation from teammates.

**Asking Questions.** A particular behavior of significance to the study was asking questions, a subcode of *deference*. As participants shared stories of communicating with colleagues, how and when participants asked questions appeared in their narratives. Some participants expressed their struggles to balance the need to know and understand with differing expectations from their cultural backgrounds. As Ethiopian educators discussed their participation in collaborative meetings, one individual stated, "There are a few who actually come from a culture [in which] when you asked questions, you might actually be seen as someone who doesn't know, and they don't want to have that label" (Participant 9, focus group, March 4, 2022). How the behavior of asking questions is viewed from a cultural perspective varied greatly. Some cultures view questioning as a way to further understanding; asking questions is encouraged. Other cultures discourage questioning and either view this act as rude or, as the data suggest, as an indication of knowing less, as articulated by an EA:

> In my culture, I mean, asking questions, is not like, right, right? So if I have to ask questions, I have to first maybe tell it to the person who was very close to me. I don't tell it directly to the team. I would have just said to the person that I think that I trust." (Participant 4, focus group, May 3, 2022)

In addition, some are worried about perceptions of others when they ask questions. An Ethiopian teacher: "There's that guilt . . . in you. What would they say? Would my questions be a silly question? Will they think, 'Oh, who is she?'" (Participant 7, focus group, March 4, 2022). The concept of question-asking relates to power distance and deference. In large power distance societies, parents teach obedience to their children and expect them to comply when interacting with superiors. Individuals from large power distance societies may be less likely to express themselves openly through acts such as questioning. As the data demonstrate, questioning is an uncomfortable and unfamiliar act for many from large power distance societies. In cultures in which questioning is less respected, the ability to do so requires a high degree of trust.

Although the variation in the act of questioning is not a new revelation, I am reminded that this process varies from culture to culture, and the data suggest that these differences impact the daily operations of staff in a diverse international school in poorly understood ways. Cultural norms of asking questions present a challenge because questioning is an expectation in a school like ICS that promotes inquiry and constructivism; yet the cultural norms of many staff suggest otherwise. While culture's influence on learning styles for school children is well-researched (Buseri, 1987; Callanan et al., 2020; Dkeidek et al., 2010), how culture impacts adults is less obvious to many. Extant research rarely discusses cultural influences on educators in their work with one another, nor is there thorough research on cultural influences in adult education.

**Speaking Openly to Supervisors.** Another challenge Ethiopian faculty expressed was discomfort in speaking openly to supervisors and elders. Varying expectations regarding open communication existed based on roles; supervisors expected faculty and staff to communicate with supervisors openly, and supervisors experienced frustration when this did not happen. However, Ethiopian staff did not feel comfortable speaking to supervisors or even colleagues they perceived as having higher status. Considering that expatriates held most supervisory positions in the study setting, Hofstede's (2014b) research on power distance helps to explain this phenomenon: "In the large power distance societies, subordinates simply assume [and] expect that they will be told what to do. In small power distance societies, a subordinate, when it relates to their work, . . . expect to be consulted" (03:52). The result was a level of discord among and between staff members.

Ethiopian faculty shared that cultural norms and expectations impacted how they interacted with supervisors of varying degrees; not only were they guarded around administrators, but they were less open toward faculty they viewed as holding a more superior role or those with more experience. An example from an Ethiopian staff member exemplifies this hesitation: “You know . . . hierarchy plays a big role in it. How free can you be with someone who’s your supervisor?” (Participant 1, Interview, February 28, 2022). In another example, an EA shared an instance in which she felt enough trust that she could speak more candidly about something with which she disagreed, but faced backlash from her colleagues: “Ethiopians that I work with, they will say, what were you thinking? You can't say stuff like that, even if you disagree. Do you think we actually enjoy . . . being quiet?” (Participant 9, focus group, March 4, 2022). This same EA continued by sharing a vivid memory of another time she took a step out of the cultural expectations with which she grew up: “I do remember one teacher when I did disagree with her, she said like, ‘You're the first [EA] I remember disagreeing with me like this.’” The inflection in the statement expressed a sense that the expatriate staff was surprised.

The role of culture in educators' collaboration in diverse cultural settings is tied to power distance. As previously discussed, faculty from cultures with a more significant power distance tend to be less comfortable speaking up in group settings. An additional layer to this reservation relates to cultural views on hierarchy. As expressed by an EA: “If there are people who are superior to you . . . in terms of hierarchy that . . . have ideas and they’re speaking out, you tend to let them do so” (Participant 1, interview, February 28, 2022). This example demonstrates how cultural norms concerning hierarchy manifest in collaborative settings. Although the data suggest that Ethiopian staff generally understood how culture impacted their behaviors, expatriate staff were less aware. These data reiterate Freire’s (1970/1993) work in which he contended that the oppressed are more primed to understand the “effects of their oppression” (p. 45). In the case of this study, the staff from the host country demonstrated more awareness of their lower status in the hierarchy of the school's structure than the expatriate staff. Building a culture in which the voices of the local staff are heard and valued is crucial in exposing the hierarchal and power dynamics among the staff.

Furthermore, amplifying voices could lead to more robust collaborative practices, as one American expatriate teacher shared after attending a CLE:

> When I listened to [an Ethiopian colleague] talk about how in his culture, it's respectful to honor an elder's words and not openly share your own on top of theirs, it made me wonder if that applies to me as a team leader. When I share an idea, is he likely not to add his own because of that cultural expectation and me being a team leader? (Participant 10, CLE reflection, March 22, 2022).

The same teacher then shared how this insight is beginning to influence her thoughts on how she might construct and facilitate team meetings differently to address her new and growing understanding. Reflections such as this reveal the impact cultural understanding could have on collaborative practices.

### *Promoting Competencies*

Ethiopians view promoting one's competencies as self-serving and drawing attention to self. In western culture, however, skillfully promoting one's competencies in the work world is viewed as necessary and useful, particularly in hiring practices. The Ethiopian staff expressed this as a barrier to working in a diverse setting. Promoting one's competencies in any work setting—in an interview or in a meeting—is not a strong part of the way Ethiopians express themselves. The participants' examples suggested inequities arise when the dominant staff lacks cultural awareness about how a person is expressing competency or a personal strength. In the stories related to employment interviews, an Ethiopian participant explained that interviewer strategies and expectations often create an unjust scenario for interviewees from societies of differing power distances:

> Even for interviews,  . . . you're supposed to talk, like, good things, positive things, your capabilities of yourself. But, like, coming to our culture, growing up, I think I have, maybe it's a cultural thought, I have learned, I wasn't taught of expressing, my positive attributes. So every time I or maybe our colleagues – Habesha [Ethiopian] colleagues— . . . even though we're capable, even though we're 100% sure that we are capable of doing something, we don't talk about that. And for interviews, that would be . . . challenging for us. (Participant 11, focus group, May 6, 2022)

Another example from a European expatriate teacher about working with colleagues and supervisors in a standard work setting concurs with a reticence to talk about oneself:

> From my culture, the way where I come, we don't say out loud what we are good at. So we just want them—the other people—(to) notice. While I think [for] many of our colleagues, it's just like you need to be strong and show what you exactly know or just say it out loud when you want. (Participant 12, interview, April 22, 2022)

The data indicate that the role of culture in promoting one's personal competencies can be a challenge when working in a culturally diverse setting with varying expectations. Considering that creating more equitable conditions necessitates having more indigenous representation on the teaching and leadership staff, this code surfaces a critical barrier. As with other differences, better cultural awareness and understanding are needed to create more equitable conditions.

**Individualism vs. Collectivism**

The concept of individualism vs. collectivism frequently surfaced during PAR Cycle

One. While the data represented fewer instances (16%) relating to cultural dissonance, the data on greetings sparked much discussion. Particularly during CLEs, participants discussed their mindsets and behaviors and began to make sense of others' behaviors. The societal values regarding individualism and collectivism did not seem new to the participants, as they often used these terms directly. What participants understood to a much lesser extent, however, was how these concepts manifested in behavior in their work environment. Even I did not immediately understand the connection between individualism and collectivism connected to particular behaviors and how this consistently caused tension. Hofstede's (2011) explanation of cultural dimensions helps to explain how these pieces fit together.

One of the six dimensions Hofstede identified in his work is individualism. He described the concept as: "**Individualism** [bolded in original] on the one side versus its opposite, **Collectivism** [bolded and capitalized in original], as a societal, not an individual characteristic, is the degree to which people in a society are integrated into groups" (Hofstede, 2011, p. 11). He explained this dimension by exploring how this mindset impacts how members of societies interact. Two examples from Hofstede frequently surfaced in the study: greetings and dealing with conflict. Both interpersonal actions are culture-bound.

### ***Greetings***

Throughout the study, greeting people was of utmost importance in Ethiopian culture; when participants brought up this practice in group settings, the discussion almost always ignited passion from others and elicited further comments. Within these discussions, Ethiopian participants expressed that many of their expatriate colleagues do not seem to share the same value about greetings. The data revealed that a lack of understanding regarding the reasons for different approaches to greeting others had been misunderstood for some time. This misunderstanding has caused issues and sometimes conflict between individuals.

The importance of taking time to greet people relates to the values and actions of a collectivist society. As described by Hofstede (2014a), “In a collectivist society, the relationship comes first. The task comes second. In an individualist society, the task comes first, and the relationship may come afterwards” (03:31). An Ethiopian-American demonstrated how misunderstanding had made its way into the daily work of educators:

> Greeting someone is so important. Even growing up, [if] we have a guest at home, my mom would get us from the room and [tell us to] bow down, say hello, and things like that. So our expectations are the same when we come to . . . work here . . . I definitely expect a greeting, like a good morning. But there are times that [an American colleague] just walks and passes by, and I don't know if she's in her mind somewhere else or if greetings [are] just not as important . . . . I don't think she hates me; she likes me. I really don't know why sometimes, you know, is it because greetings [are] not that important? (Participant 2, CLE, March 22, 2022)

Other Ethiopian participants shared similar stories about not being greeted in the mornings by expatriate teachers and assuming that they had either done something wrong or that the individual was having a bad day. Only after discussing this difference openly during the study did participants seem to gain some understanding of each other’s greeting rituals. One Ethiopian participant thanked an American participant for explaining why she often does not work her way around the space greeting everyone in the mornings. The Ethiopian participant had worked at the school for many years and expressed that this was the first time she understood that greetings are not held in the same regard as in her cultural upbringing, hence the behavior of her colleagues.

Spending time conversing about differences proved to be an essential part of the study to enhance cultural understanding. The data helped to explain the differences in how educators prioritize the way they greet others. However, the barriers persist unless those doing the daily work in international schools understand these differences. Participants reflected on their actions and considered how they might shift and adapt. An example of this came from an American teacher:

> Greeting like that, I think should be very important. But because of my conditioning, like individualistic, time-sensitive, hierarchical American culture, it's so much more important to be productive than it is to be a human. And that's really problematic. And I'm trying to . . . break down that conditioning, but it still lives in me because I was trained that way, unconsciously, and I don't like it. (Participant 13, Team meeting, May 3, 2022)

The study revealed that we need to examine how cultural norms of individualism and collectivism make their way into international schools and how schools might build this awareness and understanding to bridge gaps to address dealing with conflict.

### ***Dealing with Conflict***

The organizational actors in this study—primarily Western expatriates and Ethiopian teachers and teacher assistants—operate under different mindsets. Ethiopians expressed their perspectives about struggling to work within the predominant Western individualistic mindset. Particularly in a collaborative working environment like ICS, one that depends on a sense of cohesiveness to function well, acquiring and maintaining cohesion is difficult when group members have different expectations about dealing with challenges or conflicts. Ethiopians do not confront disagreements by speaking directly with others, and to do so is discomforting from their perspective. All expatriates do not necessarily speak directly; however, being direct is their predominant method of maintaining a positive working environment. Particularly in a collaborative working environment like ICS, we depend on a sense of cohesiveness to function well, but maintaining cohesion is difficult when group members have different expectations about dealing with challenges or conflicts.

By contrast, Ethiopians generally consider harmony among group members a primary goal. Hofstede (2014a) described the differences in societies: “A key word in collectivist societies is **harmony [**emphasis added] . . . . Even if people disagree, they should maintain the superficial harmony . . . . In the individualist society, the idea is that confrontations can do no harm; they can sometimes be healthy” (04:24). Maintaining harmony was evident in the data as participants discussed conflict. One Ethiopian EA shared:

> Even if you're mad about something, you just keep it inside, and I'm really struggling with that with my family, because I'm just like, “Why didn't you say, why are we always trying to, you know, keep the peace?” It's not working. We're angry inside. Yeah, it's tough. (Participant 1, team meeting, May 3, 2022)

Another EA shared a similar sentiment: “I think, culturally, we’re not, like, courageous . . . We’re not upfront. Even though we think something is wrong, we’ll not [say] it upfront” (Participant 11, interview, May 6, 2022).

Thus, creating cohesion within a culturally diverse group when they have different perspectives on the value and the use of conflict requires careful consideration and an understanding of varying perspectives. One Ethiopian teacher suggested openly discussing differences and creating a normed culture of speaking as a positive way her team has dealt with this issue:

> We kind of, like, came up with some kind of agreement that works best for us as a team. So we kind of created a culture of speaking. [We agreed to] not [tell] people off right there because that doesn’t really work. Especially I don’t think it’ll ever work for Ethiopians because it’ll just shut people off. (Participant 6, Interview, January 7, 2022)

Creating norms like the one suggested requires open dialogue to build cultural understanding and practices that respond to that growing understanding. This kind of dialogue does not happen spontaneously; rather, it depends on committed leaders and educators who realize its value and are intentional about examining values to create and maintain positive and effective working and learning environments.

## Implications for Collaborative Practices for PAR Cycle Two

Cultural dissonance is the differences that exist between the Ethiopian staff and the expatriate staff that can and often did cause discord or disharmony. The dissonance was a result of cultural or perception differences or inconsistencies (Ade-Ojo & Duckworth, 2017). Participants identified the key factors that influenced the dissonance, including communication patterns, differences in power and responses to hierarchies, and the dominant cultural norm—individualism or collectivism. In the field of education, several researchers have examined two specific areas of cultural dissonance: the effects of cultural dissonance on academic performance (Bickel & Jensen, 2012; Martinez-Taboada et al., 2017) and the effects of cultural dissonance on teachers and students in international schools (Allan, 2002). For example, Killoran (2019) examined the dissonance between the expatriate staff and educational assistants and found that the EAs were willing to talk about their experiences in a safe space, but they continued to have difficulty communicating with the expatriate teachers. In this case, changing their title to co-teacher was important as that clarified their status. However, the experiences of educational assistants in international schools needs more study. The extant research on cultural dissonance within education examines the struggles produced by opposing values and practices between cultures and offers suggestions to mitigate inequitable experiences for learners; however, little extant research examines cultural dissonance and its impact on the professionals working in schools. To date, the evidence confirms that cultural dissonance exists between educators within schools, affecting their interactions and mindsets.

Within the study setting, the data overwhelmingly suggested that the Ethiopian staff experienced more cultural dissonance. Ethiopian participants frequently referenced the disparity between norms and practices in the school and those in their home environments. These data correspond to Ridgley (2009), who studied cultural dissonance in response to the transplant of institutions from one cultural setting to another; considering that ICS operates similarly to schools in the Global North, the existence of the school in Ethiopia is akin to an institutional transplant. Ridgley (2009) suggested that institutions must exist in the culture in which they were originally designed, or the culture to which they are transplanted “will eventually reject the institutions or they will be transformed into more a *[sic]* culturally acceptable form” (para. 1). Unlike the institutions explored by Ridgley, the International Community School employs many staff from the Global North and caters to a diverse student body, not just the local community. However, the Ethiopian staff are a mainstay of the school. Thus, the school and local cultures need to honor the local cultural experiences while maintaining a multicultural environment. In this study, to a large degree, the opposite of Ridley’s findings is true; the institution, without stating this formally, transforms those from the local cultural context in which the institution exists. Ethiopian staff are expected to convert to the norms of the school, which are primarily those of a Global North perspective.

As I presented the data about the theme of cultural dissonance to the CPR team, we recognized that we needed to deepen our cultural understanding and address our misunderstandings. We determined that a necessary step to this goal was to signify its importance by devoting time to listening to each other. This understanding formed the basis of PAR Cycle Two, in which we explored ways to build cultural awareness and took action to design and implement strategies to do so.

# CHAPTER 6: PAR CYCLE TWO AND FINDINGS

In PAR Cycle One, we learned from the evidence that culture significantly impacted the adult working environment in our international school; the evidence indicates that we experienced cultural dissonance in adult working relationships. In particular, Ethiopian cultural expectations and norms about individual and group interactions are quite different from Western or Global North norms. The PAR team started the next cycle of inquiry ready to understand and act on how our cultural dissonance created barriers for us as educators and co-workers. Working with the CPR team, I determined that we needed more information about addressing this issue to build deeper understanding and, I hoped, develop stronger collaborative relationships on teams.

During the PAR project and study over 13 months and two cycles of inquiry, I worked with the CPR team to examine the evidence, which influenced our direction for this cycle of inquiry. I used a non-linear, iterative approach, and by the conclusion of PAR Cycle Two, I was able to solidify the theme of cultural dissonance and analyze data that gave us insights into practices that might contribute to stronger collaboration in diverse international schools. In this chapter, I describe the data collection process and analyze these data to determine the second theme that emerged in the study: strategies to diminish cultural barriers.

By the end of this second inquiry cycle, ample data supported me to name two key findings of the study. These findings indicate reasons behind inequity in cross-cultural collaboration and actions for disrupting this imbalance. I conclude this chapter by analyzing the evidence to present these findings.

## PAR Cycle Two Data Collection Process

In PAR Cycle Two, I used the same data collection and analysis processes. I gathered data through CLEs, interviews, focus groups, CPR meetings, team meetings, and reflective memos (see Table 4). We used the analysis of data from PAR Cycle One to determine the initial steps for PAR Cycle Two. In PAR Cycle Two, I focused on identifying strategies to address the theme that emerged in PAR Cycle One; therefore, I designed data collection strategies to target this focus to gather more specific information.

## Community Learning Exchanges

As described in Chapter 5, I used community learning exchanges as a key data collection strategy throughout the study. During the CLEs, I implemented activities with the intention of building relational trust and contributing to educators' understanding of one another. I used reflections about the experiences and post conversations to contribute to the data for PAR Cycle Two.

When designing the CLEs, I purposefully considered how to honor all voices. I determined that inviting all elementary faculty and staff (n=115) was crucial to gather a wide variety of viewpoints. I planned the activities during each CLE to include whole-group learning and smaller, more intimate opportunities to engage in dialogue. We began each CLE with a whole-group grounding, followed by small group or partner sharing, and concluded by reconvening as an entire community to reflect and share. This structure proved to be effective in creating a safe environment for learning.

One CLE axiom was a guiding principle for the convenings: "The people closest to the issues are best situated to discover answers to local concerns" (Guajardo et al., 2016, p. 25). I facilitated faculty and staff in identifying action steps related to the data. The result was actionable steps *for* the school constituents *by* the school constituents. As we gathered, I showed a video of a cultural life experience shared by an Ethiopian staff member to provoke a discussion of cultural differences even within Ethiopia. I then displayed the data gathered in PAR Cycle

Table 4

*PAR Cycle Two Meetings and Activities*

| Activities | February 2022 | March/ April 2022 | May/ June 2022 | September/ October 2022 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Meetings with CPR Team (n=5) | ● | ● | ● | |
| Community Learning Exchanges (n=3) | ● | ● | ● | |
| Interviews & Focus Groups (n=11) | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| Team Meetings (n=5) | | ● | ● | |
| Memos | ● | ● | ● | ● |

One and named the issue: Lack of understanding of our cultural differences is causing barriers to our collaboration. I reviewed the goals of CLEs and presented the CLE axioms. I then shared that the objective of this CLE was to work together to determine actions to address this issue. In small groups of four, participants shared experiences and ideas. In a large group sharing, they found connections and built upon each other's thinking. In addition to this larger meeting, the Grade 2 team continued to meet to focus on how one team could address the concerns of cultural understanding.

## Grade 2 Team Meetings

Examining a specific grade level team was crucial to the project and study as we were committed to using a small group to uncover day-to-day strategies to diminish collaboration barriers. I approached the Grade 2 team to collaborate more intensely from March-June 2022 as several of these team members had participated in previous aspects of the project, and the team seemed ripe for building relational trust. The Grade 2 team included four teachers and four educational assistants. All educational assistants and one teacher were Ethiopian. The remaining three teachers were expatriates. One expatriate teacher identified as Guyanese, one as American, and the other as American, but noted a background of growing up in Venezuela.

As a regular practice, the team met multiple times weekly, and two of those were with me as a PYP coordinator. We determined we needed dedicated time to intentionally nurtured our relational trust and cultural understanding, so we devoted our attention to this during one of our regular meetings every other week. I centered the work with the Grade 2 team on implementing strategies related to sharing different aspects of self. I believed that addressing the data issues head-on without knowing each other more deeply would not be a productive choice. I gathered data on how these strategies impacted the team by directly reflecting with them and observing their collaboration in subsequent PLC meetings throughout the semester.

### Interviews and Focus Groups

As the lead researcher, I continued to conduct interviews and focus groups as a vital data collection activity for PAR Cycle Two. I used an iterative process of collecting and analyzing data throughout the study, and this helped me revise the interview questions in order to target specific information. For example, I adjusted interview questions to gather data specific to strategies contributing to educators' collaboration in a culturally diverse setting. I used a responsive approach when speaking with individuals and groups and asked for clarification or more information during interviews as needed. In some cases, I conducted follow-up interviews as I realized I needed more insight from specific individuals regarding the information they had disclosed.

