Promoting Intercultural Competence: Experiences from Kenya and Nepal Study Abroad

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Abstract

This study utilized an Interpretive Phenomenological Approach (IPA) to examine how sequentially planned study abroad programs in Kenya and Nepal influenced pre-service teachers' development of intercultural competence. IPA was chosen to capture participants lived experiences and to explore their evolving perspectives before and after travel. Qualitative data was collected from eight White pre-service teachers through open-ended interviews, reflective journals, and focus groups. Findings revealed a complex trajectory: while many participants initially expressed openness to engaging with unfamiliar cultures, post-travel reflections showed significant variation. Some participants demonstrated intentional efforts to adapt and build intercultural understanding, while others exhibited denial, defensiveness, and ethnocentric attitudes, viewing unfamiliar practices through a deficit lens. These results underscore that developing intercultural competence is an intentional, fluid, and multifaceted process rather than an automatic outcome of cultural exposure. The study highlights the critical role of well-structured, critically informed study abroad programs in preparing culturally responsive social studies educators. Programs grounded in Critical Internationalization principles can more effectively foster genuine intercultural learning by encouraging self-reflection, cultural humility, and critical awareness. Implications for social studies teacher education programs emphasize the need for deliberate, sustained support to help future educators navigate and value cultural complexities in diverse classroom settings.

Keywords: *Intercultural competence; critical internationalization, study abroad, international field experience, social studies education, teacher education*

Introduction

As societies grow increasingly interconnected, global and international education has become a crucial component of teacher preparation, especially within social studies. Social studies educators are expected to help students critically analyze global interdependence, navigate cultural diversity, and become informed, empathetic global citizens (Mangram & Watson, 2011; National Council for the Social Studies [NCSS], 2010). As Smith (2024) emphasizes, preparing teachers for critical global and democratic practice requires shifting inquiries in teacher education toward fostering

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democratic engagement and global citizenship, rather than treating these as peripheral goals. This task requires not only the transmission of knowledge about other cultures but also the cultivation of intercultural competence—defined as the ability to understand, respect, and engage meaningfully with diverse cultural perspectives (Deardorff, 2006).

Research has shown that social studies teachers play a pivotal role in fostering students' intercultural understanding (Cushner & Mahon, 2002; Merryfield, 2000). In the U.S., where many teacher education programs are situated in racially and culturally homogenous communities, preparing teachers to meet this challenge remains difficult. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR; Council of Europe, 2018) emphasizes plurilingualism—the ability to draw upon multiple linguistic and cultural resources—as a key educational strategy for fostering interculturality in increasingly diverse and digitized learning environments (Piccardo, 2017). Plurilingualism is not just a linguistic framework but also a cultural one, encouraging flexibility, critical awareness, and nuanced cultural engagement, which align with the competencies required of globally minded educators. Despite the growing emphasis on global awareness in education, teacher candidates often lack opportunities for meaningful cross-cultural engagement. Prior research highlights the limitations of superficial multicultural exposure and calls for immersive experiences that allow for deep cultural understanding (Cushner & Chang, 2015; Quezada, 2022). One such intervention is the use of international field experiences or study abroad programs that place pre-service teachers in culturally unfamiliar environments. These programs, when thoughtfully structured, help participants develop the dispositions and skills necessary to teach in diverse classrooms (Kambutu & Nganga, 2008; Pence & Macgillivray, 2008).

A growing body of literature supports the idea that both long- and short-term study abroad programs can be effective in promoting intercultural competence. Kehl and Morris (2007) compared semester-long and short- term study abroad placements and found both fostered global mindedness, open-mindedness, and reflective thinking, though the depth of the experience shaped outcomes. Similarly, Shiveley and Misco (2015) documented long-term positive impacts of short-term programs, including enhanced cultural awareness, reflective teaching practices, and increased confidence in multicultural settings. Their ERIC-hosted study found that thoughtfully structured short-term programs can deepen global perspectives and increase classroom multiculturalism. Studies from non-U.S. contexts, such as Jin, Cooper, and Golding's (2016) work in China, confirm these trends, suggesting that preservice teachers gain valuable cross-cultural communication skills

and broader pedagogical adaptability. Collectively, this literature underscores the significance of immersive, reflective, and well-supported international field experiences in shaping culturally competent educators.