## PAR Cycle Two Evidence

Using the same data analysis process for PAR Cycle Two that I used in PAR Cycle One, I examined the data from iterative rounds of analysis to identify codes, then categories, and finally emerging themes. Using this process of repeatedly returning to the data, I made connections and eventually named a theme significant to the PAR study: Strategies to diminish cultural barriers. Figure 11 represents the categories and codes contributing to this theme. The data set is a collection of strategies to overcome barriers arising from our cultural differences, as indicated by the participants in the study. In this section, I analyze two categories that contribute to this theme: connecting on a personal level and norms for equitable engagement.

### Connecting on a Personal Level

Human connection was central to the implementation of this project and study, and the

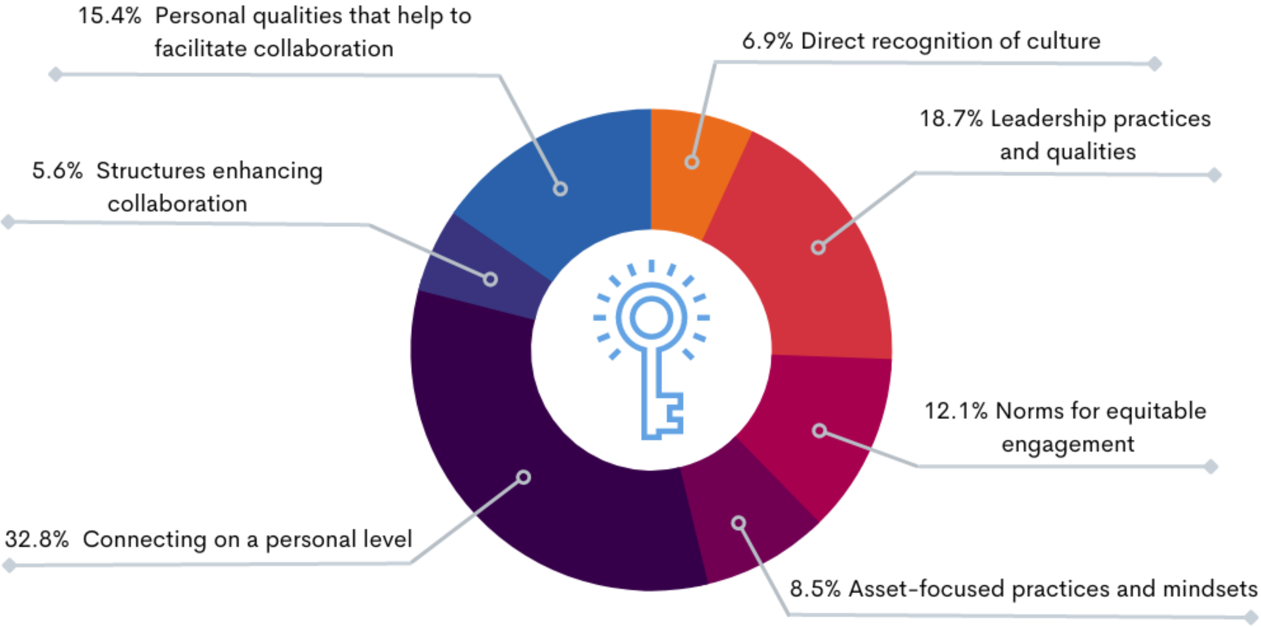


*Figure 11*. Categories that support the theme: Strategies to diminish cultural barriers.

data demonstrated that connecting on a personal level was likewise seen by participants as being an essential element of strong collaboration. Throughout the data collection strategies, individuals and groups routinely referenced the role of personal connection in their work with their colleagues. I surfaced these data through interviews and focus groups, and this topic was a key point of discussion in reflections with the Grade 2 team. Two critical factors to building connections are the power of personal narratives and spending time together outside the classroom.

### ***The Power of Personal Narratives***

Using personal narratives, CPR team members and study participants shared more about themselves and learned about their colleagues. I used personal narratives to anchor CPR team meetings, CLEs, and meetings with the Grade 2 team. In participant reflections, they reported that sharing personal stories about their identities helped them build understanding and nurture trust in each other, which contributed to stronger collaboration. Deeper understanding of others was noted by participants in 25% of the data for personal narratives when referencing the impact of personal narratives, and participants mentioned increased trust 6% of the time (see Figure 12). One CLE participant's reflection after engaging in a journey line personal narrative activity represented the data from the group:

> I felt that it increased my trust. I felt like just hearing each other’s stories made us want to trust each other even more. Not that we didn’t trust each other [before], but it felt like . . . there’s more trust among us now. (Participant 15, CLE, February 2, 2022)

As I examined the data on personal narratives, I noticed how participants found this strategy supportive of deepening understanding and trust-building, which included awareness of others’ humanity, recognition of strengths, and connectedness (see Figure 12 for coded data relating to

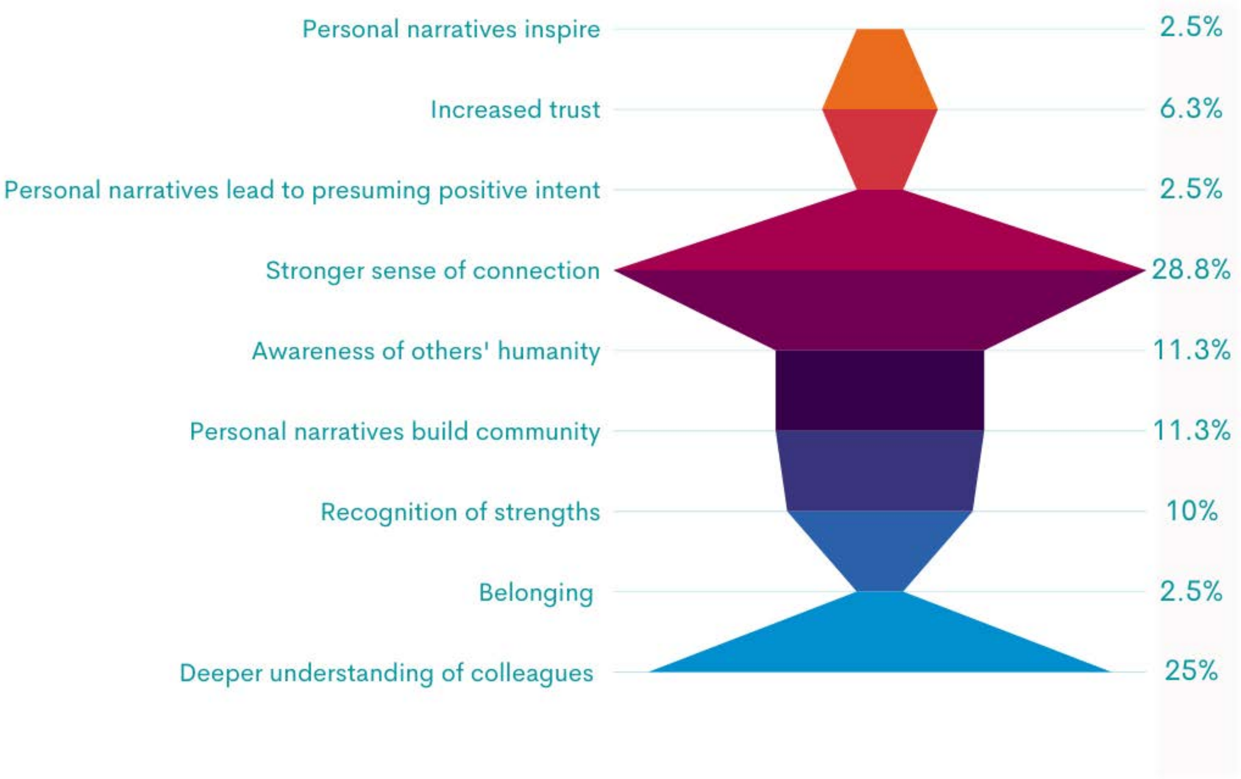


*Figure 12.* Data on the power of personal narratives.

the power of personal narratives). The frequency of each concept is depicted through the line lengths, with the longer lines indicating higher prevalence.

**Awareness of Others' Humanity**. As I collected data on the power of personal narratives, I noticed that discovering or reinforcing the humanness of others was a prominent outcome of this strategy and was noted in 11% of the responses. By human, they did not mean that they viewed others as not humans, but that they now viewed their colleagues in a larger way as members of a community and family as well as a person with whom they work. The data on the power of personal narratives illustrated the ways this strategy reinforces the humanness of others. Throughout the PAR project and study, participants used the word *human* or iterations of it to describe the impact of personal narratives on changing their perspectives of others. A participant who engaged in a CLE stated: "When you actually build those relationships, you start seeing someone in a different light. You start to see them more as a human and less as just a work colleague—just someone you pass by and work alongside" (Participant 16, personal communication, February 9, 2022). The Grade 2 team echoed this sentiment as they identified personal narratives as essential to their collective growth. One team member shared,

> When we work together every day, . . . it's easy just to see the outward appearance. Everybody seems fine. But I read a quote somewhere that you can be kind, [that] everybody's carrying something. And I think we all have things in our life, you know, that are hard, . . . [are] difficult, and things we're sorting through. And when you *hear* [emphasis added] people, you hear a theme like that. (Participant 1, team meeting, April 19, 2022)

Likewise, a CLE participant reflected that personal narratives are a powerful strategy to promote the recognition of the humanness of school community members:

> [The personal narrative experience] provided us with common understanding and sharing. I didn't know what I knew today about you, about the people that were sitting [at] my tables. And considering the amount of time that we share together, [that] we collaborate together . . . we know very little. And I think the more we know about each other as human beings, teachers, parents, colleagues, whatever, the stronger we will be as a school. (Participant 18, CLE, February 2, 2022)

The role personal narratives played in helping educators see each other in a new light—their full humanity—stronger empathy and compassion came forth throughout the study through several data points similar to the ones shared.

Participants of the project and study referenced a shift of mindset as a direct result of engaging in personal narratives with others. When sharing this idea, they often referenced having a deeper understanding of and appreciation for particular individuals. For example, after participating in a CLE, one individual later shared,

> Having [name removed] in my group and hearing her life story, I start to understand her more. Now I no longer just think of her as someone who is always absent or who is lacking strong units. It's so easy to get stuck on a superficial understanding of who they are. It's so easy to get in a funk when you are so irritated, but it's a clear sign that I need more one-on-one time. Like dinner with [name removed]—that has given me a new perspective on her and who she is, but I need to intentionally continue connecting. (Participant 16, personal communication, February 9, 2022)

The participants discussed that greater levels of collegial understanding resulted from building collaboration among faculty and staff.

**Recognition of Strengths.** Secondly, using personal narratives strengthened recognition.

As participants shared how their mindsets shifted in light of their engagement in hearing and sharing personal narratives, they sometimes noted that they better recognized their colleagues' strengths. One example of the data contributing to this code came from an educational assistant: "I . . . found out that some of my colleagues have a well-enriched . . . background experience that I can go refer to when I needed [sic] to" (Participant 11, CLE artifact, February 2, 2022). Another individual wrote, "I learn [sic] about my colleagues that they know what I don't know. I found them being unique and special" (Participant 7, CLE artifact, February 2, 2022). The data suggested that the personal narratives allowed the time and space for less obvious strengths to be unveiled.

Honneth (2012) discusses the importance of authentic recognition as a key factor in building human relationships. Recognition can occur in a situation in which the dominant culture unwittingly coerces those of the non-dominant culture to conform, thereby producing social reproduction of the dominant culture forms and norms. However, authentic reciprocal recognition ensures that *I* in the *we* feels affirmed for herself. "Humans, as beings who have needs, who are equally entitled to autonomy, and equally capable of achievement, should possess a value to which diverse forms of recognitional behavior correspond (love, legal respect, social esteem)" (Honneth, 2012, p. 86). In this case, the recognition of persons as well as the cultural norms of the Ethiopian colleagues was at stake, and "recognition may not consist of mere words or symbolic expressions but must be accompanied by actions that confirm these promises" (Honneth, 2012, p. 92).

**Stronger Sense of Connection.** Another specific aspect concerning the power of personal narratives that appeared frequently (29% of the data) was their role in drawing forth and creating connections between individuals and groups of people. Participants recognized existing connections between themselves and others as they listened to their colleagues' stories. Afterward, they shared that, although they came from diverse backgrounds both in experience and culture, the personal narrative activities revealed that they often held many commonalities. As expressed by a teacher participant:

> All of us come from different places and backgrounds but have so many similarities in our beliefs about what we do and the impact on how we come together and connect. Similar values would make it easy to work with these people. (Participant 10, CLE artifact, February 2, 2022)

The connections noted by individuals mainly included similarities in upbringing and values.

As noted, personal narratives surfaced the existing commonalities people have with one another as they *built* a sense of connection. Routinely throughout the project and study, individuals confirmed how they felt more connected to their colleagues because of their shared experiences of hearing one another's stories. One CLE participant shared with me that after passing by a colleague with whom he shared his story, he had a different connection with her—something special because they heard each other's stories (Participant 18, personal memo, February 15, 2022). Another participant shared the power of personal narratives in contributing to a stronger sense of unity and connection as she reflected several days after a CLE,

> Since that opportunity to get to know these people better, when I have seen those people in passing, it's a different kind of connection now. It's not . . . a wave. It's like, "Hi!" It's different. It's totally different because I know them better now, and I have something in common. And we discussed that. That was cool." (Participant 17, personal communication, February 2, 2022)

The data on personal narratives from work with the Grade 2 team supported this idea, as demonstrated through observations of their interactions and working relationships. Team members referenced how engaging in personal narrative and sharing experiences led to knowing each other in deeper ways that strengthened their trust. Particularly noticeable was growth in the increasing comfort level of the Ethiopian members of the team who, as evidenced in reflective memos, were generally more guarded upon the beginning of our work together but who, over time, shared stories and expressed their thoughts with others in ways that revealed deeper levels of themselves.

Although the use of personal narratives as a positive force is already supported by extant literature (Hancox, 2011; Keehn, 2015; Zak, 2013), the study suggests particular promise as to *how* the stories contribute to nurturing a collaborative work environment through the strengthening of trust. Personal narratives help people pause and connect at a more personal level, which is significantly different from other commonly used activities such as icebreakers that often remain superficial. The data from this study imply that personal narratives help individuals see their place alongside others; as a result, they develop dispositions like reliance, compassion, and cohesion. One participant expressed the power of engaging in personal narratives and its effect on building community: “I just want to do this . . . every week, until I [meet] everybody (Participant 17, CLE, February 2, 2022).

### ***Spending Time Together Outside the Classroom***

The data I gathered throughout the project and study indicate connecting personally influenced their professional interactions. Participants discussed how social gatherings influenced their comfort levels with colleagues and was a factor in diminishing the cultural dissonance. In interviews, the Ethiopian faculty and staff indicated that gathering with their colleagues outside school helped them develop a level of trust that transferred into their behaviors at work and influenced their level of active participation in team meetings. When asked about what made the team function so well with all voices heard and valued, an EA who worked on a highly collaborative team said, “The informal time. Sometimes the informal time that we have, and fun things that we [do]. Even when we laugh, you know, I . . . became [sic] . . . more comfortable” (Participant 4, focus group, May 3, 2022). I noted during the study that the grade-level team of which this EA was a member often spent time together outside school hours and made social gatherings a norm. These observations reiterated that spending time together outside the confines of work enhances work collaboration.

The participants indicated that prioritizing learning about colleagues during school time positively influenced the overall environment between educators and contributed to higher degrees of collaboration. A school is a busy place with many needs to be considered and attended to, and time for non-work-related discussion is often pushed aside for conversations deemed more critical. While educators may feel that the time spent engaging in personal discussions would be better spent preparing for learning and teaching, some of the study’s participants suggested otherwise. Through the study’s research activities, we created time and space to connect as humans, which led to a deeper understanding of each other and our wide range of backgrounds and perspectives. As one participant shared when asked what builds collaboration in a culturally diverse setting,

> The time we take in meetings to share personal things. I think that’s part of . . . how we come together. And some of those cultural things get shared in that when we talk about those things. And then . . . the understanding happens, or later somebody comes up and says, “So tell me more about that.” (Participant 20, focus group, April 12, 2022)

When school constituents create opportunities for personal connection, it opens doors to further conversation and learning. This builds a foundation necessary for high-functioning, collaborative teams.

## Norms for Equitable Engagement

Norms for equitable engagement were a critical component of fortifying trust on teams. However, as noted in the discussion regarding connecting on a personal level, norms for engagement are products of cultural expectations; 12% of the data on cultural dissonance diminishing strategies related to norms. The participants in the study described that enhanced collaboration occurred when school constituents developed norms for more equitable engagement in meetings and decision-making. They identified specific norms that people from different cultures could use to ensure equity, including pausing, clearly articulated agendas, and honoring and acting upon the ideas of all (see Figure 13 for a visual of the data contributing to this category).

### *Pausing*

The practice of pausing was primarily identified by Ethiopian participants in the study as a norm that contributed to a more equitable working environment. As individuals discussed their participation in professional learning community (PLC) meetings, they recognized that often their voices or those of their fellow Ethiopian colleagues went unheard if teams did not establish norms to facilitate equitable contribution. When asked what actions helped them feel more heard, several participants said the norm of pausing. An example came from an EA participant: “Especially pausing. . . it helps me to become a better participant in the meeting” (Participant 4, focus group, May 3, 2022). Just like think-time in classroom discourse, participants explained that pausing allowed them time to gather their thoughts to engage in dialogue; pausing makes space for them to enter into the conversation. As described in Chapter 5, individuals from larger

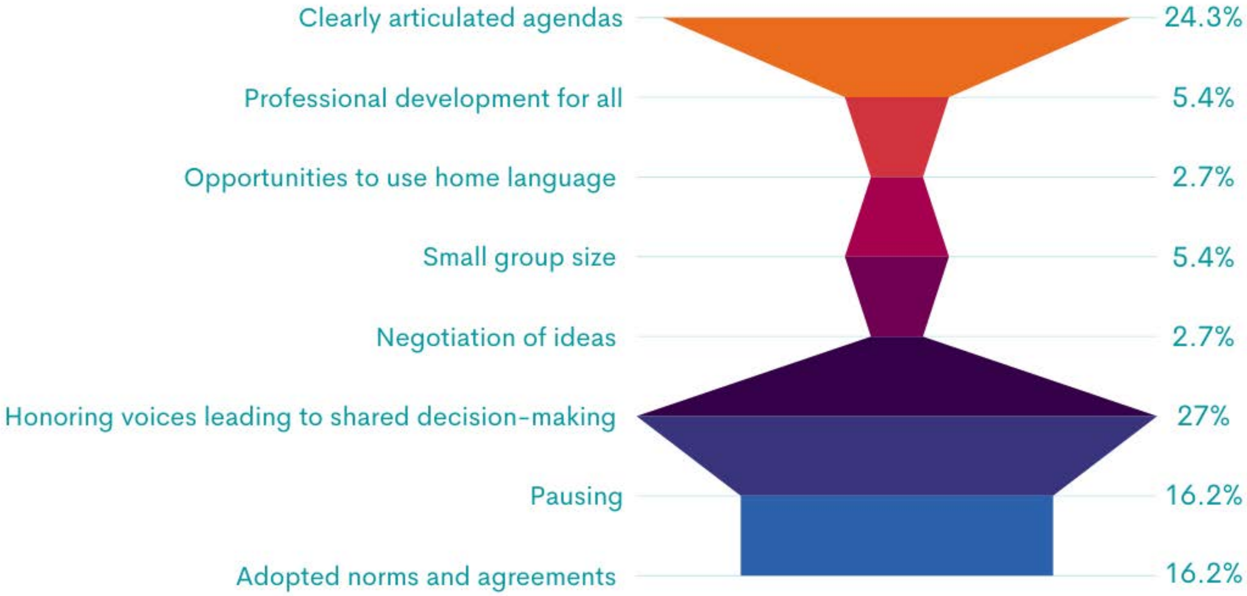


*Figure 13.* Frequency of data on norms for equitable engagement, including adopting norms and other factors that contributed to more effective collaboration.

power-distance societies are generally less attuned to interrupting or inserting themselves into dialogue (Hofstede, 2011). As demonstrated in the data, when educators incorporate pausing within the school’s norms of engagement, they might better address the inequitable participation experienced on many teams, particularly in culturally diverse international schools comprising faculty and staff from societies of varying degrees of power distance.

### ***Clearly Articulated Agendas***

Clearly articulated agendas was another norm participants identified as contributing to equitable engagement. As participants described their involvement in team discussions, they often noted that knowing the discussion points before the meeting helped them prepare to engage in the conversation. As an Ethiopian EA shared, “We are prepared ahead of time because we already know what’s . . . in the agenda” (Participant 4, focus group, October 14, 2022). In addition, they noted that detailed notes helped them to make sense of the discussion and feel better prepared to enact decisions. One individual shared that before her team developed and followed more detailed agendas, fellow Ethiopian colleagues with less experience at the school would leave team meetings and seek her support in understanding what was discussed. She shared that the agenda contributed to greater understanding by all team members, contributing to stronger collaboration during and after meetings (Participant 9, focus group, March 4, 2022).

### ***Honoring Voices Leading to Shared Decision-Making***

Norms are established ways of working, and educators interviewed in this study indicated that when these habits involved honoring and acting upon the ideas of all team members, they felt empowered to engage in collaborative endeavors (27% of the responses in discussing norms for equity). When school constituents enact norms, such as pausing and designing clear agendas, they make space for more equitable engagement; however, when members do not see their ideas realized, they limited their contributions. During interviews, I recognized the concept of honoring voices surfacing in the data, especially among teachers and their partnering EAs. The EAs whose partner teachers had described them as competent and capable educators expressed feeling comfortable and empowered because their ideas were actualized in the classroom. As described by one EA, “Our voice [being] heard . . . makes us really comfortable. Like if they don’t really apply it [my ideas], I . . .will stop—I will not talk . . . I will stop sharing things” (Participant 14, focus group, May 3, 2022). In a separate focus group, an EA on this same team said,

> They [teachers] take our ideas . . . and then they put it [sic] into action. And you don’t have that often . . . Our say or our voice have an inputs [sic]. You will see that sharing your ideas means something, so you will be more likely to share your ideas quite often. (Participant 11, focus group, May 6, 2022)

On the other hand, EAs who felt their voices were not included or heard by their partner teachers suggested feelings of inequity, such as a reflection by an Ethiopian EA:

> There have been some team meetings where . . . you’re called to that meeting and you’re told to collaborate, but when, people try to . . . express their ideas, other people talk over them or their ideas. . . And then they’re put to the side. So after a while, you’re just like, why bother? (Participant 1, interview, February 28, 2022).