However, study abroad programs are not inherently transformative. Scholars have warned that without adequate preparation, participants may reinforce stereotypes or adopt deficit-based views of the cultures they encounter (Bennett, 2004; Dervin, 2016). Critical Internationalization (Knight, 2004; Stein, 2021) offers a guiding framework for designing equitable and reflexive global learning experiences. This approach emphasizes reciprocal exchange, cultural humility, and the deconstruction of neocolonial ideologies in international education. When applied in teacher education, Critical Internationalization challenges dominant narratives and supports transformative intercultural learning grounded in mutual respect (Deardorff et al., 2022).

Drawing from these insights, the study reported in this paper investigates how a set of carefully structured study abroad programs to Kenya and Nepal impacted the development of intercultural competence among eight pre-service teachers from a predominantly White, rural university in the western United States. Participants were intentionally immersed in service-learning experiences designed to foster intercultural learning through direct engagement with local educators, students, and community members. Unlike short-term cultural tourism, these programs integrated pre-departure seminars, on-site reflective journaling, and post-travel debriefings that emphasized critical awareness of identity, power, and privilege.

A core problem addressed in this study is the ethnocentric stance that pre-service teachers may hold, which limits their ability to effectively teach students from culturally diverse backgrounds. This study examines two key variables intentional development of intercultural competence and the role of ethnocentrism in obstructing that development within the framework of Critical Internationalization. While existing research emphasizes the potential of study abroad programs to foster intercultural growth, there is limited understanding of how structured pedagogies (e.g., journaling, guided reflection, service learning) function within these programs to support or hinder that growth (Nganga,2015; Vande Berg, Paige, & Lou, 2012).

Research questions

By situating our research within the broader literature on teacher education, intercultural learning, and global citizenship, this study contributes new insights into the conditions under which

international field experiences can be transformative. Our findings also offer practical implications for designing future programs that are more inclusive, reflexive, and grounded in pedagogical frameworks such as Critical Internationalization and plurilingual intercultural competence. The following research questions guided this study:

1.   How do pre-service teachers conceptualize intercultural competence before and after participating in a structured study abroad experience?

2.   What challenges and barriers do participants face in developing intercultural competence during their immersion in Kenya and Nepal?

3.   How do program structures (e.g., reflective journaling, service learning, pre/post instruction) influence the process of intercultural learning?

Through a phenomenological lens, this study examines the lived experiences of participants and their developmental trajectories toward becoming culturally competent educators in an increasingly globalized and multilingual world.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the framework of Critical Internationalization (C.I.), complemented by scholarship on intercultural competence, plurilingualism, and sociolinguistics. Together, these perspectives provide a robust lens for examining how pre-service teachers develop intercultural awareness through study abroad programs in Kenya and Nepal.

Critical Internationalization serves as the primary framework, offering a critique of traditional models of international education that risk reinforcing Eurocentric and neoliberal ideologies (English, 2024; Knight, 2004; Stein, 2021). Rather than framing global education as a neutral or transactional process, C.I. foregrounds issues of power, privilege, and positionality. It emphasizes reciprocal, ethically grounded exchanges between students and host communities, urging programs to disrupt dominant narratives and engage in transformational learning.

To operationalize this framework, the study draws on three theoretical tools commonly associated with the Critical Internationalization literature:

1. *Critical Reflexivity* – This refers to participants' ability to interrogate their own assumptions, cultural privileges, and social positioning (Andreotti, 2006). The study assessed whether

participants moved beyond superficial cultural appreciation to deeper questioning of their own worldviews and the systems that shape them.

2. <u>Ethical Relationality</u> – Rooted in Indigenous scholarship and decolonial pedagogy, this tool evaluates the quality of participants' engagements with host communities (Donald, 2012; Stein et al., 2022). The emphasis is on humility, reciprocal learning, and valuing local knowledge rather than consuming cultural experiences.

3. *Disruption of Dominant Narratives* – Informed by Bhabha (1994) and Stein (2021), this element examines whether participants challenged deficit-oriented or colonial representations of the Global South. It considers moments when participants recognized and resisted the idea that Western norms are superior or universally applicable.

These three tools guided both the design of the Kenya and Nepal programs and the qualitative analysis of participants' experiences, ensuring consistency between theory and research practice. Data collection methods, including journaling, focus groups, and post-program interviews, were intentionally structured to capture moments of reflexivity, resistance, and relational engagement.