Recognizing the relationship between those feeling valued and those expressing the value of others led me to identify the norm of honoring voices leading to shared decision-making as significant in developing a truly collaborative team. These data aligned with the highly collaborative nature I recognized of those respective teams whose members consistently expressed their voices, were valued, and whose ideas were put into action.

In exploring existing literature discussing the role of norms in collaborative teams, I recognized that most of the research and discussion about this concept and its direct connection to equity is relatively new. Recent literature indicated particular norms to honor more diverse voices and suggested strategies for either designing or adopting norms (Boudett & Lockwood, 2019; Brassel et al., 2022; Lin & Perry, 2022). For example, Brassel et al. (2022) reported that norms that promote differing perspectives, prioritize team coaching, and include clear team decision-making guidelines help create a more equitable working environment. The data contributed to that growing body of research by identifying specific norms for equitable engagement in culturally diverse environments. In addition to the norms detailed in this section, the CPR members proposed that strategies such as small group size, designating roles in meetings, and developing communication agreements to express disagreement might help to overcome cultural barriers.

### Leadership Qualities

Participants reported that leadership qualities related to a strong collaborative environment (frequency of 18.7%); a closer examination of the qualities indicated the connection to a humanist approach. Clarity and transparency were key codes, with face-to-face communication named often as a preferred approach. Participants referenced the throughline of personal contact when they identified specific leadership qualities of approachability and honesty. They discussed the act of listening as an important leadership quality. Participants named specific instances when they felt heard, citing individual meetings with leaders as a significant action. One participant stated, “The way we have a conversation and have interviews one by one really helps us [feel] recognized” (Participant 14, focus group, May 3, 2022); another participant in a separate conversation said, “…just meet and greet, just one on one. Even for a short time. I loved that. It was personal, but it was also professional. There were personal things and professional things" (Participant 24, interview, April 14, 2022). Participants noted strong qualities and actions that point to the importance of a personal, human-centered leadership approach. As I discuss the findings, I indicate the need for leaders in culturally diverse organizations to humanize their work. The findings indicate leaders need to fully understand and enact this component so they can effectively lead schools striving for equity.

## Findings

Teachers and administrators cannot collaborate effectively without cultural awareness, as a lack of this understanding results in inequitable work environments. Educators have an opportunity, through particular and authentic actions, to break through the cultural barriers and engender greater understanding among educators in diverse contexts. Two findings resulted from the project and study inquiry (see Figure 14):

1. Cultural dissonance is a significant barrier to collaboration in a culturally heterogeneous setting.
2. Educators can diminish cultural dissonance barriers by engaging in authentic actions that humanize the working environment.

In supporting the themes presented in the data and to explain their intersection, I draw on two theories: Sinek (2009) and his Golden Circle Theory and Habermas' (1984; 1987) Theory of Life World and Systems World. In Sinek's theory, leaders and employees of highly successful businesses speak the same language because they identify their shared *why* as a first step to their work. He argued that too often, businesses emphasize *what* they want to achieve and *how* they will do it with their justification as to *why* coming later. The framework helped me explain that although *what* is critical, we could not make progress without understanding *why* certain cultural

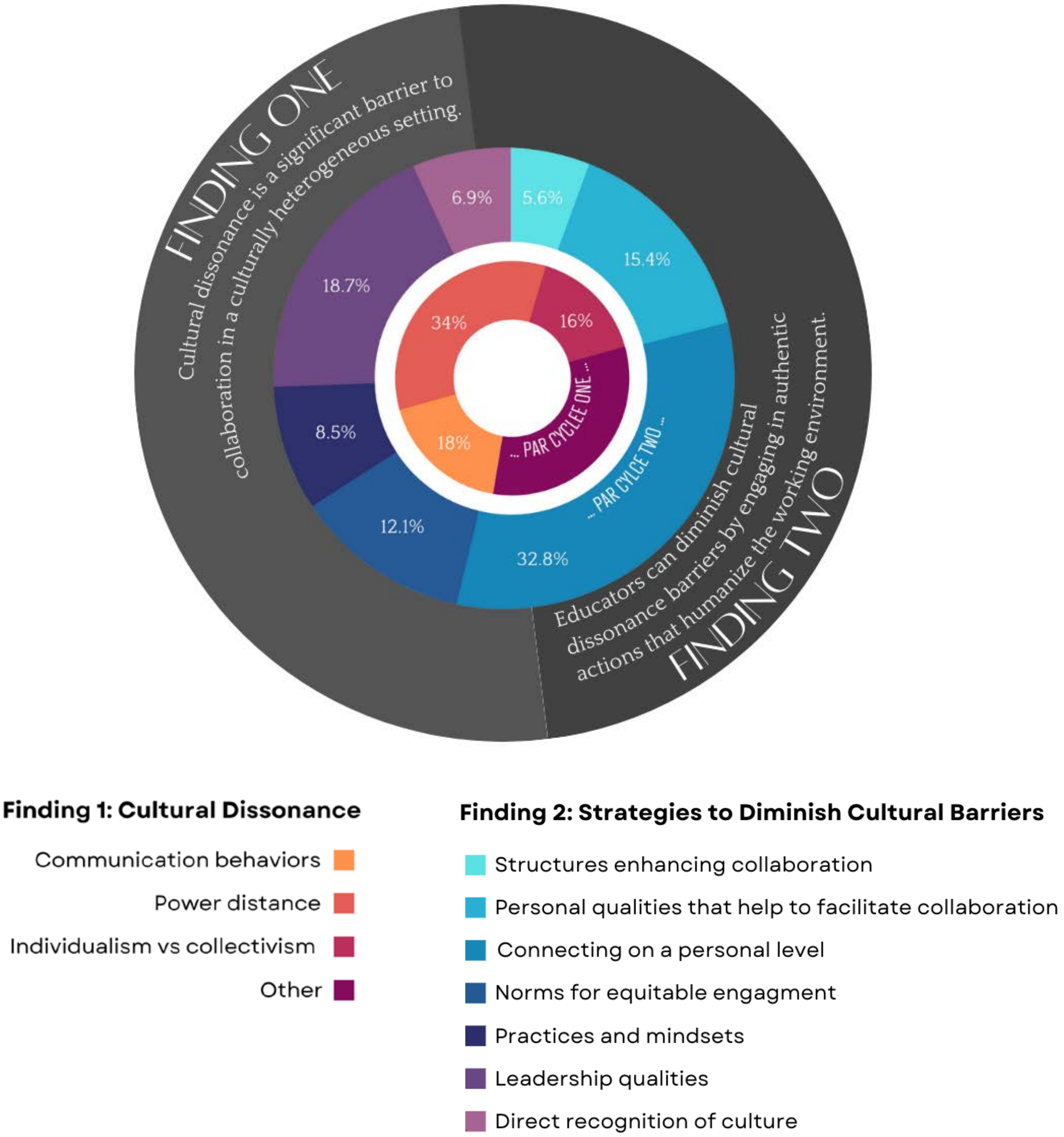


*Figure 14*. PAR cycle categories leading to findings.

patterns occurred and *how* we might respond. In Figure 15, I outline the layers of the data and how the two themes connect. Then, I analyze the findings and explain their association with the work of philosopher Habermas (1984; 1987), who urged us to connect the life world (our lives and relationships) with the systems world (organizations in which we work) so that we could humanize the organizational culture.

## Cultural Dissonance

The project and study set out to answer the question of how international school educators can honor and utilize the assets of a diverse international school community to create a more equitable, cross-cultural, collaborative environment. Through this study, I determined that cultural dissonance was and is a significant barrier to collaboration in a culturally heterogeneous setting. First introduced by Festinger in 1957, cognitive dissonance theory explains the extent to which individuals experience a sense of disharmony due to the contradiction of their existing ideas or beliefs (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019). Festinger argued that humans seek to avoid dissonance and therefore take action to reduce this cognitive discomfort. Cultural dissonance refers to a similar sense of discord, specifically stemming from discrepancies in cultural values and behaviors (Ade-Ojo & Duckworth, 2017). In this study, 72% of the barriers to collaboration identified in the data indicate that the people in the organization did not have cross-cultural understandings. The indigenous community felt the discord most strongly, while the expatriate staff minimally recognized it. Using these data, I concluded that a lack of cultural awareness on both sides created a barrier to collaborative work. Uncovering this understanding was critical to determining how best to address the issue I initially recognized: inequitable collaboration. Through the data collection process, I exposed a significant reason for the prevalence of the inequities that I now realize is critical as it identifies the *why*. These data suggest that, although

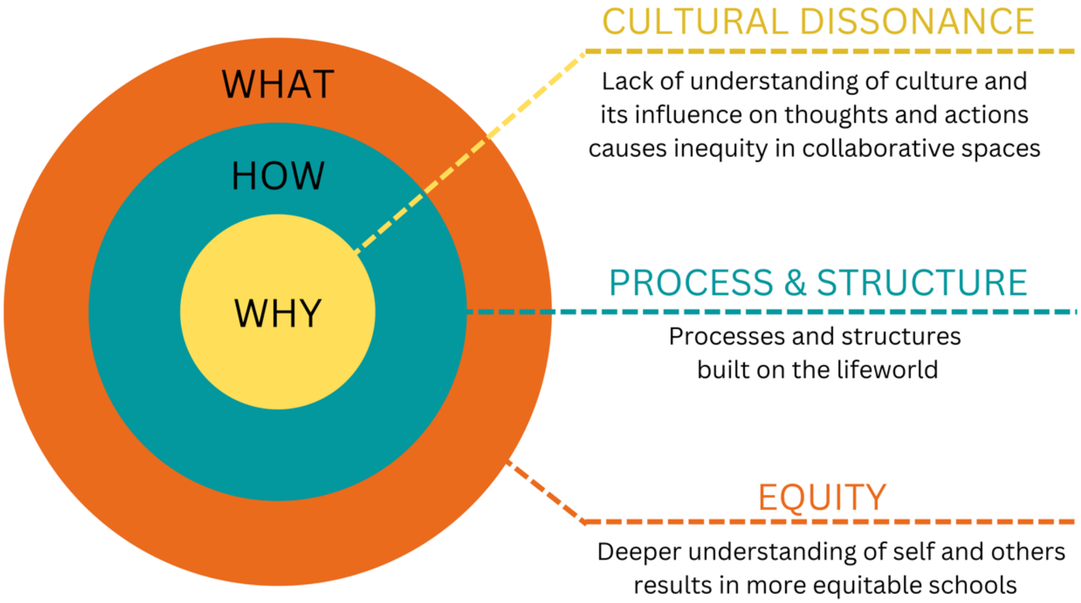

WHAT
HOW
WHY
CULTURAL DISSONANCE
Lack of understanding of culture and its influence on thoughts and actions causes inequity in collaborative spaces
PROCESS & STRUCTURE
Processes and structures built on the lifeworld
EQUITY
Deeper understanding of self and others results in more equitable schools

*Figure 15*. Layers of findings based on Simon Sinek's (2009) Golden Circle Theory.

educators in international schools recognize that cultural differences play a role in their collaboration, they were, and perhaps still are, unaware of the extent to which they do so. Until this study, the specifics of cultural dissonance had been unrecognized and, thus, persisted. Local educators, in particular, had unvoiced cultural dissonance stories and experiences. Participants in the study—both expatriates and indigenous staff—misunderstood cultural actions, resulting in latent discord and imbalances.

### Processes and Structures that Diminish Dissonance

In addition to uncovering the *why*, my interactions with study participants helped me to simultaneously reveal the *how*, as depicted in Figure 15. Based on data from across the year, I concluded that we needed to adjust and strengthen *how* we operate in order to meet our equity outcome—the *what*. Analyzing the data helped me to name particular processes and structures as possible strategies for diminishing cultural dissonance among educators in culturally diverse international schools. Uncovering the reasons was complex at first, but using the processes and structures was helpful. I recognized that the actual processes and structures I used to collect and analyze data were particularly helpful in addressing the barriers in our systems world. Using our lifeworld stories helped us to diminish the dissonance.

The findings support how we, as a staff, prioritized humanism and communication, two crucial factors in the work of critical theorist Jürgen Habermas (1984; 1987) and his theory of communicative action. Habermas discussed the relationship between the lifeworld and the systems world, arguing that the systems world has *colonized* the lifeworld—meaning that we ignore the social communication, the backbone of the lifeworld, in creating and reinforcing systems that reproduce dominant groups and their ways of designing organizational cultures. Specifically, the lifeworld is constructed of three components, culture, society, and personality, and these components form the way individuals act and communicate with others in both private and public spheres. Habermas argued that the very nature of the lifeworld is communicative. Adversely, the systems world is built on strategic actions taken to meet the interests of institutions, which reinforce power structures of the dominant group. In the systems world, driven by power and money, the organizational actors are not communicative because the goals are not focused on consensus-seeking. Habermas contended that, in an ideal world, the lifeworld would inform the systems world so that the social needs for communication and harmony prevail. Then, people in an organization should use a communicative, collaborative approach to review and adjust systems as needed. However, changing an organization requires intentional processes because the systems world thinking and actions have infiltrated the communicative space of the lifeworld and drive all interactions and decisions.

Habermas's work provides a framework for the findings. I use his language to articulate the findings and discuss implications. The data support his theory to the extent that the evidence demonstrates that we ignored the lifeworld, particularly of indigenous staff, in designing and implementing an educational system; instead, our system was almost entirely bound by Western/Global North values and structures that had, to a certain extent, colonized the lifeworld in which we existed and were using as our guide in developing structures and processes. During the study, we began to alleviate the equity issues of the systems-centric mindset that dominated our school organization because we used different processes and structures that helped us de-colonize the lifeworld. Habermas's theory of the colonization of the lifeworld presents international schools with a dilemma: the indigenous staff offer coherency in the school and educators from the Global North are typically transient and often focused on external factors with little time spent connecting as humans. By systematically describing the types of cultural dissonance, we built cultural awareness and understanding through dialogue and active listening. While leaders have previously implemented structures with positive intent, often focused on ensuring discussions centered on children and learning, they had ignored the lifeworld of the adult educators. As we learned, this created barriers to understanding one another and resulted in surface-level relationships.

Additionally, the expatriate staff did not understand or initially value the cultural norms of the indigenous staff and did not consider how those norms could become a part of the work setting. For example, Ethiopian teachers prioritized greetings and cordiality as behaviors essential to their everyday interactions; expatriate staff generally seemed not to recognize these behaviors as critical components of work interactions. Although often unintentional, this disregard for the Ethiopian staff left them feeling unheard and unaccepted as equals in their day-to-day interactions with expatriate staff.

Using the supporting data, I assert that we must implement processes and structures that focus on the lifeworld to build cultural awareness, as the interactions educators engage in during systems-focused protocols failed to offer processes for authentic collaboration. Data from various grade-level teams in the study provide evidence of this finding, with the Early Years 5 team, in particular, standing out. Seven of the team’s members participated in the study—four indigenous to Ethiopia and the remaining expatriate faculty. Four Ethiopian staff members independently expressed feeling valued and respected as active contributors to the decision-making process on their team. Likewise, all three expatriate faculty members independently highlighted the capabilities of their partnering Ethiopian teammates. These sentiments demonstrated a more collective sense of equity, which other teams did not express. In sifting through the data contributing to the codes targeting lifeworld strategies, I found that these individuals repeatedly remarked how much they valued their time together in and outside the school setting. This team prioritized their diverse lifeworlds. Data from memos observing the Grade 2 team contributed to this finding, as improvement in their team collaboration was noticeable. I witnessed an uptick in their social gatherings after they began intentionally sharing personal narratives during their biweekly meetings with me.

Habermas's theory of communicative action argues that the lifeworld is centered on developing consensus, or mutual understanding, through dialogue. Participants in this study indicated that this return of dialogue and sharing of perspectives was essential to growing the cultural awareness needed for educators to collaborate more equitably in international schools. A critical step in working toward trust and equity is intentionally incorporating processes and structures focused on making space for sharing the lifeworld with our colleagues. As shared by one Ethiopian participant upon engaging in more lifeworld-focused conversations with her team, “Now it’s changing because believing and trusting in each other is another thing that’s helping me to become a better participant, a better educator” (Participant 4, focus group, May 4, 2022).

## Conclusion

Enacting the PAR project and study helped me surface some barriers of inequity in a diverse international school setting. The findings lead me to suggest that structures focused on sharing our humanity with others are necessary for building awareness of our cultural differences and how they influence our behaviors. The time educators spent engaging in conversations about life was well spent as they enhanced relationships that had a significant role in cultivating the trust and understanding necessary for working with others from different cultural backgrounds. These findings have substantial implications for international schools and potentially for aspects of any school in which the teachers are from diverse backgrounds.

In the final chapter, I discuss the findings as they relate to the extant literature and share implications for practice, policy, and research. The study's results present strong possibilities for improving international schools and enhancing leadership. I share my personal leadership growth to indicate how the PAR research approach can advance professional improvement, and I suggest actionable steps for others striving for more equitable schools.

# CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

*Because we live in a world of change and diversity, we are privileged to enter, if only peripherally, into a diversity of visions, and beyond that to include them in the range of responsible caring.* (Bateson, 2019, p. 12)

I believe I was always a caring and responsible educator, but I was privileged through the PAR project and study to enter into the diverse, lived experiences of the International Community School of Addis Ababa staff and increase my capacity as a school leader to recognize and act on visions of social justice and equity. When I began my journey three years ago as a doctoral student and qualitative researcher, I did so because the program's philosophy is rooted in a desire to develop leaders equipped to notice and act upon issues of equity in schools across the globe. At the time of joining the program, I recognized equity concerns in my context and international schools generally; however, over the course of three years in the program, I became more aware of how deeply ingrained these issues are. My preexisting passions and interests led me to determine the focus of practice, but the experience of engaging in participatory action research (PAR) led me to new and deeper understandings.

I enacted the PAR project and study in a culturally diverse international school with members of the elementary leadership team (n=6) who acted as co-practitioner researchers throughout the study. The team and I explored the role of school leaders in supporting a school setting in which we worked with adults and students of multiple nationalities, ethnicities, cultures, and languages. The profound learning and knowledge I gained from my studies, research activities, and in-depth interactions with participants prepared me to enter a new role at yet another international school in East Africa. The experiences taught me the skills necessary to continue leading for equity in a new context. In this chapter, I first provide an overview of the study and methodology and then discuss the findings I identified as a result of the PAR inquiry.

Then, I describe my leadership growth and implications for future research. Through writing this chapter and articulating the process of the project and my personal development, I garnered clarity on steps for individual action in my new context and suggested actions for others in similar settings.

## Enacting the PAR Project and Study

I had the honor of facilitating the PAR project and study at the International Community School of Addis Ababa in Ethiopia—a school of passionate and driven educators who warmly and eagerly embraced the idea of a research project that required personal and professional self-examination. The PAR project focused on the elementary division and included leaders, teachers, educational assistants (EAs), and an office secretary as participants. Although not as diverse as the student body, the staff in the elementary school included individuals identifying home as Africa, North America, South America, Europe, and Australia. This culturally rich setting provided an ideal context for examining ways to develop more culturally responsive and collaborative working spaces.

### Focus of Practice and Theory of Action

I developed the focus of practice (FoP) for the PAR project and study from observations of the interactions between and among staff members at the school, observations which revealed an imbalance in collaboration among the expatriate population and local staff and led me to examine ways to address this issue. Although the school educators faithfully adhered to collaborative systems and structures such as professional learning communities, I observed issues of equity in collaboration among educators at team meetings and in classroom settings. These observations led me to decide on this focus of practice as a guiding light for the study: Use culturally responsive practices in an international school to develop and sustain relational trust, recognize the assets of the school community, and cultivate a more equitable and collaborative experience for all constituents. The theory of action was: *IF* leaders and teachers in an international school use processes to foster personal connections among a diverse staff, *THEN* they will build understanding and strengthen collaboration in a cross-cultural environment. To respond to this hypothesis, I facilitated a PAR project and study grounded in community-centric activities: I relied on school constituents to identify both the issues and potential solutions through their participation in these activities.

## Methodological Process

The decision to use a participatory action research (PAR) approach was intentional, as I aimed to uncover sustainable actions *with* participants rooted in their lived experiences. As a result, I relied on a form of PAR termed activist, meaning an intentional goal of creating more socially just practices as a result of the project and study (Hale, 2001; hunter et al., 2013). I came to understand the value of this belief: “We believe that one of the most important things that happens in critical participatory action research is simply that participants get together and talk about their work and lives” (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 33). They describe PAR as a collective methodology anchored in communicative action, a concept initially introduced by Habermas (1984; 1987). They stated that participatory action research is “a conversation in which people strive for intersubjective agreement about the ideas and the language they use, mutual understanding of one another's perspectives and points of view, and unforced consensus about what to do” (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 48). In this study, I highlighted interactions between participants that were based on sharing personal experiences and stories rooted in their cultural realities and perspectives.

A targeted approach to data collection aligning with the PAR goals was critical. I drew on the wisdom of Paulo Freire (1970/1993), who asserted that transformation and humanization only occur through true dialogue and endeavored to anchor the data collection activities in conversation and employed a data collection strategy grounded in the axioms of the community learning exchanges (CLE). Guajardo et al. (2016) described CLEs as a process that "from beginning to end and beyond . . . is deliberate and designed to continuously nurture conversations intended to help participants explore, change, and grow" (p. 22). The CLEs involved leaders, teachers, and EAs across the elementary school and were transformative to the study and to my personal leadership growth. In other data collection activities—interviews, focus groups, and team meetings—I structured the processes based on the premises of dialogic interactions.

Throughout two iterative cycles of inquiry over a span of 13 months, I compiled and analyzed data by assuming an inquiry stance to the research and remaining open to unexpected outcomes. Employing this approach as the lead researcher was important, as in doing so, I unveiled significant findings with strong implications. The two findings, which I discuss next, indicated cultural dissonance as a considerable barrier to collaboration in intercultural settings and suggest that we, as leaders and teachers, must concentrate on humanizing actions that can diminish the barriers (see Figure 16).

## Discussion

Based on the findings of the study, I reference the literature review and extant literature that relates to the international school sector. The PAR findings are:

1. Cultural dissonance is a significant barrier to collaboration in a culturally heterogeneous setting.

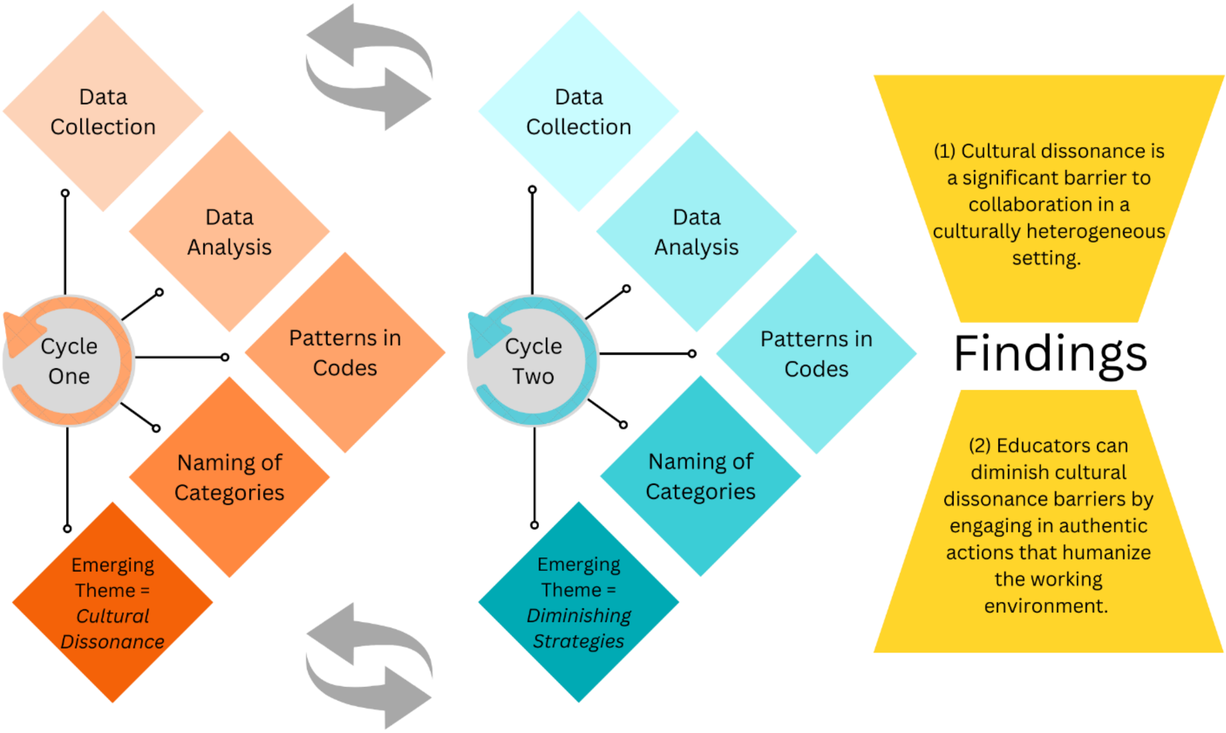

Data Collection
Data Analysis
Patterns in Codes
Cycle One
Naming of Categories
Emerging Theme = *Cultural Dissonance*
Data Collection
Data Analysis
Patterns in Codes
Cycle Two
Naming of Categories
Emerging Theme = *Diminishing Strategies*
(1) Cultural dissonance is a significant barrier to collaboration in a culturally heterogeneous setting.
Findings
(2) Educators can diminish cultural dissonance barriers by engaging in authentic actions that humanize the working environment.

*Figure 16*. PAR inquiry process resulted in two findings.

2. Educators can diminish cultural dissonance barriers by engaging in authentic actions that humanize the working environment.

## Cultural Dissonance

Over the course of the PAR project and study, participants continuously referenced the concept of cultural dissonance as a barrier to their cross-cultural collaboration. As discussed in Chapter 5, cultural dissonance refers to the discord people experience stemming from cultural discrepancies (Ade-Ojo & Duckworth, 2017). The indigenous staff recognized the cultural dissonance more readily than their expatriate counterparts, insinuating that values of the Global North dominated the school's systems, structures, and working habits. The values were often so in sync with the cultural values of the expatriate staff that they did not recognize the dissonance that the indigenous staff felt. Confronted daily by interactions that differed from their cultural habits, the local Ethiopian staff members experienced stress as a result of cultural dissonance that most of their colleagues neither endured nor fully recognized. A lack of understanding of the role of culture in collaborative endeavors on both sides resulted in discord that often remained just under the surface. Through pre-established trust and thoughtful data-collection strategies, I unveiled cultural dissonance as a barrier that had persisted for years. When the data surfaced, staff were attentive to the barrier and did not resist change.

In discussing the role of culture in the classroom and the workplace, Hofstede et al. (2010) identified how specific dimensions such as power distance and individualism vs. collectivism present themselves in different societies. Their work demonstrates differing perspectives of cultural groups and the struggle these differences present for individuals from diverse backgrounds in those same settings. In their discussions regarding cultural dimensions at school, Hofstede et al. (2010) described the relational conflict that can stem from cultural clashes between teachers and students or teachers and parents and among students. They noted that "most intercultural encounters in schools are of one of two types: between local teachers and foreign, migrant, or refugee students or between expatriate teachers, hired as foreign experts or sent as missionaries, and local students" (p. 393). Hofstede et al. highlighted critical elements of culture within a school setting, but the impact of culture on relationships *between teachers* was absent from the discussion. In fact, the relationship between educators was missing from the extant literature discussing cultural discord in schools. I argue that, especially regarding international schools, it is critical to explore this relationship in striving for equity.

Studies that focused on multiculturalism in the workplace have concentrated on the worlds of business and politics (Alozie, 2020; Bochner & Hesketh, 1994; DeLancey, 2013; Vangen, 2016) and the impact on advancing company aims. Hofstede et al. (2010) discussed interculturalism in the workplace, but most of the conversation on relationships centers on supervisors and employees. To extrapolate that research to an educational setting, however, we have a similar need in our context: culturally diverse organizations should strategically create plans for building cultural understanding. How to do so is debated; Vangen (2016) argued that among the many tensions that might arise in culturally diverse teams, one is developing cultural sensitivity. Vangen posits that organizations must grapple with the role of context in building cultural sensitivity: on the one hand, cultural sensitivity is stable enough to be learned generally without a specific context, but cultural sensitivity is responsive to specific situations and therefore needs to be developed in context. The PAR study suggests some methods of doing so, which I share concerning the second study finding and expand upon further in the implications section.

The impact of culture in the educational setting generally focuses on its impact at the classroom level. As cultural sensitivity relates to teachers, some research indicated how cultural understanding might be developed through teacher preparation programs (Gay & Howard, 2000; Thomassen & Munthe, 2020). Teachers and leaders need adequate preparation in the area of multicultural education. Gay and Howard (2000) asserted that teachers are generally not prepared to work with students from diverse cultural backgrounds, and teacher preparation programs do little to help support the development necessary to work in diverse schools. They proposed that attention to multicultural education is so essential to attacking the educational inequity between cultural groups that teachers without robust multicultural training should be neither certified to teach nor hired to work with students. While student teachers recognize the importance of multicultural education, they feel that their preservice programs need to educate them to feel successfully prepared to teach diverse students (Thomassen & Munthe, 2020). Yet, preservice experiences are insufficient. The PAR study emphasized professional learning activities *in situ* or in the cultural context in which we live and work. We prioritized personal connections which, the data suggested, allowed teachers to gain more cultural understanding and feel supported in working with colleagues from different cultures.

While theoretical in nature, the entire process of recognition of the *I* in each person is central to the process of developing the *we-ness* we actually strive for in a collaborative educational setting. In our case, as expatriates who are largely in hierarchical positions in the school, we had a friendly working environment, but we had established social recognition of the Ethiopian staff that operated as a “conformist ideology…[creating] a feeling of self-worth that provides motivational resources for forms of voluntary subordination” (Honneth, 2012, p. 77). The Ethiopian staff had not expressed their individual and collective concerns about the lack of cultural understanding and kept their opinions to themselves to respect a cultural norm of honoring elders or those in charge. However, our actions to date had not resulted in authentic, reciprocal recognition of the *I* as a cultural self. The expatriates largely controlled the structures and processes in the school, and the Ethiopian staff complied. If we were to actually live the values of the school, the Ethiopian staff are entitled to autonomy and authentic recognition of their values and culture. Therefore, we cannot use “mere words or symbolic expressions, but must [engage in] actions that confirm these promises…and give real expression” by changing our policies and practices (Honneth, 2012, p. 92). However, being fully aware of taking on the necessary and deeper cultural understanding takes shifts in expatriate teacher and leader roles and responsibilities. In our context, recognizing the *I* began by establishing the space for those in our community with limited participation and voice to share themselves and for those with power to listen. We found that creating time to share personal narratives prioritized our recognition of the *I*, and we could begin the process of reimagining and co-constructing a more authentic *we*.

Teachers in international schools are often ill-prepared to work in a culturally diverse setting. Snowball (2007) posits that “most teachers are only prepared for their immediate domestic context” (p. 247). To address this issue, Snowball (2007) introduced seven standards and three requirements exposed in her research as necessary for international teachers and proposed that these standards form an “International Teacher Certification.” Snowball suggested that the goal of many schools to develop internationally-minded students cannot occur without training teachers on the core elements of internationalism. Snowball (2007) says, “If we accept that teachers are key factors in educational effectiveness then it follows that they need the specialized knowledge, skills and characteristics to nurture this in students” (p. 254). The cultural dissonance existing at ICS illustrated Snowball's posit. Teachers were not aware of the cultural barriers until they were given the opportunity to reflect on personal narratives and have open dialogue with colleagues from different backgrounds.

As the study findings exposed the cultural dissonance existing among educators in culturally diverse international schools, we realized we needed to discuss how to build cultural understanding among educators already working in schools. In discussing the second finding of the study, I identify specific ways of doing so.

### Strategies that Humanize

Over the course of the PAR, participating educators and leaders indicated that rituals and routines we used in meetings and CLEs were useful in diminishing cultural dissonance. Exploring these structures and processes in depth revealed their roots in the value of humanizing interactions as part of any change process. Humanizing means that we are dedicated to recognizing the full humanity of each person, including their cultural self (Honneth, 2012). The humanist approach is not new to the world of education. In the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970/1993) urged educators to build communities rooted in liberating strategies rich in dialogue, suggesting that this approach humanizes individuals. The findings of this study support Freire’s ideas and indicate that actions founded on humanizing the working environment can diminish cultural dissonance in international schools.

In Habermas’ (1984; 1987) theory of communicative action, he presented a framework for understanding how organizations decrease humanization and promote systems that sustain control. Habermas argued that in capitalist societies, the systems world has become pervasive and has colonized the human-centric, lived experiences of individuals, which he termed the *lifeworld*. He argued that we must focus on the lifeworld as a necessary space for recognizing and fostering the strengths and stories of individuals who make up any organization. The findings of this study indicate that lifeworld-focused actions contribute to building cultural understanding and diminishing dissonance among educators.

Sergiovanni (2004) explored the idea of the lifeworld as a driver for positive change in schools and highlighted educators' strength and abilities to direct change within their individual contexts. Emphasizing standards as an example, Sergiovanni (2004) stressed that individuals in their unique contexts—not outside forces—should make decisions regarding what they deem essential and worth knowing. In line with Habermas, Sergiovanni recognized individual humans as having strengths that must be acknowledged. Conversations with Educational Assistants (EAs) reiterated the importance of acknowledging the voices of those who were typically voiceless and marginalized in our organization. They highlighted the microaggressions that persist when systems fail to honor each individual. As shared by one EA,

> Sometimes, I feel [that the expatriates think] I'm not literate. I mean, I don't think that they know that I'm—we're—professionals. We had jobs. . . . We went to college. And I don't know how much they know that we can learn. I mean, we can have the same training. We can understand equally, regardless of the language. It's not our first language, it's not [our] mother tongue, but still, we can learn” (Participant 22, focus group, March 4, 2022).

These kinds of responses on the part of the Ethiopian staff illuminated the lack of what we know as critical for any school change efforts—relational trust.

Relational trust is foundational to any substantive change; termed an abstract resource, Grubb (2009) studied the relationship between relational trust and other resources and outcomes in school. He found that we cannot “buy” trust as a resource. Instead, we must co-construct trust for, without trust, the other resources we may pour into schools actually do not fully work. Bryk et al. (2010), in their study of Chicago schools, found that relational trust was the backbone of successful reform efforts. Cranston (2011) studied the role of relational trust in the change process and found that improving student outcomes must start with a focus on building relational trust between educators to promote conversations at deeper levels. He said, “Trust requires increased focus on and visibility of the adult social relationships in schools. Relational trust has to be built and sustained, and it has to be active” (Cranston, 2011, p. 70). Likewise, Sergiovanni (n.d.) stated, “Social capital consists of norms, obligations and trusts that are generated by caring relationships among people in a school, community or neighborhood” (para. 31).

Our CPR team noticed that when relational trust between staff of different backgrounds strengthened, we could recognize not only the importance of relationships through the connection but the increased social and academic capital that could be a resource for school improvement. This was notable in the way expatriate staff members began to describe the capabilities of their partnering EAs, as exemplified by one teacher: “Going back to the strengths and finding out about the professionals that are our EAs, what they bring. And this year without [them], I don't know how I would have [survived] (Participant 23, focus group, April 12, 2022). She continued by saying, “They are . . . using their strengths to take on [instructional] groups. We can really use them because they're all qualified.” EAs shared distinct examples of times they felt valued and recognized and how trust within their teams created a safe space for their voices to be heard. One EA said, “I actually enjoyed working with [another teacher] because she would allow me to experience these things, to do these things. This is trust. So that is the difference there. (Participant 9, focus group, March 4, 2022). Thus, I suggest that academic capital increases when all educators have access to social capital built through relationships with their colleagues. Building these relationships requires lifeworld-focused actions.

Power is relational, and we can use our power in ways that aim for equity (Suarez, 2018). She describes two types of power: Power focused on domination that reflects supremacist thinking and liberatory power aiming for equity. She states that through mindfulness and strengthened awareness, we can better recognize when others are void of power and act in ways that work toward mutuality. We can work toward liberation through our everyday actions. I suggest that actions rooted in the lifeworld helped us become more self-aware and started a process of disrupting the power imbalance. By highlighting the lifeworld in an international school as a way to diminish the prevalence of cultural dissonance in these multiracial, multicultural, and multilingual settings, we can shift the power dynamics at the school to include indigenous ways of knowing and acting (Mitchell, 2018). A lack of cultural awareness and understanding persists in a world dominated by systems. Returning humanizing actions to our schools can help build this understanding necessary for more equitable international schools.

## Review of Research Questions

The overarching question guiding the PAR project and study was: *How can international school educators honor and utilize the assets of a diverse international school community to co-create a more equitable, cross-cultural, collaborative environment?* Three sub-questions furthered the inquiry:

1. How does a leadership team use culturally responsive practices to recognize community assets and challenges in a culturally diverse environment?
2. To what extent does a staff build understanding and strengthen collaboration in a cross-cultural environment?

3. How do I grow as an educational leader in supporting leaders and teachers to build relational trust and deepen their cultural understanding?

Over the course of the PAR project, personal narratives served as a driving method for establishing or deepening relational trust. We began the work with the CPR team, which consisted of members of the elementary leadership team. This team, with the exception of one individual who had joined the school near the beginning of the study, spent significant time establishing relational trust in previous years as the group members routinely met and collaborated. We experienced deepening of trust and new learning due to engaging in personal narratives as part of the project and study.

To respond to the research questions meaningfully, we had to rely on personal narratives with educators—their lifeworld stories—which led them to a deeper understanding of each other and their behaviors. This practice exposed misunderstandings between and among individuals of different cultural backgrounds that had gone unnamed—and even unnoticed—for years. Engagement in personal narrative experiences revealed the unique assets of individuals and gave insight into how cultural understanding can be developed in culturally diverse international schools.

Throughout the PAR project and study, I used reflective practices to examine my growth as a leader. Memoing was a core activity that supported this process. By personally reflecting after specific activities and then periodically reflecting on a broader level throughout the study, I recognized the areas of my leadership journey most strengthened by engaging in the PAR project. I expand upon my leadership journey later in the chapter and discuss how this experience will inform my future actions.

## Conceptual Framework for Equity

In Figure 17, I propose a conceptual framework that suggests a theory for strengthening practice in international schools. Note that I used a razor wire image as a part of the graphic because that is a cultural reference. In Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, as in many places in the world, razor wire on top of walls around homes acts as a barrier to entry. Cultural dissonance is the razor wire "fence" that we needed to navigate because it was a substantial barrier to the collaborative work of educators in our culturally diverse international schools, contributing to a lack of understanding and, therefore, inequity. Supported by the findings of this study, I theorize that implementing more lifeworld, humanizing actions can penetrate and diminish the usual barriers to cross-cultural understandings, contributing to deepening understanding between educators and a collective power that we can harness for our shared work to support students and families in diverse contexts. I suggest that acts like these ultimately lead to greater equity in collaboration.

# Implications

The study findings build on existing evidence of the power of the lifeworld in organizations and call to the forefront the need to incorporate lifeworld-focused actions more intentionally in international schools. Supported by the findings, I suggest that doing so can build greater understanding between culturally diverse educators and work to bring greater equity to the power dynamics among school constituents. To further articulate the ways this research can support change improvement, I discuss the implications as they relate to practice, policy, and research, particularly in the realm of international schools.

## Practice

The findings of this study present strong implications for practice in the international

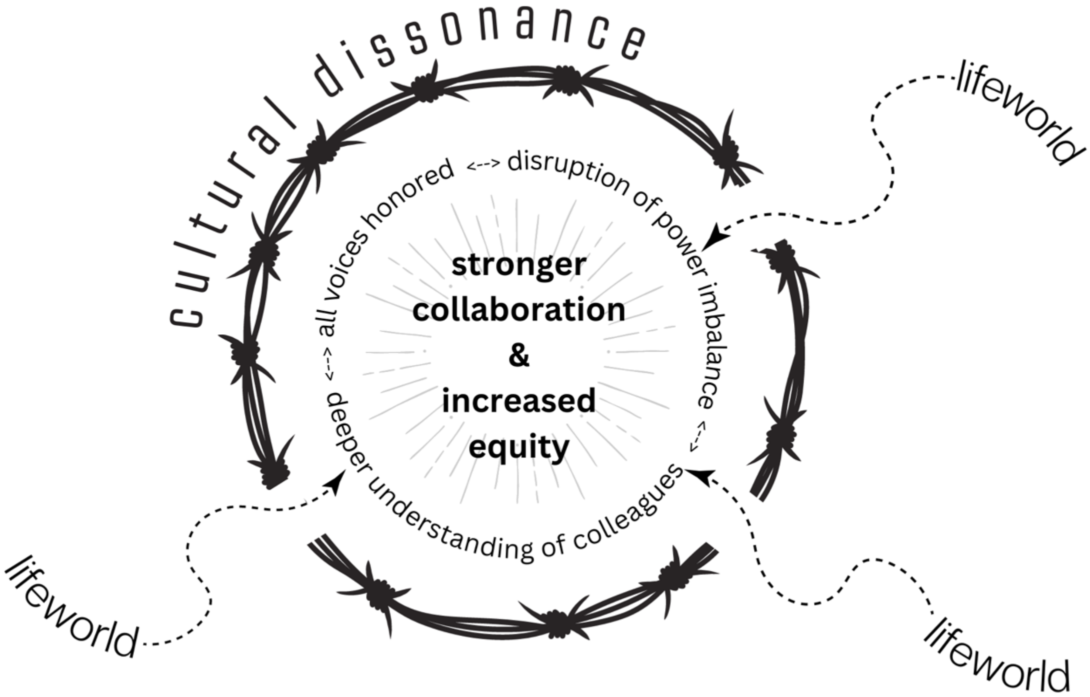

cultural dissonance
lifeworld
lifeworld
lifeworld
all voices honored <--> disruption of power imbalance <--> deeper understanding of colleagues <--> all voices honored
stronger collaboration & increased equity

*Figure 17*. Conceptual framework for equity in culturally diverse international schools.

school in which this study was based and for the broader global international school community. As evidenced by the data, prioritizing the lifeworld is a necessary first step in breaking through the inequities that dominate the collaborative endeavors of many international schools. Identifying tangible actions for realizing this finding is a critical step. Although the processes may need to be strengthened, I offer these ideas for other international schools. These practices and possibilities comport with other findings about the relationships between expatriate and local staff in international schools (Killoran, 2019; Richardson Garcia, 2019) and the importance of developing an understanding of local culture (English, 2021). Our collective findings point to a need for changing practices to support life-focused protocols and teacher and leader actions that help us diminish the cultural boundaries that exist in international schools.