The concept of intercultural competence further enriches the framework by focusing on the attitudes, knowledge, and skills required to interact effectively and ethically across cultural contexts. Rooted in multicultural education (Banks, 2013; Gay, 2010), intercultural competence is understood here as dynamic and developmental. Drawing on Bennett's (1993, 2004) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, the study recognizes that participants may move through stages ranging from denial and defense to acceptance and adaptation.

Importantly, the framework also integrates insights from sociolinguistics and plurilingualism to address how language mediates cultural understanding. Clouet, R. (2006, Kramsch (1998) emphasizes that language is not only a tool for communication but also a carrier of cultural identity. Building on this, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) promotes plurilingualism—a recognition that individuals draw on multiple, context-dependent linguistic and cultural repertoires (Council of Europe, 2018; Piccardo, 2017). Plurilingual competence supports a more fluid, integrated model of intercultural understanding, particularly relevant in today's multilingual, digital learning environments (Yeleussiz & Qanay, 2025).

Together, these theoretical elements provide a comprehensive and contextually grounded framework for analyzing the design, implementation, and outcomes of short-term, faculty-led study abroad programs in teacher education. By drawing from interdisciplinary sources, including

decolonial theory, multicultural education, sociolinguistics, and global education, the framework facilitates a nuanced understanding of how intercultural competence can be ethically and intentionally cultivated in pre-service teachers.

Although participants came from the same rural teacher education program in the western United States (N = 4 per program), both groups shared limited exposure to diverse cultural contexts. Their common baseline provided a foundation to explore how distinct settings shaped intercultural development. The next section introduces the Kenya and Nepal programs, illustrating how this framework was applied.

Cultivating Intercultural Competence: Pre-Departure and Field-Based Learning in Kenya and Nepal Study Abroad Programs

To ensure parity and consistency across both study abroad experiences, faculty designed pre-departure programming grounded in Deardorff's (2006) intercultural competence development framework. Both the Kenya and Nepal programs incorporated structured learning activities aimed at cultivating intercultural awareness, global-mindedness, and critical self-reflection in pre-service teachers.

Participants in both cohorts completed a semester-long, hybrid pre-departure course focused on key concepts in intercultural competence, global education, and culturally responsive pedagogy. The course integrated theoretical readings (e.g., Banks, 2013; Kramsch, 1998; Piccardo, 2017), interactive discussions, and practical learning activities. Child development in diverse cultural contexts was a core component, with readings such as Rogoff (2003) and Tobin et al. (2009) offering global perspectives on educational practices.

Core pre-travel activities included:

• Individual interviews exploring participants' definitions and perceptions of "culture" and "intercultural competence."

• Creation of personalized intercultural learning goals informed by course content and group dialogue.

• Bi-monthly, in-person or synchronous class sessions examining cultural frameworks, cross-cultural communication, and identity negotiation.

• Engagement with guest speakers from Kenya and Nepal who shared lived experiences, cultural traditions, and insights on education systems in their respective countries.

Although the structure was consistent across both programs, the Nepal program included additional selection criteria such as written applications and interviews, as requested by the Nepali host institution (Deardorff, 2006). The Kenya program relied on open volunteer enrollment. Safe learning spaces were intentionally fostered during the pre-departure phase to support emotional and intellectual readiness. Through activities focused on cultural humility, identity mapping, and self-reflexivity, participants were encouraged to examine their assumptions and prepare for intercultural discomfort. These sessions provided a foundation for building trust among participants and set the tone for nonjudgmental, exploratory learning throughout the program.

In both cases, participants prepared for immersive, short-term service-learning placements in either Nairobi, Kenya, or Kathmandu, Nepal. These placements were developed in collaboration with local schools and emphasized reciprocal engagement. Pre-service teachers worked alongside local educators, observed teaching practices, co-taught lessons, and participated in everyday school activities. These field-based experiences were designed to support the application of intercultural concepts in authentic contexts and to reinforce the program's broader goal of advancing critical, ethical international learning.

Pre-departure programming was intentionally situated within a Critical Internationalization framework (Knight, 2004; Stein, 2021), drawing on principles from multicultural education (Banks, 2013), sociolinguistics (Kramsch, 1998), and plurilingualism (Council of Europe, 2018; Piccardo, 2017). The curriculum encouraged participants to examine how language, identity, and power operate within global education systems, equipping them to approach their international experiences with cultural humility and a commitment to ethical reciprocity.