### ***Lifeworld-Focused Protocols***

Our school is highly influenced by a professional learning community structure of culturally heterogeneous teams who meet regularly throughout the week and, therefore, was ripe for implementing change to bring more lifeworld into its already dynamic systems world. During the project and study, the CPR team and I considered how we might develop supports for educators to begin drawing in the lifeworld into a setting made up of a diverse and multicultural workforce. We understood that although more lifeworld-focused practices might be positively received by staff, not all community members felt adequately equipped to meaningfully actualize them on their own. In response, we developed a starting set of protocols that could be used at different levels of collaboration. Teams of educators already had used protocols to support productive and purposeful conversations focused on learning, but the use of personal narratives and protocols to uncover the stories of staff supplemented those. We hoped that developing similar step-by-step processes concentrated on the lifeworld would support educators in meaningful conversations.

Although only a starting point, we hoped that the protocols would act as a model for leaders and teachers with the hope for further development over time. I implemented some of these protocols as a part of the data collection process, while others were made in response to discoveries from the study (see Appendix F). Adding to this starter set and building up a robust lifeworld-focused bank of protocols could be a powerful and much-needed resource to support the school and other international schools globally. A resource such as the one suggested would provide guidance as to the practical implementation of lifeworld-centric conversations in the workplace—a necessary piece to acting upon the research and theory.

### ***Participant Suggested Actions***

Participants in the study provided suggestions for attending to the study's finding concerning cultural dissonance, with targeted recommendations proposed during the final community learning exchange (CLE). As described in Chapter 6, a core principle of the community learning exchange (CLE) model anchored this CLE: "The people closest to the issues are best situated to discover answers to local concerns" (Guajardo et al., 2016, p. 25). With this belief guiding our work, teachers, educational assistants, and leaders chose specific actions to combat the problems presented by the data collection process: the creation of a cultural coach position, informal social opportunities to engage in conversations (coffee hours, walks), regular sharing about culture through internal communication platforms, and robust and ongoing cultural training for teachers. We recognized how the cultural practices of Ethiopia grounded in community could play a larger role in our work. For example, sitting in a circular fashion to share a meal is commonplace in Ethiopia, and bringing this intentionality to the way we physically gathered was a simple but important step. Although CLE participants identified the actions that are specific to the context of the study, many are transferable and could be used in other international schools.

### ***Leadership Practices***

As leaders at the school considered how to focus on our understanding of the lifeworld experiences, they considered this connection to relational trust—an essential precursor to change and high functionality in schools. The nexus between the lifeworld and relational trust was evident in this study as participants regularly shared and demonstrated how hearing each other's personal stories helped them develop a greater sense of trust and understanding. Extant research on the role of relational trust in education supports this understanding (Bryk et al., 2010; Grubb, 2009). Edwards-Groves et al. (2016) declared, "understanding educational practice is largely, but not only, a matter of understanding the relationships formed among people in educational settings" (p. 374). Emphasizing the importance of what Habermas (1996) called the *public sphere* as a space for developing trust, Edwards-Groves et al. (2016) asserted that leaders must approach trust-building as a multi-dimensional concept to establish the conditions necessary for change. They proposed that trust is built upon five dimensions: interpersonal trust, interactional trust, intersubjective trust, intellectual trust, and pragmatic trust. The findings of this study contribute to the research of Edwards-Grove et al., demonstrating the significance of the dimensions of interpersonal and interactional trust. I posit that the leadership actions Edwards-Grove et al. described for these two tiers, primarily focused on openness, recognition, dialogue, and listening to others, are best actualized when the lifeworld is prioritized. In international schools, an extra layer of complexity is added to the effort of understanding the relationships in educational settings due to the nature of the cultural diversity represented in the community.

When leaders recognize and value the role of the lifeworld in this process, they can help themselves and their staff attain a deeper degree of cultural understanding.

## Policy

Implications for policy at the micro and meso level of the school include a reexamination of hiring practices and a review of the school's induction program. Based on the induction study of English (2021) in an international school in Bangkok, we learned that we need to shift our induction to ensure that new teachers or leaders know the cultural context of the country and school in which they will teach or lead. At the time of this study, hiring practices primarily focused on experience with the school's curricula and pedagogical framework and working collaboratively; attention to culturally responsive practices was rarely discussed in the hiring process. School leaders must give more direct consideration to this critical aspect when recruiting educators of all levels. The school's induction program is another essential component to review and address. Previous induction programs at the school included a cultural session to teach general Ethiopian customs, history, and keywords in the country's most widely spoken official language, but these are surface efforts and need to be re-considered. Leaders must carefully develop a program that intentionally builds cultural understanding over time, especially for incoming expatriate staff.

As well, school leaders must recognize that the backbone of the school is the indigenous teaching staff, including teachers and educational assistants. Persons in these positions hold the history of the school and are typically from the cultural context of the city and country of the school. They are often shepherding students and families from that context through the educational system. They are often overlooked as sources of information and as co-designers of systems. In some cases, even the in-country directors are not viewed by the school or the school board as important and are not included in the governance of the school (English, 2021). Those processes need revamping.

Similar policy implications ring true for the macro level of international schools. The topic of hiring practices is slowly making its way to the forefront of conversations; however, policymakers and educators must consider the discussion as imperative and one warranting prompt attention. In reconsidering the background experience and education requirements for hiring, school leaders and school boards should focus on diverse staff that more closely mirrors the demographics of the student body at different types of international schools. Likewise, school leaders should consider the specific prerequisites necessary to teach in international schools. As previously discussed, extant literature indicated that teacher preparation programs do not prepare teachers to work with culturally diverse students (Gay & Howard, 2000; Snowball, 2007). Moreover, principal preparation programs overemphasize the systems world, resulting in principals feeling inadequately prepared to engage in the relational aspects of the job (Nelson et al., 2008). Nelson et al. (2008) argued that we must "[resist] the call to produce more technical school leaders and instead do the hard work of creating programs that produce competent lifeworld leaders" (p. 700). We must reimagine preservice programs for teachers and leaders and prioritize a human approach to education so that they have the skills and understanding necessary to engage with the unique individuals and communities they encounter.

## Research

Based on the powerful and insightful process of engaging in a community-oriented and humanist approach to gathering data that honored people and place (Guajardo et al., 2016), I suggest implications for future research. I use my experience as an action and activist researcher and the research findings to propose these suggestions. These implications, therefore, focus on the research process and topics for exploration.

### ***Research Process: PAR Process/CLE-Inspired Protocols***

I used a participatory action research (PAR) approach for this project and study. I worked with a CPR team composed of members of the elementary leadership team who helped inform the PAR. Centered on the belief that powerful learning happens when people come together to discuss their work and hopes for the future, I created communicative spaces for participants to engage in critical conversations built on respect and trust (Kemmis et al., 2014). I enhanced this approach by incorporating community learning exchanges (CLE) that honored the wisdom of the people and the power of the place (Guajardo et al., 2016). One CLE axiom firmly guided the study: The people closest to the issue are in the best position to do the work (Guajardo et al., 2016). Enacting research through a humanist approach was a powerful way of promoting change, as suggestions for improvement came directly from the participants. Future researchers should consider using a similar method to approach issues of concern as lasting and substantial change comes when those closest to the issues identify both the problems and the solutions that will work for their unique contexts.

### ***Recommendations for Future Research***

This study explored the dynamics of a culturally diverse international school at the educator level; future research should examine the use of lifeworld-focused actions at all levels of the educational system: leaders, teachers, instructional assistants, students, and family levels. In particular, examining how the inclusion of the lifeworld among leaders and teachers transfer to classrooms is research that is much needed in enhancing understanding of how to develop more culturally responsive classrooms. Culturally diverse international schools often tout their diverse student body and state that they aim to embrace this diversity to build global citizens, but too often, educators fail to truly honor the unique assets of their students, resulting in relatively homogenous classrooms. We need to consider how to better honor the wisdom of the people at the student level and identify practitioner actions that can further this intention. Researchers could significantly impact international schools by advancing the knowledge base in this critical area.

## Limitations and Possibilities

Although the PAR study offered insights into actions for school improvement, I recognize the limitations. Specifically, limitations involve the context-specific nature of the study, the sample size, and external disruptions/pressures. I outline these complexities in the following section and suggest possibilities for future research.

### *Context-Specificity*

I enacted the PAR project and study in one international school in one location. Therefore, the specifics of the study cannot be replicated in another context. Honoring the people and place of the particular context, the data were specific to those individuals and their experiences. The place, including its history and societal values, added particularities that limit the study's direct transferability. I propose, however, that the overall findings of the study and the processes in which I engaged are transferable to contexts with similar characteristics. The PAR approach and use of CLEs could garner rich data distinct to another context. In educational contexts, we are concerned with scaling our pilot efforts to more contexts. In this case, I subscribe to action and activist research recommendations; scaling should be a dynamic process in which those in new contexts adapt and often reinvent (Morel et al., 2019).

### *Sample Size*

Site-based research presents limitations of sample size. The context of the PAR project and study, with 115 elementary staff members, dictated the sample size. Participation was voluntary; therefore, I was limited to those individuals who expressed willingness to join the study. Although the sample size was relatively small (n= 6 for CPR group and n= 53 for total staff in CLEs, interviews, and focus groups) and presents general limitations, the size in relation to the context of the school was robust. Many leaders, teachers, and educational assistants in the school eagerly participated, strengthening the data's reliability.

### *Disruptions/Pressures*

I enacted the PAR project and study during a time of significant disruption from external forces, which added pressures and unforeseen limitations regarding protocols and possibilities for gathering. The study happened during the global COVID-19 pandemic, introducing extra stress and health and safety protocols. Although some protocols were lifted over the course of the study, many remained for the study's duration, dictating the location and means of gathering. National political turmoil presented another complexity to the project as increasing pressure and instability forced the school to move to a virtual platform for two months. The issues were complex and incredibly stressful for many staff members. Their resiliency and passion for improving their practices and strengthening their community point to the quality of humans working at the school.

In discussing the study's implications for practice, policy, research, and limitations and possibilities, I argue that there is great potential for growth in building more culturally responsive, equitable international schools by deliberately incorporating humanizing actions. I recognized my personal growth as a leader from engaging in the PAR process and believe other leaders can learn from this experience. Hence, I describe my growth next.

## Leadership Development

The experience of identifying an issue of equity and engaging in a PAR project to deeply explore the problem and potential solutions was powerful in my growth as an educator, leader, and human. From the beginning of the study, I aimed to examine my development as a leader and therefore took deliberate actions to track my growth over time. The concentrated, reflective process in which I engaged was transformational in my journey. The third research sub-question I explored in the study was: *How do I grow as an educational leader in supporting leaders and teachers to deepen their cultural understanding and build relational trust?* To gather data supportive of this question, I wrote regular reflective memos documenting my thinking and new learning. I took a similar approach to coding this data as I had used to examine the data leading to the study's findings. In studying this data, I realized that much of my growth centers on my actions as a leader becoming more rooted in a humanist approach, which is demonstrated through Figure 18. Next, I share key aspects of my leadership growth and how engaging in the PAR process can influence my future leadership actions.

### Intentionality in Learning About Others

The PAR project furthered my development as a humanist leader by helping me recognize the importance of learning about others (19%). In examining early artifacts, I realized that although learning about others and cultures was of interest to me in entering this project, I grew most significantly in my *intentionality*. Valuing others and making connections were important to me prior to the project, but I recognized that I was only sometimes intentional at connecting with others in my role as a leader. Throughout the project, I grew in taking deliberate

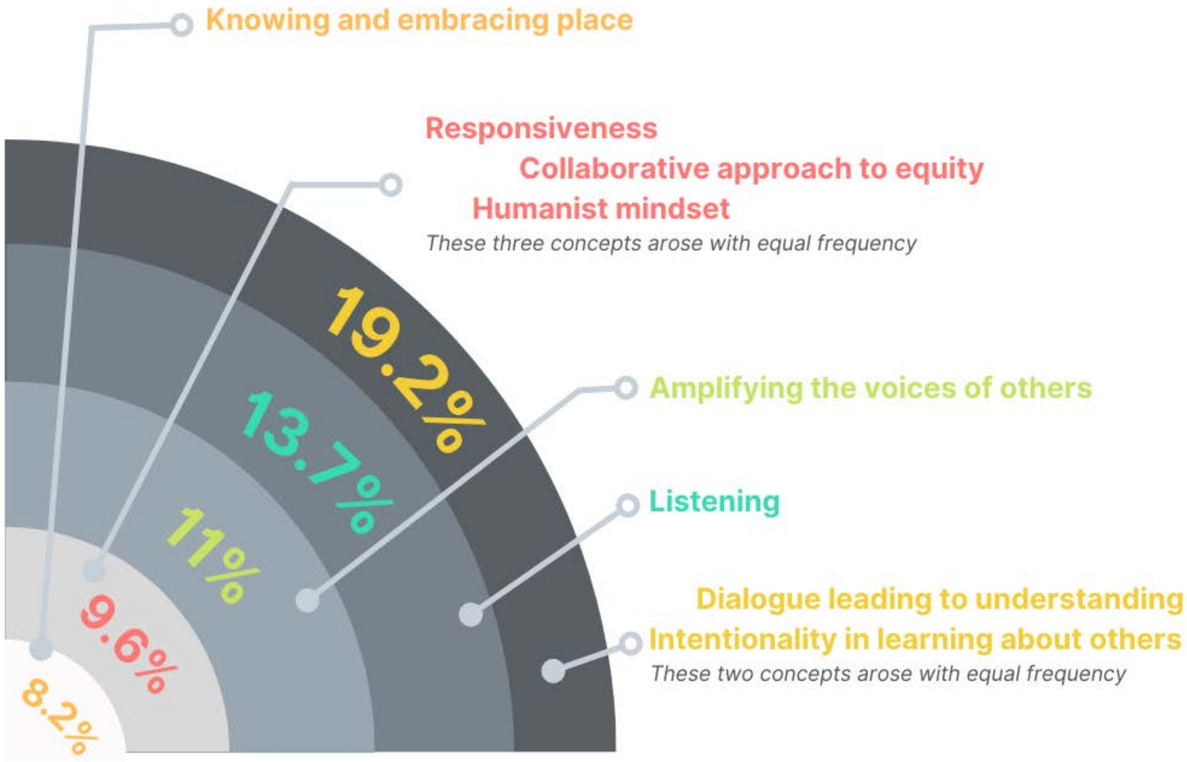


*Figure 18*. Data on my humanist leadership development.

actions to get to know others more deeply, and I have since applied this learning to my daily actions in my new school and role.

I increased my ability to be transparent and became clear about my role and the processes of others. I recognized the necessity of simple measures such as pausing to ask others about their personal lives. I used more self-talk to tell myself to stop in the busyness of the day to acknowledge others and ask about non-work-related issues. Although not entirely absent from my leadership before the PAR project, I now consider how these qualities are vital for strong humanist leadership: dialogue to promote understanding, amplifying unheard voices, and listening to understand.

### Dialogue Leading to Understanding

While I have always valued collaboration and recognized the importance of engaging in collective practices, the data revealed that recognizing the role of dialogue in leading to understanding is significant in my growth as a leader (19%). Before the project, my values regarding collaboration largely centered on the role of collaboration in strengthening ideas and enhancing teaching practices. While I still view this as an important aspect, I now perceive more depth to collaboration. I recognize dialogue as an essential component of more authentic collaboration and one that often gets passed over in the hectic nature of education as well as the perceptions I probably carried as a dominant culture person. Generally, I relate well to people, but the increased confidence that the Ethiopian staff had in me reinforced my role as a leader in creating dialogue spaces that promoted equity. Since dialogue holds a critical role in understanding, whether that be with colleagues, students, or parents, this learning showed up in the study as I built protocols for meetings focused on creating time and space for dialogue. I intend to use these protocols moving forward and develop a more robust bank of resources to support more inclusion of the lifeworld in the daily interactions of school settings.

### Amplifying Voices

Freire (1970/1993) suggested that amplifying suppressed voices is a key action of emancipation; understanding this as a critical leadership role was significant to my development (11% frequency). I recognize that I can take strategic actions in my daily work as a leader to augment the voices of individuals less likely to be heard. The PAR project and study revealed insight into norms, such as pausing, that I now use more consistently in my practice but acknowledge are continued areas for growth. Engaging in the PAR project reinforced for me that leading often means stepping back. Suarez (2018) depicted moving away from supremacy power and toward liberation power through two frameworks: Levels of Involvement in Decision Making and Ladder of Citizen Participation. These frameworks provided me with a roadmap for steps that I can take as a leader in working toward equity. I aim to continue observing whose voices are silenced and work to develop a community that values the input of all its members.

### Listening

A final growth area that warrants recognition is listening (14% of the evidence from the memos); often throughout the PAR project, I noticed I listened more actively with the intention of understanding. This influenced my subsequent actions, as demonstrated in one of my reflections: “I have also grown as a listener. As I facilitated, I learned to build in space for sharing and have learned to be open to things going a different way than initially planned” (Molloy, reflective memo, November 18, 2021). I now assume an inquiry stance as a core component of my leadership style. This transformation developed directly from my involvement in the PAR project.

As a White female American leader, I understand the inherent power and privilege I hold. I understand my duty in disrupting the power imbalance. The relationships I built with others over time in the study site played a significant role in helping me uncover critical data that point to how I and others can go about this important work. I now understand with greater clarity that much of my ongoing work must be focused on bringing forth the lifeworld to disrupt the largely inequitable systems world—for it is through lifeworld-focused interactions that we can begin to recognize and utilize the strengths of those with less power and privilege.

The PAR process was, and I predict will remain, an influential piece of my journey as a leader. The final sub-question was important to my leadership development as it urged me to continually reflect on self. As stated by Guajardo et al. (2016), learning about self is a necessary act in supporting organizational change. The PAR process encouraged me to dig deep into my ontology and better understand my values as a leader. It then built my knowledge base for how to enact these values more fully. Facilitating and engaging in community-focused learning sessions (CLEs) was a powerful practice I will continue to employ. I witnessed the positive effects of honoring the wisdom of the people and the power of place (Guajardo et al., 2016) in the change process, which significantly influenced the transformation of my leadership and practice. I will continue striving to be a leader focused on honoring the people in my organization.

## Conclusion

Culturally diverse international schools are ripe for developing humans with values and skills that embrace and promote the dignity of all people. Comprising individuals from various cultures and backgrounds, international schools provide a unique context to develop intercultural understanding. International schools assert their aim to achieve this goal by constructing missions and visions that employ such language as *global citizens* and *international-mindedness* when describing their ideal learner profile and by adopting curricular frameworks that proclaim the same. The International Baccalaureate, a framework adopted by many international schools, declares its commitment to this effort in its mission statement: “The International Baccalaureate aims to develop inquiring, knowledgeable and caring young people who help to create a better and more peaceful world through intercultural understanding and respect” (International Baccalaureate, 2022, para. 1). Although proclaiming noble objectives, these institutions often fall short as they fail to support leaders and teachers in understanding *how* to meet these goals. Rather, processes that develop intercultural understanding and respect, such as we found in this study, are necessary to break through the inequities that, although often unintentional, pervade international schools.

I explored strategies to build cross-cultural collaboration in the PAR project and study. I revealed critical findings that explain the *why* behind equity issues and strategies that indicate *how* to diminish them. I uncovered the significant prevalence of cultural dissonance that caused continual barriers to collaboration in the study’s setting. This discord often silenced the voices of the indigenous members of the teaching community. This finding is pivotal to recognizing the root of the equity concerns noticeable in collaborative endeavors among culturally heterogenous educators. I argue that if leaders and teachers in other international schools assume the critical stance of an equity warrior (Leverett, 2002; Mitchell, 2018) and willingly face equity concerns in their own contexts, they might uncover similar findings.

Equity warriors never stop striving for a more just and fairer world; they do not claim their work is finished after identifying the causes of inequity in their settings. Equity warriors seek to uncover actions that they and others can take to dispel inequity. As an equity warrior myself, uncovering cultural dissonance as a root cause for the disparity in voice between the local and expatriate staff was insufficient. I desired to understand *how* to enact change to attack this issue. Working with and learning from my colleagues, I uncovered the vital role of the lifeworld in building the cultural understanding necessary for equity. Like many schools worldwide, international schools are too often dominated by the systems world, leaving little room for the lifeworld (Habermas, 1987). A result of this imbalance in culturally diverse international schools seems to be a workforce lacking in understanding of others and the way culture influences their behaviors and habits. Encouragingly, this study leads me to suggest that intentional humanizing actions by leaders and teachers can rebuild the existence of the lifeworld in schools and, in turn, develop the intercultural understanding and respect we desire.

All international schools need to examine how to become more culturally responsive. We must amplify the voices of those who have been silenced for too long. Equity warriors must be willing to acknowledge their role in inequity and act to discover ways to grow. If we strive to develop students who interact with the world in ways that honor the unique assets of all individuals, we must start with our own actions as educators by returning the lifeworld to our systems-driven schools. If we fail to build relationships grounded in understanding and trust, we will further perpetuate the inequity that has become a cornerstone of international schools. I end with the wise words of Bateson (2019, p. 14; emphasis in original): "*Insight*, I believe, refers to that depth of understanding that comes by setting experiences, yours and mine, familiar and exotic, new and old, side by side, learning by letting them speak to one another."

# REFERENCES

Ade-Ojo, G., & Duckworth, V. (2017). Of cultural dissonance: The UK's adult literacy policies and the creation of democratic learning spaces. *International Journal of Lifelong Education, 36*(4), 388-405. https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2016.1250232

Allan, M. (2002). Cultural borderlands: A case study of cultural dissonance in an international school. *Journal of Research in International Education, 1*(1), 63-90. https://doi.org/10.1177/147524090200100l269

Alozie, O. E. (2020). Diversity V multiculturalism advantages and disadvantages of workplace diversity. *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications (IJSRP), 10*(1), 135-146. https://doi.org/10.29322/ijsrp.10.01.2020.p9720

Anderson, G. L., Mungal, A., Pinit, M., Scott, J., & Thomson, P. (2013). Policy, equity, and diversity in global context: Educational leadership after the welfare state. In L. Tillman, & J. J. Scheurich (Eds.), *Handbook of research on educational leadership and equity and diversity* (pp. 43-61). Routledge.