Kenya and Nepal Study Abroad Programs: In-country activities

During the study abroad programs in Kenya and Nepal, preservice teachers participated in immersive, service-learning experiences designed to develop intercultural competence, global citizenship, and culturally responsive teaching practices. The Kenya program placed participants in a diverse urban setting, intentionally contrasting their predominantly White, rural U.S. backgrounds. Through tutoring, co-teaching, and supervising classroom activities, participants engaged meaningfully with local educators and students, enabling situated learning experiences (Bringle & Hatcher, 2011). These activities were grounded in a Critical Internationalization framework, challenging assimilationist ideologies and promoting reflexive engagement with cultural diversity (DiAngelo, 2018; Gorski, 2006). Faculty supported critical reflection throughout

the program via structured journaling, group discussions, and guided debriefings, helping participants revisit, process, and rethink their intercultural experiences and reactions. These reflections culminated in oral presentations and final essays that documented their personal and professional growth (Nganga, Nydam, & Kambutu, 2025 Zeichner, & Liston, 2013).

The Nepal program shared a similar structure and objectives but included a more selective admission process, involving written essays and interviews to assess applicants' intercultural readiness (Deardorff, 2006). Participants completed a four-week immersive teaching placement in Kathmandu, applying theoretical concepts in real-world classrooms. Collaborative placements provided opportunities to observe, co-teach, and reflect on educational practices within a culturally rich environment.

Post-program activities

Post-program activities were intentionally aligned across both programs to support reflective practice. Participants completed comprehensive reflective essays and participated in structured post-travel interviews that revisited pre-departure goals and assessed changes in cultural assumptions and teaching philosophies. Final oral presentations allowed students to synthesize their learning, demonstrate intercultural competence, and articulate their evolving perspectives on teaching. These activities fostered a continuous cycle of reflection and application, reinforcing key theoretical constructs and advancing participants' readiness to engage ethically and effectively in diverse educational settings (Merryfield, 2000; Merryfield & Kasai, 2004; Kirkwood-Tucker, 2003).

Method

Research Design

This interpretive phenomenological study explored how planned study abroad programs in Kenya and Nepal influenced pre-service teachers' development of intercultural knowledge and competence. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was selected as the guiding methodological approach because it prioritizes the examination of individuals lived experiences, aiming to understand how participants make sense of their intercultural encounters (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; Smith, 2017).

Informed by the phenomenological traditions of Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology and Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on perception, this study emphasized participants' meaning-making

processes and situated understanding of cultural experiences. The researchers followed the four essential steps in phenomenological research: bracketing, intuiting, analyzing, and describing Van Manen,2023; van Manen, van Manen, 2021). Bracketing involved suspending prior assumptions to engage authentically with the data. Intuiting allowed researchers to attend deeply to participants' narratives, analyzing involved identifying emergent themes, and describing conveyed the essence of participants' intercultural learning.

Population and Sample/ Study Group/Participants

A convenience sample of eight White pre-service teachers from a midsize, rural university in the Rocky Mountain region of the U.S. participated. They were selected due to their availability and enrollment in the teacher education program at the time of the study. All participants had limited prior exposure to racially or linguistically diverse communities. Four traveled to Kenya with two faculty members (both originally from Kenya), while the other four participated in the Nepal program, accompanied by two faculty members—one of Indian origin and one White American. Ethical procedures were followed, and participants gave informed consent.

Before departure, all participants completed a semester-long, one-credit online course focusing on intercultural competence, cultural humility, child development across cultures (Rogoff, 2003), and reflections on personal and social identities. Instructional activities included participation in individual interviews, formulation of personalized intercultural goals, and engagement in structured readings and class discussions. Participants also attended bi-monthly three-hour meetings and guest lectures on Kenyan and Nepali cultural practices. These activities ensured parity in pre-departure preparation between both study locations.

While abroad, participants engaged in daily structured school-based service-learning activities. In both Kenya and Nepal, they shadowed local teachers, co-taught lessons, tutored students, and participated in both academic and extracurricular school events. These immersive activities fostered authentic interaction with host students and educators, enabling participants to compare teaching styles, cultural expectations, and classroom practices. Researchers maintained observational field notes during these activities to document participant engagement and cultural reactions.