Bateson, M. C. (2019). *Peripheral visions: Learning along the way*. HarperCollins e-books.

Berryman, M., Lawrence, D., & Lamont, R. (2018). Cultural relationships for responsive pedagogy: A bicultural mana ōrite perspective. *Set: Research Information for Teachers*, (1), 3–10. https://doi.org/10.18296/set.0096

Bickel, G., & Jensen, D. (2012). Understanding cultural dissonance to enhance higher education academic success. *World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology, International Journal of Social, Behavioral, Educational, Economic, Business and Industrial Engineering, 6*(6), 1,170-1,176.

Bochner, S., & Hesketh, B. (1994). Power distance, individualism/collectivism, and job-related attitudes in a culturally diverse work group. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, *25*(2), 233–257. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022194252005

Boudett, K. P., & Lockwood, M. (2019). The power of team norms. *Educational Leadership, 76* (9), 12-17. https://www.ascd.org/el/articles/the-power-of-team-norms

Brassel, S., Van Bommel, T., & Robotham, K. (2022). *Three inclusive team norms that drive success (report)*. Catalyst. https://www.catalyst.org/reports/inclusive-team-norms-success/

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Brummitt, N., & Keeling, A. (2013). Charting the growth of international schools. In R. Pearce (Ed.), *International education and schools: Moving beyond the first 40 years* (pp. 25–36). Bloomsbury Academic.

Bryk, A. S., & Schneider, B. (2003). Trust in schools: A core resource for school reform. *Educational Leadership, 60*(6), 40-45.

Bryk, A. S., Sebring, P. B., Allensworth, E., Luppescu, S., & Easton, J. Q. (2010). *Organizing schools for improvement: Lessons from Chicago*. The University of Chicago Press.

Bryk, A. S., Gomez, L., Grunow, A., & LeMahieu, P. (2015). *Learning to improve: How America's schools can get better at getting better*. Harvard Education Press.

Bunnell, T. (2020). The continuous growth and development of 'international schooling': The notion of a 'transitionary phase'. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education, 50*(5), 764-768. https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2020.1712890

Bunnell, T., Fertig, M., & James, C. (2016). What is international about international schools? An institutional legitimacy perspective. *Oxford Review of Education*, *42*(4), 408-423. https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2016.1195735

Buseri, J. (1987). The influence of culture on pupils' questioning habits in Nigerian secondary schools. *International Journal of Science Education, 9*(5), 579-584. https://doi.org/10.1080/0950069870090507

Callanan, M., Solis, G., Castañeda, C., & Jipson, J. (2020). Children's question-asking across cultural communities. In L. Butler, S. Ronfard, & K. Corriveau (Eds.), *The questioning child: Insights from psychology and education* (pp. 73-88). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108553803.005

Carder, M., Mertin, P., & Porter, S. (2018). *Second language learners in international schools*. UCL Institute of Education Press.

Cavendish, L. M. (2011). *Stories from international teachers: A narrative inquiry about culturally responsive teaching* (Publication No. 3461096) [Doctoral dissertation, University of Iowa]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

Cazden, C. B., & Leggett, E. L. (1976). *Culturally responsive education: A response to LAU remedies II*. Harvard University.

Cochran-Smith, M. (1995). Color blindness and basket making are not the answers: Confronting the dilemmas of race, culture, and language diversity in teacher education. *American Educational Research Journal*, *32*(3), 493-522. https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312032003493

Cranston, J. (2011). Relational trust: The glue that binds a professional learning community. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, *57*(1), 59-72. https://doi.org/10.11575/ajer.v57i1.55455

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications, Inc.

DeLancey, R. M. (2013). Employees perceptions of multiculturalism and diversity in multinational corporations. *African Journal of Business Management*, *7*(35), 3,559–3,574. https://doi.org/10.5897/ajbm2013.7152

Deveney, B. (2007). How well-prepared do international school teachers believe themselves to be for teaching in culturally diverse classrooms? *Journal of Research in International Education*, *6*(3), 309– 32. https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240907083198

Dkeidek, I., Mamlok-Naaman, R., & Hofstein, A. (2010). *Effect of culture on high-school students' question-asking ability resulting from an inquiry-oriented chemistry laboratory. International Journal of Science and Mathematics Education*, *9*, 1,305-1,331. SpringerLink. https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10763-010-9261-0

Drake, J. (2017, November 23). *Education – the world's global language*. IB World Schools Yearbook. https://www.ibyb.org/news/education-the-worlds-global-language-2

Dweck, C. (2008). *Mindset: The new psychology of success.* Ballantine Books.

Ebbeck, M., & Reus, V. (2005). Transitions: Third culture children. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, *30*(3), 10–16. https://doi.org/10.1177/183693910503000303

Edwards-Groves, C., Grootenboer, P., & Ronnerman, K. (2016) Facilitating a culture of relational trust in school-based action research: Recognizing the role of middle leaders, *Educational Action Research, 24*(3), 369-386. https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2015.1131175

Edwards, S., & Edick, N. A. (2013). Culturally responsive teaching for significant relationships. *Journal of Praxis in Multicultural Education*, *7*(1), Article 4. https://doi.org/10.9741/2161-2978.1058

EmbassyPages (n.d.). *Ethiopia embassies & consulates.* https://www.embassypages.com/ethiopia

English, T. A. (2021). *Teacher readiness, belonging, and cultural awareness: A model for international teacher induction* (Order No. 28667240). [Doctoral dissertation, East Carolina University]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (2553208359). https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/teacher-readiness-belonging-cultural-awareness/docview/2553208359/se-2

Ezra, R. (2003). Culture, language and personality in the context of the internationally mobile child. *Journal of Research in International Education, 2*(2), 123–149. https://doi.org/10.1177/14752409030022001

Fail, H. (2010). Teaching and learning in international schools: A consideration of the stakeholders and their expectations (1st ed.). In R. J. Bates (Ed.), *Schooling internationally: Globalization, internationaliztion and the future for international schools* (pp. 101-120). Routledge.

Fournier, R., Cervera, M. S., Buckley, K., & Gutierrez, A. (2019). Stories from the field: Cultivating relationships through administrator actions. *Transforming Education.* https://transformingeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/StoriesfromtheField-Relationships-Brief-3-vF.pdf

Freire, P. (1993). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Penguin Books. (Original work published 1970).

Fullam, J. P. (2017). From seeing to believing: Using instructional video to develop culturally responsive teaching. *Journal for Multicultural Education, 11*(2), 131-148. http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/JME-09-2016-0053

Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. Teachers College Press.

Gay, G. (2002). Preparing for culturally responsive teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *53*(2), 106-116. https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A83732906/BIC?u=ncliveecu&sid=bookmark-BIC&xid=aa15cc82

Gay, G. (2013). Teaching to and through cultural diversity. *Curriculum Inquiry, 43*(1), 48-70. https://doi.org/10.1111/curi.12002

Gay, G., & Howard, T. C. (2000) Multicultural teacher education for the 21st century. *The Teacher Educator, 36*(1), 1-16. https://doi.org/10.1080/08878730009555246

Google. (n.d.). [Google map of the International Community School of Addis Ababa]. https://earth.google.com/web/search/international+community+school+of+addis+ababa/@8.99635214,38.72750578,2320.49044082a,943.45215503d,35y,0h,0t,0r/data=CigiJgokCTj1iseBBCJAEVVRi61c9yFAGUgKUxEqX0NAIc5S9wvtWkNA

Gorski, P. (2013). *Reaching and teaching students in poverty: Strategies for erasing the opportunity gap*. Teachers College Press.

Guajardo, M., Guajardo, F., Janson, C., & Militello, M. (2016). *Reframing community partnerships in education: Uniting the power of place and wisdom of people.* Routledge.

Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2000). Epistemological and methodological bases of naturalistic inquiry. In D. L. Stufflebeam, G. F. Madaus, & T. Kellaghan (Eds.). *Evaluation models* (pp. 363-381). Kluwer Academic.

Grubb, W. N. (2009). *The money myth: School resources, outcomes, and equity*. Russell Sage Foundation.

Habermas, J. (1984). *The theory of communicative action.* Beacon Press.

Habermas, J. (1987). *The theory of communicative action, volume 2.: Lifeworld and system: A Critique of functionalist reason*. Beacon Press.

Habermas, J. (1996). *Between facts and norms: Contributions to a discourse theory of law and democracy* (Trans. William Rehg). The MIT Press.

Hale, C. (2001). What is activist research? *Social Science Research Council, 2*(1-2), 13-15.

Hammond, Z. (2015). *Culturally responsive teaching and the brain: Promoting authentic engagement and rigor among culturally and linguistically diverse students.* Corwin.

Hancox, D. (2011). Stories with impact: The potential of storytelling to contribute to cultural research and social inclusion. *M/C Journal*, *14*(6). https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.439

Harmon-Jones, E., & Mills, J. (2019). An introduction to cognitive dissonance theory and an overview of current perspectives on the theory. In E. Harmon-Jones (Ed.). *Cognitive dissonance: Reexamining a pivotal theory in psychology (*2nd ed., pp. 3–24). American Psychological Association. https://doi.org/10.1037/0000135-001

Hattie, J. (2009). *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. Routledge.

Hayden, M. (2006). *Introduction to international education: International schools and their communities* [eBook edition]. SAGE Publications, Inc. https://ebookcentral.proquest.com

Hayden, M., & Thompson, J. (1995). Perceptions of international education: A preliminary study. *International Review of Education*, *41*(5), 389–404. https://doi.org/10.1007/bf01103036

Hayden, M., & Thompson, J. (2008). *International schools: Growth and influence*. UNESCO and United Nations. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/44839571_International_schools_growth_and_influence

Hayden, M., & Thompson, J. (2013). International schools: Antecedents, current issues and metaphors for the future. In R. Pearce (Ed.), *International education and schools: Moving beyond the first 40 years* (pp. 3-23). Bloomsbury Academic.

Herr, K., & Anderson, G. L. (2014). *The action research dissertation: A guide for students and faculty* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications, Inc.

Hofstede, G. (2011). Dimensionalizing cultures: The Hofstede model in context. *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture*, *2*(1). https://doi.org/10.9707/2307-0919.1014

Hofstede, G. (2014a, November 18). *10 minutes with Geert Hofstede on individualisme versus collectivisme* [video file]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zQj1VPNPHlI&t=2s

Hofstede, G. (2014b, November 18). *10 minutes with Geert Hofstede . . . on power distance* [video file]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DqAJclwfyCw&t=235s

Hofstede, G., Minkov, M., & Hofstede, G. J. (2010). *Cultures and organizations: Software of the mind*. McGraw-Hill.

Honneth, A. (2012). *The I in we studies in theory recognition*. Polity Press.

Howard, T. C. (2003). Culturally relevant pedagogy: Ingredients for critical teacher reflection. *Theory into Practice*, *42*(3), 195-202. https://search.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/culturally-relevant-pedagogy-ingredients-critical/docview/218780146/se-2?accountid=10639

hunter, l., emerald, e., & Martin, G. (2013). *Participatory activist research in the globalized world*. Springer.

ICS/ACS Alumni. (n.d.). *History of ICS/ACS*. https://sites.google.com/icsaddis.edu.et/alumnilink/welcome/history-of-icsacs

International Baccalaureate Organization. (2018). *The learner*. https://resources.ibo.org/data/the-learner_fc17a71a-2344-4b26-84cb-caca3a02750d/the-learner-en_d32875a1-8611-4de3-9f7d-14a22127adc2.pdf

International Baccalaureate. (2022). *Our mission*. https://ibo.org/about-the-ib/mission/

International Community School of Addis Ababa. (n.d.). *Admissions policy*. https://www.icsaddis.org/join/admissions/admissions-policy

International Community School of Addis Ababa. (2018). *Foundational principles*. https://www.icsaddis.org/discover/welcome-message

International Community School of Addis Ababa. (2019). *Annual report 2018-2019*. https://www.icsaddis.org/uploaded/downloads/ICS_Annual_Report,_2018-19SY.pdf

International Organization for Migration. (2017, December). *Migration data portal: The bigger picture*. https://migrationdataportal.org/

Irvine, J. (1990). Transforming teaching for the twenty-first century. *Educational Horizons*, *69*(1), 16-21. http://www.jstor.org/stable/42924855

Keehn, M. G. (2015). “When you tell a personal story, I kind of perk up a little bit more”: An examination of student learning from listening to personal stories in two social diversity courses. *Equity & Excellence in Education, 48*(3), 373–391. https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2015.1056712

Kemmis, S., McTaggart, R., & Nixon, R. (2014). *The action research planner: Doing critical participatory action research*. Springer.

Kendi, I. X. (2019) *How to be an anti-racist.* One Word.

Killoran, T. (2019). *Equity Agents: Creating an innovative learning culture with foreign teachers and Laoshi 老师 within an international school context* (Order No. 27629327). [Doctoral dissertation, East Carolina University]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (2353550100). https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/equity-agents-creating-innovative-learning/docview/2353550100/se-2

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995a). But that's just good teaching! The case for culturally relevant pedagogy. *Theory Into Practice*, *34*(3), 159-165. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1476635

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995b). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal*, *32*(3), 465-491. https://doi.org/10.2307/1163320

Leverett, L. (2002). Warriors to advance equity: An argument for distributing leadership. *Laboratory for Student Success: Spotlight on Student* Success, 709, 1-2.

Lin, J., & Perry, A. (2022). *Should groups set their own norms? Maybe not*. Learning Forward. https://learningforward.org/journal/building-community-in-a-divided-world/should-groups-set-their-own-norms-maybe-not/

Martinez-Taboada, C., Mera, M., Amutio, A., Castañeda, X., Felt, E., & Nicolae G. (2017). The impact of cultural dissonance and acculturation orientations on immigrant students' academic performance. *Universitas Psychologica, 16*(5), 1-14. https://doi.org/10.11144/Javeriana.upsy16-5.icda\

McCaig, N. M. (2002). Raised in the margin of the mosaic: Global nomads balance worlds within. *International Educator*, *11*(2), 10–17.

McKenzie, K. B., & Scheurich, J. J. (2004). Equity traps: A useful construct for preparing principals to lead schools that are successful with racially diverse students**.** *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *40*(5), 601-632. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X04268839

McKoy, C. L., MacLeod, R. B., Walter, J. S., & Nolker, D. B. (2017). The impact of an in-service workshop on cooperating teachers' perceptions of culturally responsive teaching. *Language Teaching Research*, *26*(2), 9–27. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168814541752

McLachlan, D. A. (2007). Global nomads in an international school. *Journal of Research in International Education*, *6*(2), 233–249. https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240907078615

Mitchell, S. (2018). *Sacred instructions: Indigenous wisdom for living spirit-based change.* North Atlantic Books.

Moll, L. C., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory Into Practice, 31*(2), 132-141. https://doi.org/10.2307/1476399

Moore, A. M., & Barker, G. G. (2012). Confused or multicultural: Third culture individuals' cultural identity. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, *36*(4), 553–562. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2011.11.002

Morales, A. (2017). Intercultural sensitivity, gender, and nationality of third culture kids attending an international high school. *Journal of International Education Research (JIER), 13*(1), 35-44. https://doi.org/10.19030/jier.v13i1.9969

Morel, R. P., Coburn, C., Catterson, A. K. & Higgs, J. (2019). The multiple meanings of scale: Implications for researcher and practitioners. *Educational Researcher, 48*(6), 369-377.

National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2018). *How people learn II: Learners, contexts, and cultures.* The National Academies Press.

Nelson, S. W., Maria G de, l. C., & Boone, M. D. (2008). Lifeworld or systems world: what guides novice principals? *Journal of Educational Administration, 46*(6), 690-701. https://doi.org/10.1108/09578230810908280

O'Connor, T. (1989). Cultural voice and strategies for multicultural education. *The Journal of Education, 171*(2), 57–74. http://www.jstor.org/stable/42742151

Ota, D. W. (2014). *Safe passage how mobility affects people & what international schools should do about it* [eBook edition]. Summertime Publishing.

Paine, L., Aydarova, E., & Syahril, I. (2017). Globalization and teacher education. In D. J. Clandinin & J. Husu (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of research on teacher education* (Vol. 2, pp. 1,133-1,148). SAGE Publications Ltd, https://www.doi.org/10.4135/9781529716627

Patton, M. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods.* Sage.

Pearce, R. (Ed.). (2013). *International education and schools: Moving beyond the first 40 years.* Bloomsbury Press.

Pollock, D. C., & Van Reken, R. (2001). *Third culture kids: The experience of growing up among worlds.* Nicholas Brealey.

Queirós, A., Faria, D., & Almeida, F. (2017). Strengths and limitations of qualitative and quantitative research methods. *European Journal of Education Studies*, *3*(9), 369-387. https://doi:10.5281/zenodo.887089

Richardson Garcia, L. (2019). *Utilizing community learning exchanges to empower all voices and strengthen community engagement in an international middle school* (Order No. 27629160). Available from Dissertations & Theses @ East Carolina University; ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (2352655582). https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/utilizing-community-learning-exchanges-empower/docview/2352655582/se-2

Ridgley, S. (2009). Cultural consonance vs. cultural dissonance: The role of culture in institutional success and failure. *Journal of Global Business Management, 5.* https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Stanley-Ridgley-2/publication/271196311_Cultural_Consonance_vs_Cultural_Dissonance_The_Role_of_Culture_in_Institutional_Success_and_Failure/links/54c001320cf21674ce9cdcd2/Cultural-Consonance-vs-Cultural-Dissonance-The-Role-of-Culture-in-Institutional-Success-and-Failure.pdf

Ross, P. T., & Bibler Z., N. (2019). Limited by our limitations. *Perspectives on Medical Education*, *8*(4), 261-264. https://doi:10.1007/s40037-019-00530-x

Russell, J. L., Bryk, A. S., Dolle, J. R., Gomez, L. M., LeMahieu, P. G., & Grumow, A. (2017). A framework for the initiation of networked improvement communities. *Teachers College Record*, *119*(5), 1-36. https://www.tcrecord.org

Saldaña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers.* Sage Publications Ltd.

Sato, M., & Lensmire, T. J. (2009). Poverty and Payne supporting teachers to work with children of poverty. *Phi Delta Kappan, 90*(5), 365-370. https://doi.org/10.1177/003172170909000512

Schneider, J., & Berkshire, J. (2020). *A wolf at the schoolhouse door: The dismantling of public education and the future of school*. The New Press.

Sergiovanni, T. J. (n.d.). *Standards and the lifeworld of leadership*. AASA. https://aasa.org/SchoolAdministratorArticle.aspx?id=14542

Sergiovanni, T. J. (2004). *The lifeworld of leadership: Creating culture, community, and personal meaning in our schools*. Jossey-Bass.

Sinek, S. (2009). *Start with why: How great leaders inspire everyone to take action*. Portfolio.

Snowball, L. (2007). Becoming more internationally-minded: International teacher certification and professional development. In M. Hayden, J. Levy, & J. Thompson (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of research in international education* (pp. 247-255). SAGE Publications Ltd.

Stembridge, A. (2019). *Culturally responsive education in the classroom: An equity framework for pedagogy*. Routledge.

Stuart, T. S., Heckmann, S., Mattos, M., & Buffum, A. (2018). *Personalized learning in a PLC at work: Student agency through the four critical questions*. Solution Tree Press.

Suarez, C. (2018). *The power manual: How to master complex power dynamics*. New Society Publishers.

Taylor, J. A. (1991). *Notes on an unhurried journey*. Four Walls Eight Windows.

Thomassen, W. E., & Munthe, E. (2020). A Norwegian perspective: Student teachers' orientations towards cultural and linguistic diversity in schools. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 96*, 103,151. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2020.103151

Tschannen-Moran, M. (2014). The interconnectivity of trust in schools. In D. Van Maele, P. B. Forsyth, & M. Van Houtte (Eds.), *Trust and school life: The role of trust for learning, teaching, leading, and bridging* (pp. 57-81). Springer.

Tschannen-Moran, M., & Hoy, W. K. (2000). A multidisciplinary analysis of the nature, meaning, and measurement of trust. *Review of Educational Research, 70*(4), 547-593. https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543070004547

U.S. Department of State. (2022, April 28). *Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: International Community School of Addis Ababa: 2021-2022 fact sheet - united states department of state.* U.S. Department of State. https://www.state.gov/international-community-school-of-addis-ababa-fact-sheet/#:~:text=Faculty%3A%20In%20the%202021%2D2022,total%20staff%20including%20105%20teachers.

United States Census Bureau. (2020, September 15). *Poverty rates for Blacks and Hispanics reached historic lows in 2019.* https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2020/09/poverty-rates-for-blacks-and-hispanics-reached-historic-lows-in-2019.html

Useem, R. H., & Downie, R. (1976). Third-culture kids. *The Journal of the National Education Association Today's Education, 65*(3), 103–105.

Valverde, G. (2005). Communication, culture, and language teaching. *Revista Pensamiento Actual, 5*(6), 92-98.