In line with IPA methodology, data were collected through pre- and post-travel individual interviews, reflective journals, written goal-setting responses, and observational field notes. Interview protocols were identical across both study sites to enhance credibility. Data were

transcribed verbatim, and thematic analysis was conducted using Smith, (2017) IPA process. Researchers first read and annotated the transcripts for descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments. Emergent themes were then clustered into superordinate categories, allowing for the identification of recurring patterns across participants.

This design allowed the researchers to remain attuned to participants' perspectives while applying a structured analytical process to make sense of their intercultural growth. The emphasis on bracketing and reflexivity, combined with rich, triangulated data sources, strengthens the study's credibility and rigor.

Data Collection and Instruments

Before implementing the study abroad programs, the researchers used multiple qualitative instruments grounded in interpretive phenomenology to gather rich, experiential data from participants in Kenya and Nepal. These instruments included semi-structured individual interviews, focus group discussions, researcher field notes, and classroom observations— administered before, during, and after travel. Interview protocols (Appendix A) used open-ended questions to elicit participants' evolving understandings of cultural identity, intercultural learning, and self-reflection (Van Manen, 2023).

Group discussions and post-travel reflections provided opportunities for participants to co-construct meaning, while field notes captured context-specific insights and researcher reflexivity. Classroom observations documented how participants engaged with new educational environments, further enriching the data. All audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. This triangulation of data sources supported analytical depth and methodological rigor consistent with qualitative research best practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Validation and Trustworthiness

To enhance trustworthiness and rigor, we incorporated key validation strategies drawn from Sousa (2014) *and* Lincoln & Guba (1985). Sousa emphasizes that validation in descriptive phenomenology requires methodological coherence, transparency, and contextual richness.

- Credibility was strengthened through *member checking*, where preliminary themes were shared with participants to confirm interpretive accuracy.
- Triangulation across multiple data sources (interviews, focus groups, observations, field notes) ensured convergence of findings and minimized bias.

- Researcher reflexivity was practiced through analytic memoing and collaborative debriefings, aligning with Sousa's call for introspection and self-awareness in qualitative interpretation.
- Iterative validation was carried out by reexamining emerging codes and categories in relation to raw data to ensure interpretive fidelity—a strategy emphasized by Sousa for preserving coherence between data and analysis.
- Transferability was achieved by providing *rich, thick descriptions* of participant backgrounds, settings, and program structures to allow readers to determine relevance to other educational contexts (Sousa, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data Analysis

The researchers analyzed the data using content analysis within the interpretive phenomenological framework (Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The process included three systematic phases: (1) data preparation, (2) data organization and coding, and (3) interpretation and theme development.

Data Preparation: All transcribed interviews, focus group discussions, field notes, and observation memos were compiled and de-identified. Each researcher first immersed themselves in the data by reading transcripts multiple times to gain familiarity and note initial impressions.

*Data Organization and Coding***:** Researchers independently conducted open coding, identifying keywords and phrases that represented participants' conceptualizations of intercultural competence, cultural identity, internationalization, and cultural engagement. The initial codes were clustered into categories that reflected patterns across the data sets. To ensure intercoder reliability, researchers working with each country (Kenya or Nepal) met in pairs to compare their coding schemes, clarify discrepancies, and reach consensus (Artstein & Poesio, 2008; Campbell, Quincy, Osserman, & Pedersen, 2013; Smith, Jarman & Osborn, 1999). See Appendix B for sample codes.

Interpretation and Thematic Development: In collaborative cross-country meetings, the research teams integrated their findings, identifying overarching themes that captured the essence of participants' experiences. To enhance credibility, the researchers applied member-checking by sharing emergent themes with participants and inviting feedback. Guided by the theoretical framework of Critical Internationalization (Knight, 2004), the researchers collapsed the identified sub-themes into two major themes:

- Theme 1: Becoming Interculturally Competent is an Intentional Act

- Theme 2: Denial, Defense, and Ethnocentrism as Barriers to Developing Intercultural Competence

The integration of theoretical constructs during theme interpretation helped situate the findings within broader discourses of cultural competence, neocolonialism, and global education. This analytic approach was consistent with the study's aim to explore how structured cultural immersion experiences impact pre-service teachers' development of intercultural awareness and skills.

By using rigorous, systematic, and transparent data collection and analysis procedures, this study responded to the call for validity and reliability in qualitative inquiry while remaining grounded in the phenomenological principles of lived experience and meaning-making.