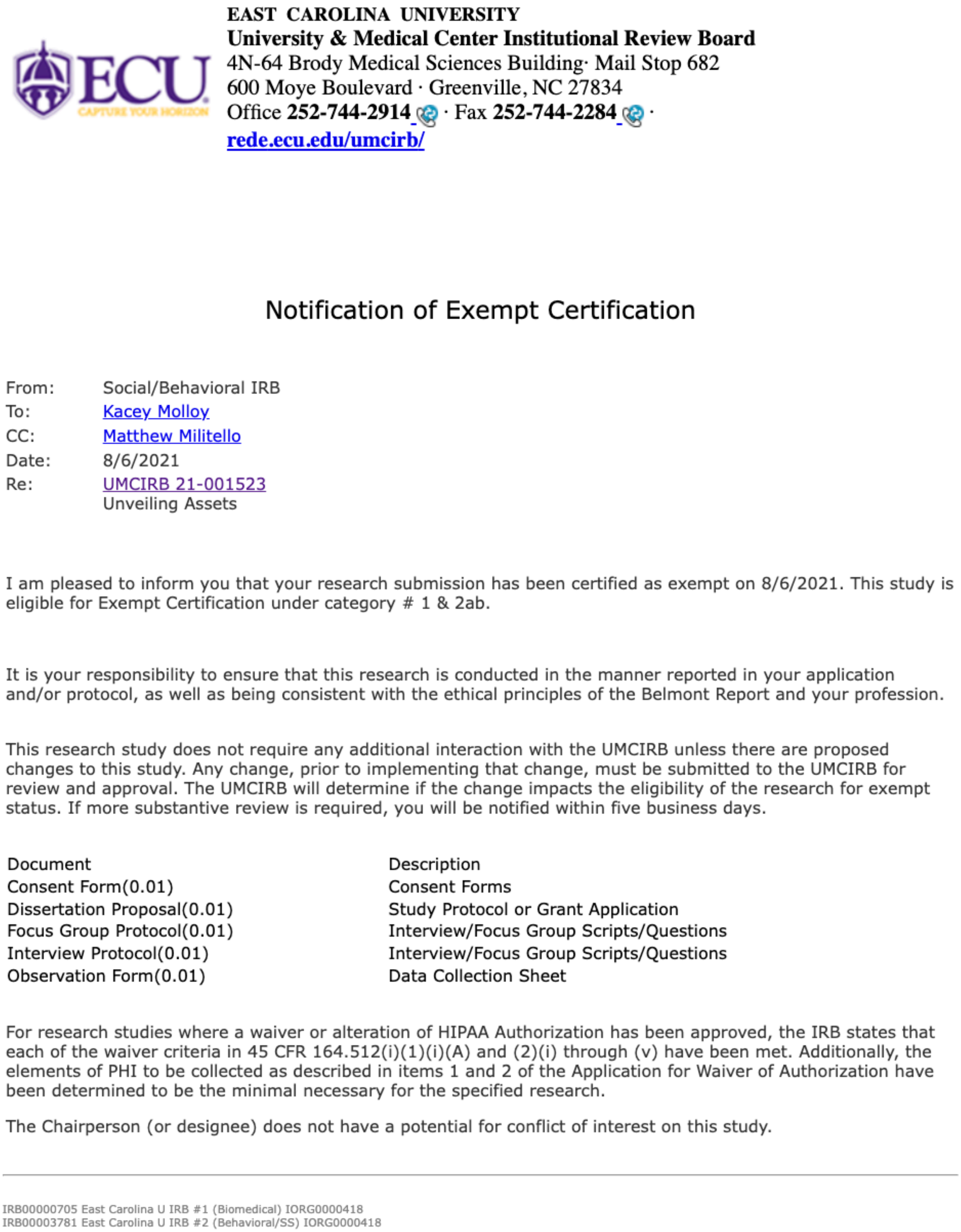
Vangen, S. (2016). Culturally diverse collaborations: A focus on communication and shared understanding. *Public Management Review, 19*(3), 305–325. https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2016.1209234

Wahyuni, A. (2018). *The power of verbal and nonverbal communication in learning*. Atlantis Press. https://www.atlantis-press.com/proceedings/icigr-17/25890842

World Population Review. (2022). *Ethiopia population 2022 (live)*. Ethiopia Population 2022 (Demographics, Maps, Graphs). https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/ethiopia-population

Zak, P. J. (2013). *How stories change the brain*. Greater Good. https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_stories_change_brain

# APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



**EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY**
**University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board**
4N-64 Brody Medical Sciences Building· Mail Stop 682
600 Moye Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834
Office **252-744-2914** · Fax **252-744-2284** ·
**rede.ecu.edu/umcirb/**

## Notification of Exempt Certification

From: Social/Behavioral IRB
To: Kacey Molloy
CC: Matthew Militello
Date: 8/6/2021
Re: UMCIRB 21-001523
Unveiling Assets

I am pleased to inform you that your research submission has been certified as exempt on 8/6/2021. This study is eligible for Exempt Certification under category # 1 & 2ab.

It is your responsibility to ensure that this research is conducted in the manner reported in your application and/or protocol, as well as being consistent with the ethical principles of the Belmont Report and your profession.

This research study does not require any additional interaction with the UMCIRB unless there are proposed changes to this study. Any change, prior to implementing that change, must be submitted to the UMCIRB for review and approval. The UMCIRB will determine if the change impacts the eligibility of the research for exempt status. If more substantive review is required, you will be notified within five business days.

| Document | Description |
|---|---|
| Consent Form(0.01) | Consent Forms |
| Dissertation Proposal(0.01) | Study Protocol or Grant Application |
| Focus Group Protocol(0.01) | Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions |
| Interview Protocol(0.01) | Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions |
| Observation Form(0.01) | Data Collection Sheet |

For research studies where a waiver or alteration of HIPAA Authorization has been approved, the IRB states that each of the waiver criteria in 45 CFR 164.512(i)(1)(i)(A) and (2)(i) through (v) have been met. Additionally, the elements of PHI to be collected as described in items 1 and 2 of the Application for Waiver of Authorization have been determined to be the minimal necessary for the specified research.

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.

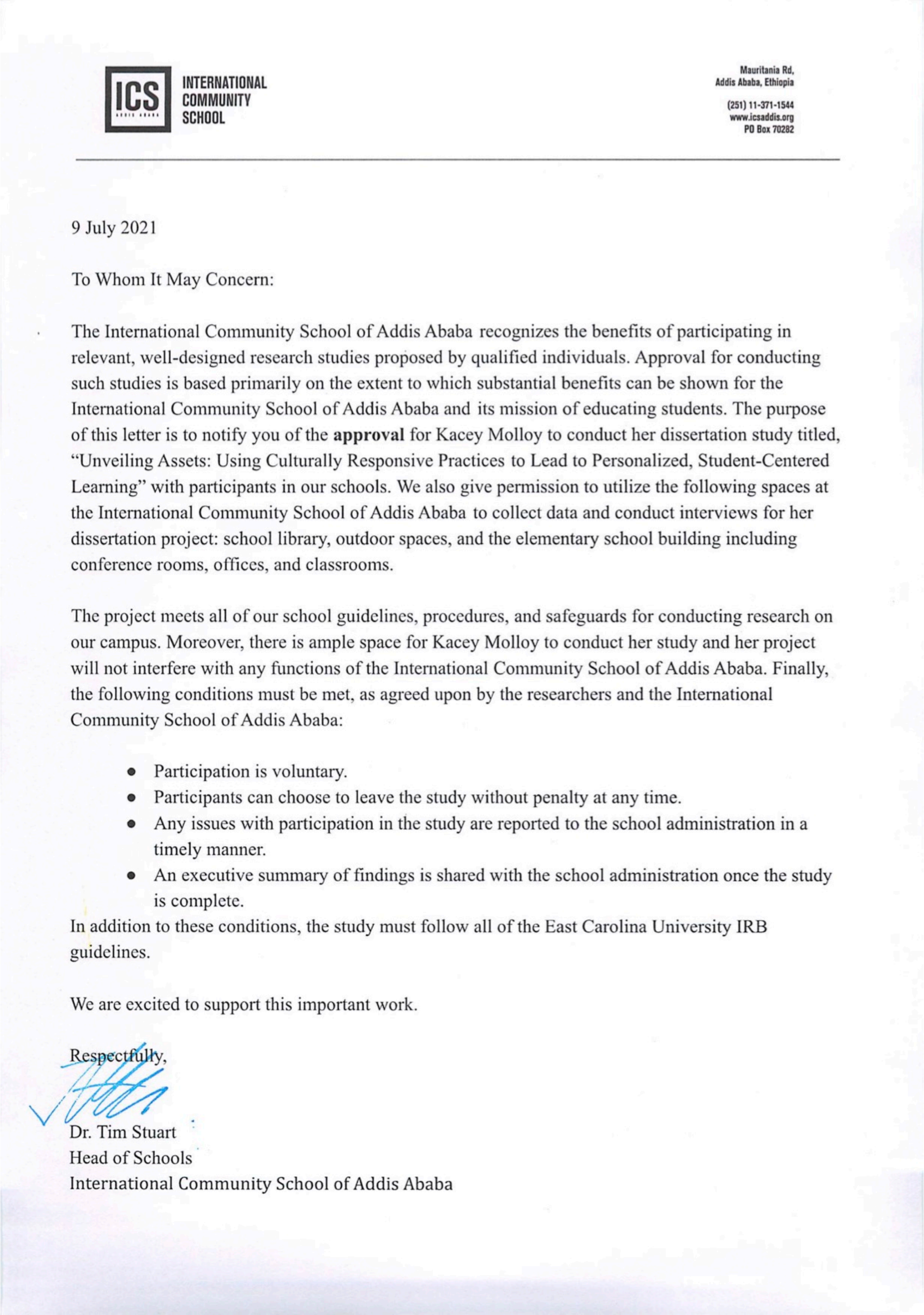
---

IRB00000705 East Carolina U IRB #1 (Biomedical) IORG0000418
IRB00003781 East Carolina U IRB #2 (Behavioral/SS) IORG0000418

# APPENDIX B: CITI TRAINING CERTIFICATE

itiprogram.org/verify/?w700489aa-c178-48c3-b91d-1a0107a39641-40139420

# APPENDIX C: SCHOOL PERMISSION LETTER



ICS
ADDIS ABABA
INTERNATIONAL
COMMUNITY
SCHOOL

Mauritania Rd,
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
(251) 11-371-1544
www.icsaddis.org
PO Box 70282

9 July 2021

To Whom It May Concern:

The International Community School of Addis Ababa recognizes the benefits of participating in relevant, well-designed research studies proposed by qualified individuals. Approval for conducting such studies is based primarily on the extent to which substantial benefits can be shown for the International Community School of Addis Ababa and its mission of educating students. The purpose of this letter is to notify you of the **approval** for Kacey Molloy to conduct her dissertation study titled, "Unveiling Assets: Using Culturally Responsive Practices to Lead to Personalized, Student-Centered Learning" with participants in our schools. We also give permission to utilize the following spaces at the International Community School of Addis Ababa to collect data and conduct interviews for her dissertation project: school library, outdoor spaces, and the elementary school building including conference rooms, offices, and classrooms.

The project meets all of our school guidelines, procedures, and safeguards for conducting research on our campus. Moreover, there is ample space for Kacey Molloy to conduct her study and her project will not interfere with any functions of the International Community School of Addis Ababa. Finally, the following conditions must be met, as agreed upon by the researchers and the International Community School of Addis Ababa:

- Participation is voluntary.
- Participants can choose to leave the study without penalty at any time.
- Any issues with participation in the study are reported to the school administration in a timely manner.
- An executive summary of findings is shared with the school administration once the study is complete.

In addition to these conditions, the study must follow all of the East Carolina University IRB guidelines.

We are excited to support this important work.

Respectfully,

Dr. Tim Stuart
Head of Schools
International Community School of Addis Ababa

# APPENDIX D: CONSENT FORM

## Informed Consent to Participate in Research

Information to consider before taking part in research that has no more than minimal risk.

Title of Research Study: Unveiling Assets: Using Culturally Responsive Practices to Lead to Personalized, Student-Centered Learning

Principal Investigator: Kacey Molloy
Institution, Department or Division: East Carolina University, Department of Educational Leadership
Address: Mauritania Rd., Addis Ababa, Ethiopia 70282
Telephone #: +251-944-06-5554
Study Coordinator: Dr. Matthew Militello
Telephone #: 252-328-6131

---

Researchers at East Carolina University (ECU) study issues related to society, health problems, environmental problems, behavior problems and the human condition. To do this, we need the help of volunteers who are willing to take part in research.

**Why am I being invited to take part in this research?**

The purpose of this participatory action research (PAR) project is to improve understanding and implementation of personalized, student centered learning. You are being invited to take part in this research because you are an educator in an international school working toward a personalized, student-centered approach. The decision to take part in this research is yours to make. By doing this research, we hope to learn how culturally responsive practices can be used to honor and utilize the assets of a diverse international school community to provide a more equitable, personalized experience for all school constituents. If you volunteer to take part in this research, you will be one of a number of participants from the school community.

**Are there reasons I should not take part in this research?**

There are no known reasons for why you should not participate in this research study.

**What other choices do I have if I do not take part in this research?**

You can choose not to participate.

**Where is the research going to take place and how long will it last?**
The research will be conducted at the International Community School of Addis Ababa (ICS), Ethiopia. You will need to come to the elementary school building conference room and may be asked to engage in continuing experiences. The total amount of time you will be asked to volunteer for this study is approximately five hours over the next five months.

**What will I be asked to do?**
You will be asked to do the following: If you agree to participate in this study, you may be asked to participate in interviews and/or observations. You may be asked to participate in community learning exchanges, all of which will focus on culturally responsive pedagogical practices. The interviews or observation may be recorded in addition to handwritten notes by the lead researcher. The interview questions will focus on your personal experience and school practices to improve understanding of personalized, student-centered teaching and learning. You may also be asked to help the lead researcher with the data analysis process in order to ensure the validity of the data collected.

**What might I experience if I take part in the research?**
We don't know of any risks (the chance of harm) associated with this research. Any risks that may occur with this research are no more than what you would experience in everyday life. We don't know if you will benefit from taking part in this study. There may not be any personal benefit to you, but the information gained by doing this research may help others in the future.

**Will I be paid for taking part in this research?**
We will not be able to pay you for the time you volunteer while being in this study

**Will it cost me to take part in this research?**
It will not cost you any money to be part of the research.

**Who will know that I took part in this research and learn personal information about me?**
ECU and the people and organizations listed below may know that you took part in this research and may see information about you that is normally kept private. With your permission, these people may use your private information to do this research:

- Any agency of the federal, state, or local government that regulates human research. This includes the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), the North Carolina Department of Health, and the Office for Human Research Protections.
- The University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) and its staff have responsibility for overseeing your welfare during this research and may need to see research records that identify you.

**How will you keep the information you collect about me secure? How long will you keep it?**
The information in the study will be kept confidential to the full extent allowed by law. Confidentiality will be maintained throughout the data collection and data analysis process. Consent forms and data from surveys, interviews, and focus groups will be maintained in a secure, locked location and will be stored for a minimum of three years after completion of the study. No reference will be made in oral or written reports that could link you to the study.

**What if I decide I don't want to continue in this research?**
You can stop at any time after it has already started. There will be no consequences if you stop and you will not be criticized. You will not lose any benefits that you normally receive.

**Who should I contact if I have questions?**
The people conducting this study will be able to answer any questions concerning this research, now or in the future. You may contact the Principal Investigator at phone number +251-944-06-5554 (weekdays, 8:00 am – 4:00 pm) or email molloyka20@students.ecu.edu.

If you have questions about your rights as someone taking part in research, you may call the University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) at phone number 252-744-2914 (days, 8:00 am-5:00 pm). If you would like to report a complaint or concern about this research study, you may call the Director for Human Research Protections, at 252-744-2914.

**I have decided I want to take part in this research. What should I do now?**
The person obtaining informed consent will ask you to read the following and if you agree, you should sign this form:

- I have read (or had read to me) all of the above information.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions about things in this research I did not understand and have received satisfactory answers.
- I know that I can stop taking part in this study at any time.
- By signing this informed consent form, I am not giving up any of my rights.
- I have been given a copy of this consent document, and it is mine to keep.

______________________________________________

**Participant's Name (PRINT)** **Signature** **Date**

**Person Obtaining Informed Consent**: I have conducted the initial informed consent process. I have orally reviewed the contents of the consent document with the person who has signed above and answered all of the person's questions about the research.

______________________________________________

**Person Obtaining Consent (PRINT)** **Signature** **Date**

*Consent Version Date: 27 January 2022* *Participant's Initials: _________* *Page 3 of 3*

# APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Study Title: Honoring Cultural Diversity in an International School: How Culturally Responsive Practices Support Teacher Collaboration

## Introduction

Thank you for taking time from your busy schedule to meet with me today. I appreciate your willingness to participate in this interview and will limit the time to one hour.

My name is Kacey Molloy. You have been selected to speak with me today as you have been identified as someone who has a great deal to share regarding the goals of this study. My study does not aim to evaluate your techniques or experiences. Rather, I am trying to better understand how to more equitably meet the needs of a diverse international school community. To do this, I am exploring how culturally responsive practices draw out the assets of the school community and how this understanding can be used to create a more equitable, collaborative experience for all. My hope is that the information gained from the study can support the ongoing development of the International Community School of Addis Ababa (ICS) and also support other international schools in providing an optimal experience for all their school constituents.

Disclosures:

1. Your participation in the study is voluntary. It is your decision whether or not to participate and you may elect to stop participating in the interview at any time.
2. The interview will be digitally recorded in order to capture a comprehensive record of our conversation. All information collected will be kept confidential. Any information collected during the session that may identify any participant will only be disclosed with your prior permission. I will use a coding system in the management and analysis of the interview data with no names or school identifiers associated with any of the recorded discussion.
3. The interview will be conducted using a semi-structured format. Several questions will be asked about your individual experience at ICS, especially regarding collaboration. Other questions will focus on ICS and general practices used to build relationships and understanding.
4. The interview will last approximately one hour.

## Interview Questions

**TURN RECORDER ON AND STATE THE FOLLOWING:**
**"This is Kacey Molloy, interviewing (*Interviewee's Name)* on *(Date)* for the Unveiling Assets Problem of Practice Study."**

- In a diverse international school like ours, does knowledge of cultures affect your work and decisions? If so, how?

- How has the diversity represented in an international school like ours impacted your work in a team and in a hub?

- What barriers are prohibiting authentic, meaningful connection and collaboration here at ICS?
  *What is it about some of our differences that is coming in the way of true collaboration?*
    - In what ways has misunderstanding hindered progress? (speak to specific barriers shared)
    - In what ways has understanding strengthened progress?
    - Can you share specific examples?

- In what ways do you think we could strengthen our understanding of one another?

- In what ways do you think we could strengthen our collaboration?

- In what ways do you think we could better recognize and utilize the assets of our host culture?

- What are cultural practices of our host country that we could bring into ICS to enrich our everyday ways of interacting and/or collaborating?

- How do you feel *your* assets are being recognized and utilized at ICS? How are they not?

# APPENDIX F: PROTOCOLS TO BUILD UNDERSTANDING AND TRUST

## Uncovering Strengths: Part One

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

| Duration | Materials | Setting |
|---|---|---|
| ~ 25 minutes | pens/pencils, notecards, projector | circle of chairs |

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible] part ONE [illegible]

**Part one** [illegible]

**Step 1:** **Pre-Work -** Ask each team member to independently complete a strengths assessment. The HIGH5 personality test is a great, free option. Upon completion, have each team member put their top five strengths into the attached template (along with the descriptor if possible). [illegible]

[illegible]

**Step 2:** 3 min — Project the team strengths for all to see. Give each participant a notecard and pen/pencil. On one side of the card, quietly and individually write down three noticings. Begin each with “ [illegible] Ensure these are factual in nature.

**Step 3:** 6 min — [illegible] Moving around the circle, ask each participant to read one noticing out loud to the group. If another participant has that same noticing, they simply check it off and will not read it out. Continue working your way around the circle until all new noticings have been shared. [illegible]

**Step 4:** 3 min — Return to a few moments of individual thinking. Ask each participant to turn over their card and this time write three wonders either based on the strengths of the group or what was shared in round 1. Begin each phrase with [illegible] These reflections are to be question-statements that dive deeper into the strengths.

**Step 5:** 6 min — [illegible] - Following the same process as round 1, ask each participant to share a new wonder. [illegible]

**Step 6:** After all wonders have been shared, invite open discussion.

[illegible]

[illegible]

| TEAM NAME | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **name** | **name** | **name** | **name** |
| *Part One: Add strengths in the white rows* | | | |
| **Reserve for Part 2 of the Protocol**<br>***How my strengths could help our team:***<br>***Challenges my strengths could present:*** | **Reserve for Part 2 of the Protocol**<br>***How my strengths could help our team:***<br>***Challenges my strengths could present:*** | **Reserve for Part 2 of the Protocol**<br>***How my strengths could help our team:***<br>***Challenges my strengths could present:*** | **Reserve for Part 2 of the Protocol**<br>***How my strengths could help our team:***<br>***Challenges my strengths could present:*** |
| **name** | **name** | **name** | **name** |
| | | | |
| **Reserve for Part 2 of the Protocol**<br>***How my strengths could help our team:***<br>***Challenges my strengths could present:*** | **Reserve for Part 2 of the Protocol**<br>***How my strengths could help our team:***<br>***Challenges my strengths could present:*** | **Reserve for Part 2 of the Protocol**<br>***How my strengths could help our team:***<br>***Challenges my strengths could present:*** | **Reserve for Part 2 of the Protocol**<br>***How my strengths could help our team:***<br>***Challenges my strengths could present:*** |

*Other protocol parts: Part 2, Part 3, Part 4*

*Icons made by Freepik from www.Flaticon.com*

## Uncovering Strengths: Part Two

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

| Duration | Materials | Setting |
|---|---|---|
| ~ 25 minutes | pens/pencils, notecars, projector | circle of chairs |

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible] part TWO [illegible]

**Part two** [illegible]

**Step 1:** Revisit your team members' strengths. Spend a moment in silent reflection.
1 min

**Step 2:** Adding onto your team template, begin by individually entering thoughts as to how you can intentionally use your strengths as an asset to your team. (e.g., if one of your top 5 strengths is as a [illegible] offer to be the official timekeeper for the team during PLC meetings.)
3 min

**Step 3:** Shift your attention to your teammates and their strengths. How might they intentionally employ their strengths? Individually add your thinking under their column.
4 min

**Step 4:** Spend some time as a team conversing about what you noticed. **Identify some actionable steps you can take to utilize individual team members' strengths.**
10 min

**Step 5:** Return to individual thinking time. Note some challenges your personal strengths could potentially pose in a team dynamic. (e.g., if one of your top 5 strengths is [illegible] your team probably needs to know that you will throw out lots of ideas and that for some this may be overwhelming. You might need a [illegible] to determine which next steps to take to move on.)
2 min

**Step 6:** Discuss these challenges as a team. How might you presume positive intent when these challenges present themselves?
10 min

[illegible] [illegible]

# Uncovering Strengths: Part Three

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

| Duration | Materials | Setting |
|---|---|---|
| ~ 25 minutes | asset map copies, pens/pencils,<br>sticky notes | circle of chairs |

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

part THREE [illegible]

Part three [illegible]

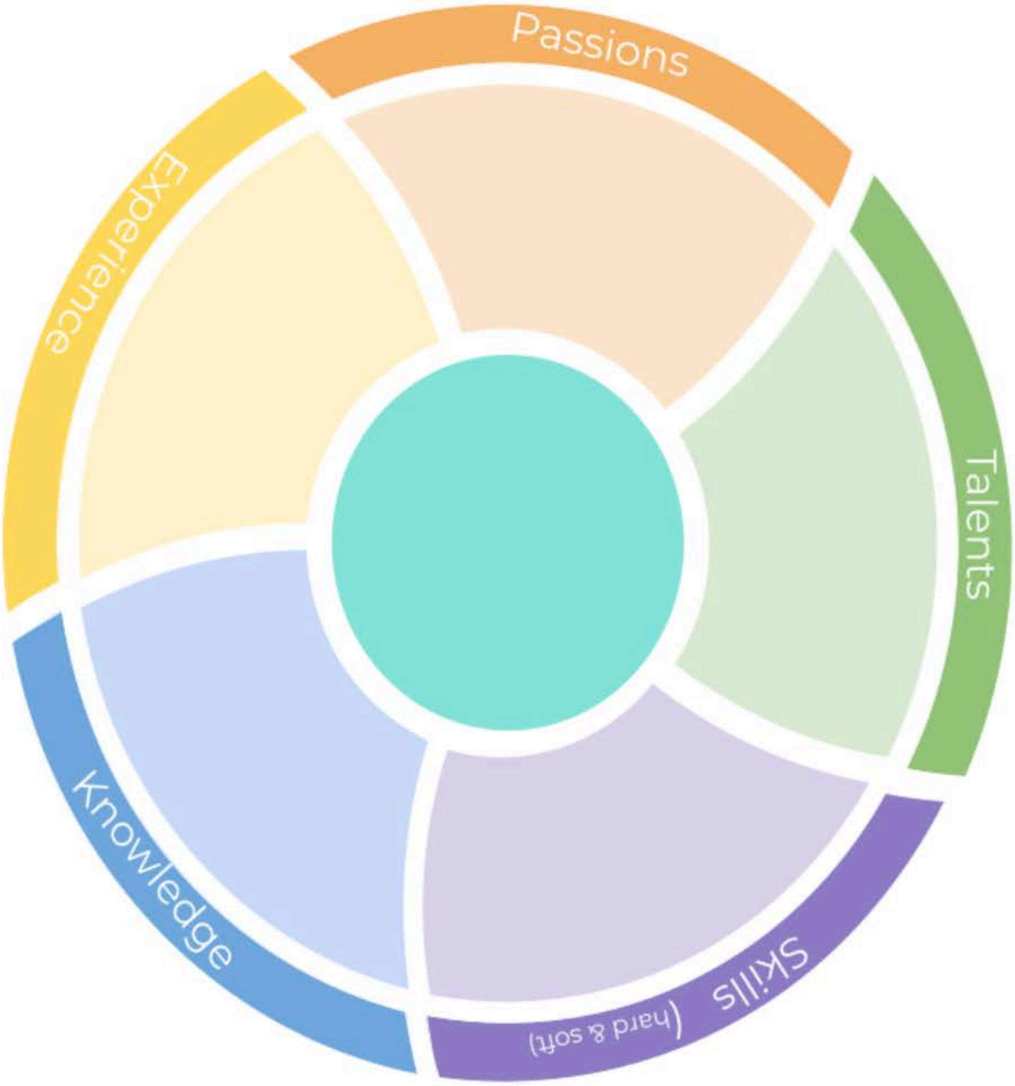
[illegible]

**Step 1:** Provide each participant with a copy of the attached asset map, ideally printed on A3-sized paper. Ask them to write their name in the center. Next, instruct participants to consider assets they possess that might not have been revealed through the strengths assessment. Add these in the appropriate spaces in their template. [illegible]
8 min

**Step 2:** Place all of the asset maps on tables throughout the room. Ask each participant to take some sticky notes and a pen/pencil. Instruct all participants to independently move through the space examining assets, leaving comments on sticky notes of how these assets could be utilized to strengthen the team. [illegible]
10 min

**Step 3:** Gather in a circle. Bring all of the asset maps with sticky notes back to the team. Ask them to reflect as a group on what they noticed, identifying any actional steps the team can take in light of this deeper understanding of the group members. [illegible]
10 min

Other protocol parts: Part 1, Part 2, Part 4


Passions
Talents
Skills
(hard & soft)
Knowledge
Experience

# Uncovering Strengths: Part Four

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

| Duration | Materials | Setting |
|---|---|---|
| ~ 25 minutes | asset maps, pens/pencils | circle of chairs |

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible] part FOUR [illegible]

Part four [illegible]

[illegible]

**Step 1:** 3 min — Gather all participants' asset maps. With all participants sitting in a circle, ask for one participant's willingness to be further discussed. Then, take that participant's asset map and place it in a location for all to see. As a team, verbalize additional assets of that team member and have one person add them to the asset map. [illegible]

**Step 2:** Depends on group size — Repeat step 1 for the remaining participant.

**Step 3:** 10 min — Spend time reflecting as a team about how to best utilize the assets uncovered.

# Manifestation of Strengths in Times of Stress

*"It's not the load that breaks you down. It's the way that you carry it."*

*- Lou Holtz*

| **Duration** | **Materials** | **Setting** |
|---|---|---|
| ~ 25 minutes<br>*depends on size of team* | individual access to strengths, copies of the attached templates, pens/pencils | circle of chairs |

*Protocol by Kacey Molloy & Rianne Anderson, inspired by Strengths Finders*

*Please customize this protocol for your use and attribute adaptation to the original author(s).*

*This protocol is best used after the team has spent some time together establishing relational trust. It might be useful to consider using this protocol just before entering into a period of time that typically provokes stress in individuals, such as a reporting period.*

**Step 1:** Ask each person to reflect upon their top five strengths as indicated through the High 5 or Strengths Finders assessment. Using the thriving and drowning template, individually record how these strengths manifest in times of strength and in times of stress. (7 min)

**Step 2:** After the initial reflection period, narrow in on one strength that may manifest quite visibly to others. Expand upon this in more detail on the thriving and drowning template. (3 min.)

**Step 3:** Provide time for each team member to share about their one identified strength from step two, telling about how that strength manifests for them both when they are thriving and when they are drowning. (10 min)

**Step 4:** Turn the conversation to actionable steps that can be taken when drowning. Ask participants to reflect on what they need in order to thrive in times of stress, using the one identified strength to anchor the reflection. Record thoughts on this template. (5 min)

**Step 5:** Display each of the reflection pages from step four in a large circle. As a team, find commonalities amongst the reflections and draw a connecting line between them.

**Step 6:** In the middle of the circle, add a paper on top of the connecting lines. Collectively identify actionable steps to take together to help the team thrive.

*Icons made by Freepik from www.Flaticon.com*

How might my strengths manifest when I am thriving and when I'm drowning?

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| THRIVING |  |  |  |  |  |
| DROWNING |  |  |  |  |  |

*Icons made by Freepik from www.Flaticon.com*

Name:

Strength: ______________________________

What I need in order to **thrive** in the midst of stress…

-
-
-
-

Name:

Strength: ______________________________

What I need in order to **thrive** in the midst of stress…

-
-
-
-

*Icons made by Freepik from www.Flaticon.com*

## Culture Continuum

*"Cultural differences should not separate us from each other, but rather cultural diversity brings a collective strength that can benefit all of humanity."*

*- Robert Alan*

| **Duration** | **Materials** | **Setting** |
|---|---|---|
| ~ 40 minutes | copies of statements & questions, projector | open space to move on a line, space for pairs to converse |

*Protocol by Kacey Molloy*

*Please customize this protocol for your use and attribute adaptation to the original author.*

**Step 1:** **Project the following quote and allow the group a moment of silent reflection:**
1 min

*"Culture" refers to a group or community which shares common experiences that shape the way its members understand the world. It includes groups that we are born into, such as race, national origin, gender, class, or religion. It can also include a group we join or become part of. For example, it is possible to acquire a new culture by moving to a new country or region, by a change in our economic status, or by becoming disabled. When we think of culture this broadly we realize we all belong to many cultures at once." (Community Tool Box)*

**Step 2:** Draw a line across the room. Label one end of the line "strongly agree" and the other end "strongly disagree."
1 min

**Step 3:** Read out the statements on the following page. Instruct participants to move on the line according to how strongly they agree or disagree with each statement. Tell participants to pay close attention to their peers throughout the engagement.
10 min

**Step 4:** After all statements have been read, instruct participants to find someone with whom they differed quite a lot throughout the engagement. Invite pairs (or trios if needed) to engage in conversation with the aim to gain greater understanding of each other. Pass out statements read during the continuum activity as well as the interview questions as possible prompts (print back to front).
15 min

**Step 4:** Gather back together as a whole group. Invite the group to share key learning.
10 min

*Icons made by Freepik from www.Flaticon.com*

## Continuum Statements

***In a culture with which I identify…..***

- Eye contact is expected.
- Greeting people is of very high importance.
- Children are encouraged to move away from home when they reach adulthood.
- Change is viewed as negative.
- The group is more important than the individual.
- Expectations for females differ greatly from expectation for males.
- Confronting someone when personal conflict arises is considered a postivie problem-solving strategy.
- Family needs are put before all other obligations, including work.
- Heirarchy is extremely important
- Students are encouraged to question in order to learn
- Speaking up and out is encouraged.
- A value in the education system is teaching children leadership skills.
- Individuals achieve recognition or social standing through their extended family. There is a class system.
- Punctuality is important.
- Providing a lot of food is a sign of good hospitality.
- A loud voice is seen as aggressive.
- When I started working at ICS, I had to learn and adopt many new pratices in and outside the classroom in order to fit into the culture.

## Possible Interview Questions

1. Describe your first day or first month at ICS.
    a. What helped you?
    b. What was challenging for you?
2. What is a significant memory you have of an individual at ICS?
3. Working in a diverse setting like ICS, what is something important to you and or your culture that you think a number of people you work with don't understand?
4. Describe a challenging moment you have experienced working at ICS.
5. Tell me about a time you have been confused by someone's behavior.
6. What are some of your hopes for the future?
7. How can I help you shine?

## Emulation Poem

*"Our histories cling to us. We are shaped by where we come from."*

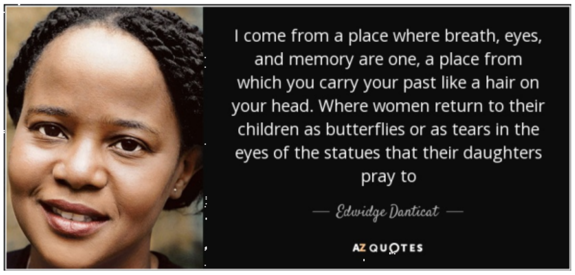
*- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie*

| Duration | Materials | Setting |
|---|---|---|
| ~ 30 minutes | paper, pens/pencils | circle of chairs |

*Protocol by Lynda Tredway*

*Please customize this protocol for your use and attribute adaptation to the original author.*

*To emulate is to copy or use as a guide; it is to echo what you have read or heard or seen. The emulation poem is an opportunity to use a facilitator's example poem(s) to write your own poem. When the facilitator writes his or her example, s/he should use the same time frame (8-10 min) that the participants have to write their poems.*



I come from a place where breath, eyes, and memory are one, a place from which you carry your past like a hair on your head. Where women return to their children as butterflies or as tears in the eyes of the statues that their daughters pray to

— Edwidge Danticat —

AZ QUOTES

**Step 1:** Listen to/read the example poem below or the facilitator's pre-written poem.
1 min

**Step 2:** Using a timer, spend 10 minutes writing your own poem by responding to the three parts of the prompt as noted below. ***Resist the temptation to edit.***
10 min

I come from a place where…

I am in a place where or I went to a place where…

I am going to a place where…

**Step 3:** Share your emulation poem and listen to others. You can share comments, appreciations, and affirmations in response.

*Icons made by Freepik from www.Flaticon.com*

## EMULATION POEM: I COME FROM A PLACE WHERE… LYNDA TREDWAY

I come from a place where the simple life is valued,

where gossip at the grocery store is the lifeblood of knowing,

where the routine of meat and potatoes and a vegetable is supper,

where the principles of democracy and Christianity are revered but too often not a reality,

where spring planting depends on how wet the fields are,

where irrigation wells hum in summer,

where my father's last fall harvest time came too soon in his life,

and where blankets of snow come in winter and we ice skate on the pond,

where I walked the shelterbelts of my childhood seeking to know

looking at leaves and trees and wondering how to grow into my own life,

where Saturdays were catechism and cleaning, and Sundays church and family,

where school and friends were a refuge

where my family was unpredictable and secretive and my security came from my own thoughts and hopes and reading about a larger world that I wanted to inhabit

I went to a place where city life moved faster,

where rain meant problems with traffic instead of an answer to prayers,

where preserving democracy and the values of learning, giving, and doing became my life direction

where I learned to cast myself in roles as mother, friend, and aunt in ways that fit my sense of freedom and where my white girl self grew into a woman who saw herself as an ally for justice

I am still going to a place where the Elysian fields of knowledge and care and kindness are the main currency and where the illusive goals of equity and justice are worth giving your life to and for.

*Icons made by Freepik from www.Flaticon.com*

## Revealing an Unknown Piece of My Identity

*"Own your identity. Love who you are in the world."*

*- Nyle DiMarco*

| **Duration** | **Materials** | **Setting** |
|---|---|---|
| ~ 25 minutes | artifacts | circle of chairs |

*Protocol by Kacey Molloy*

*Please customize this protocol for your use and attribute adaptation to the original author.*

**Step 1:** **Pre-work -** Consider what pieces of your identity you have revealed to your team, and which might still be unknown. What do you feel safe sharing with others? *Choose an artifact that represents an unknown piece of yourself - something your team might not yet know about you. Be ready to share this with the team.*

***artifact = a physical item (in this case used as a representation)***

**Step 2:** Provide time for each participant to share their item and the story behind it. Only the person sharing talks; no questions are asked at this point. Participants respond to each individual simply with, "Thank you for sharing."

*The following questions can be used as guides as needed:*

- What piece of your identity would you like to reveal today?
- What artifact did you choose to represent that piece of your identity?
- Why did you choose this artifact?

**Step 3:** Close out the sharing by honoring the participants for their courage in sharing.

*Icons made by Freepik from www.Flaticon.com*

## Success Story

***success*** */sək'sɛs/noun: the accomplishment of an aim or purpose*

*Oxford University Press, 2022*

| Duration | Materials | Setting |
|---|---|---|
| ~ 25 minutes<br>*depends on size of team* | copies of brainstorming template, pens/pencils | circle of chairs |

*Protocol by Kacey Molloy*

*Please customize this protocol for your use and attribute adaptation to the original author.*

**Step 1:** **Consider a time when you have felt successful.** What led to that success? How did you reach your goal?
1 min

im possible

**Step 2:** Use the template attached to help you reflect upon your journey leading to that success.
5 min

**Step 3:** Either in pairs or with the whole group (depending on time), share your success story. Use your brainstorming template to guide your story.
~ 2 min per ind.

*Icons made by Freepik from www.Flaticon.com*

**Consider a time when you have felt successful.**

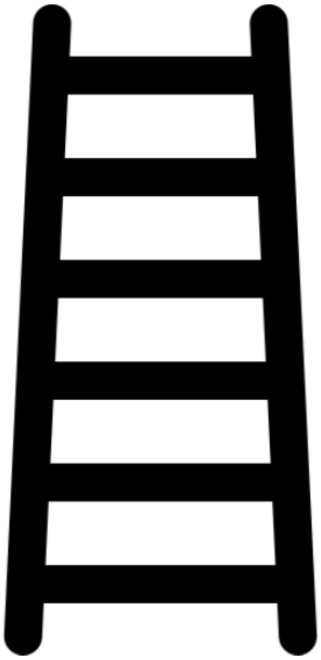
What led to that success? How did you reach your goal?

Write your success in the box at the top of the ladder and use the rungs to help you brainstorm what led you to that success. This is just a tool to support your thinking, not necessarily to be shared.

**Some ideas to get you thinking:**

This might be confronting a challenge, facing a fear, earning an award, being recognized, or accomplishing a difficult task.

*Success:*



*Icons made by Freepik from www.Flaticon.com*

## The Power of Birthdays

*"The older you get the better you get, unless you are a banana."*

*- Betty White*

| Duration | Materials | Setting |
|---|---|---|
| ~ 15 minutes | depending | circle of chairs |

*Protocol by Kacey Molloy; questions by Laurie Matteson*

*Please customize this protocol for your use and attribute adaptation to the original author.*

*Not everyone celebrates their birthday. Be aware of your teammates when entering into this protocol. You could encourage any participant to choose an alternate day to be honored, or, you may choose to skip this protocol entirely depending on your context.*

**Step 1:** Ask all team members to share their birthdays at the very beginning of your work together. Add these to your own Google calendar and invite the other members of your team to each invite. Talk with your team about how you might *consistently* honor and celebrate birthdays. Some ideas are:

time

- Purchase snacks to enjoy during team meetings
- Go out to dinner or a happy hour
- Make a special card

**Step 2:** On the day of a team member's birthday, ask the team to sit in a circle. Moving around the circle, invite each individual to share something they appreciate about the person celebrating their birthday.

2 min

**Step 3:** Ask the individual celebrating their birthday to respond to the following questions:

5 min

1. What is something that you have done in this past year that you are proud of?
2. What is something that you have done in this past year that you will not do again?
3. Do you have a goal for the next year and do you feel comfortable sharing that with us?
4. Is there anything that we can do to help you meet your goal?

*Icons made by Freepik from www.Flaticon.com*

# The Story of My Name

> *"I learned very early the difference between*
> *knowing the name of something and knowing something."*
> *- Richard P. Feynman*

| **Duration** | **Materials** | **Setting** |
|---|---|---|
| ~ 25 minutes | projector, questions in step 2 | circle of chairs |

*Protocol by Kacey Molloy*

*Please customize this protocol for your use and attribute adaptation to the original author.*

**Step 1:** Watch this video as a provocation into the power of a name.
6.5 min

**Step 2:** Invite participants to reflect on their names and origins. Display the following questions adapted from *The Listen Project* (2019, p. 51) for participants to reflect upon individually:
2 min

- How do you correctly pronounce your name?
- Who chose your name and why?
- Does it have a meaning?
- Was it always like this or has it changed?
- Do you like your name?
- What do your relatives and friends call you?

**Step 3:** Allow participants to share the story of their names. (~2 minutes/individual)
2 min

*Interested in more resources?:*
- Poem: Application Poem by Phoebe Wang (link)
- Blog Post & Book: Name Stories (link)
- Books to Teach Kids About the Importance of Names (link)

*Icons made by Freepik from www.Flaticon.com*

# Unpacking & Connecting With the Seven Norms of Collaboration

*"Collaborating is often about conversation. The seven norms are to some extent the way your group has conversations together and the way they interact together.."*

*- Amy Climer*

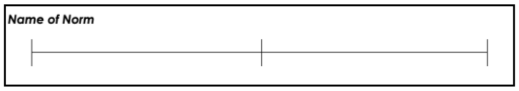
| **Duration** | **Materials** | **Setting** |
|---|---|---|
| ~ 30 minutes | Copies of continuum page,<br>7 pieces of A3 paper, stickers,<br>pens/pencils | circle of chairs |

*Protocol by Kacey Molloy and Calley Connelly*

*Please customize this protocol for your use and attribute adaptation to the original authors.*

*This protocol aims to familiarize participants with the Seven Norms of Collaboration and reveal that cultural backgrounds may contribute to comfort in enacting the norms. Understanding the influence personal culture plays can help identify actions individuals and teams can take in establishing healthy, collaborative environments.*

**Step 1:** **Pre-work -** Draw continuums like the following onto 7 different A3-sized pieces of paper, labeling each with a different norm.



**Step 2:** 1 min — Read or project the following statement to the group:

> *International schools often hire educators from diverse cultural backgrounds. Our unique cultures influence the way we work and interact with others. Many times, these cultural differences can present challenges to our collaboration.*
>
> ***Our school has adopted the Seven Norms of Collaboration to help establish a school culture understood by all.***

**Step 3:** 10 min — Pass out a copy of the continuum page to each participant. Allow time for individual reflection as to the questions asked.

**Step 4:** 20 min — Put the seven continuums previously prepared spaced around the room. Invite participants to move freely between the continuums, placing a sticker on the continuum in a place matching their reflections. These can be anonymous. Afterward, reflect as a team about how you can collectively support one another to reach the middle *(e.g. You might decide to create a cue to use when things are moving too fast in meetings.)*

*Icons made by Freepik from www.Flaticon.com*