Findings

Theme 1: Becoming Interculturally Competent Is an Intentional Act

Findings from the pre-participation phase revealed that participants consistently viewed the development of intercultural competence as a purposeful and intentional process. Their reflections suggested that cultural growth required goal-setting, self-awareness, and sustained interpersonal effort. These responses align with Deardorff (2023) argument that meaningful intercultural learning is not accidental but demands deep reflection, openness, and behavioral adaptation. This theme also aligns with Deardorff's (2006) process model of intercultural competence, which emphasizes intentional self-assessment and development over time.

For instance, one participant in the Kenya program expressed:

"When in an unfamiliar culture, I would like to adapt my behavior appropriately. I will know I have made progress on this goal when I can communicate and act in a respectful way within that culture by using appropriate verbal and nonverbal cues."

This statement reflected an intentional goal of respectful engagement, which was echoed in post-travel interviews. The same participant later stated:

"I took time to look out for their social cues and what they meant so I could adapt appropriately. Although my goal was about being respectful within a different culture… I think that I have done this within my own culture, too."

Such data exemplify the deliberate nature of intercultural learning. Participants did not view competence as innate but as cultivated through conscious observation and adaptation. These insights align with the framework of Critical Internationalization (Knight, 2004), particularly the

theoretical tools of critical reflexivity (e.g., examining one's own cultural assumptions), ethical relationality (e.g., respectful interactions in others' cultural spaces), and disruption of dominant narratives (e.g., resisting "us vs. them" thinking) (Bhabha, 1994; Quiros, Varghese, & Vanidestine, 2020).

One participant from the Nepal group provided a counterexample of intentional cultural preservation:

"I wasn't willing to negotiate my Christian and White identity. It's incredibly important to me."

This quote illustrates that intentionality also includes purposeful boundary-setting. Though limiting in terms of openness, it reflects conscious cultural self-positioning, which Jiang, Wang & Tschudi (2014) notes is part of intercultural development.

In contrast, another participant in the Nepal group emphasized the importance of engagement:

"It is important to be culturally competent because you are going into someone else's home place. It is nice to be able to interact with them. When people come to America, we expect them to use our language and our ways."

This participant's statement, shared during a post-travel reflection session, revealed an emerging understanding of reciprocity and mutual adaptation. Other participants similarly expressed the ability to "adapt to a new culture," "respect cultural differences," and avoid viewing other traditions as "weird" or "un-American."

Such reflections show how participants' intentionality shaped their ability to bridge cultural differences. These examples reflect the Critical Internationalization framework's aim to foster transformative learning by promoting intentional cultural humility and reciprocal understanding (Buckner & Stein, 2020;Liang, 2025).

Theme 2: Denial, Defense, and Ethnocentrism as Barriers to Developing Intercultural Competence

Despite pre-participation training and reflective prompts, several participants demonstrated patterns of denial, defense, and ethnocentrism during and after their field experiences. According to Bennett (2004, Stein, 2021) such responses represent early stages in the development of intercultural sensitivity and often hinder true understanding.

For example, one participant in the Nepal program, during their final interview, stated:

"I left for America feeling sorry for the students in Nepal. I wish I could make a difference in their lives."

While empathetic, this comment lacked critical awareness of structural inequalities and reflected a saviorist stance that can reproduce neocolonial narratives (Pires,2000; Said, 2023). Similarly, other responses exposed unconscious cultural superiority:

"I was excited about the trip and being able to help others out, but I was not prepared for the poverty I saw. I have mainly traveled to wealthy countries. It was a smack on the nose to see the kind of poverty I saw in Kenya."

"It made me frustrated because back in the States we care about the children giving us their best work always, and here they have showed me that they want to get onto the next activity as quickly as possible."

These sentiments reflected ethnocentric assumptions about schooling, care, and developmental norms, privileging Euro-Western perspectives and dismissing local pedagogical practices (Menon, 2023).

Moreover, participants demonstrated difficulty connecting what they witnessed to deeper historical or structural causes. For instance:

"I had heard it was bad in 'third world' countries, and had seen a few pictures, but it did not fully sink how bad it was until I was in Kenya looking at the buildings and people."

This view lacked critical interrogation of colonial legacies, despite participants having been exposed to pre-travel readings on British colonialism's impact in Kenya and Nepal. The inability to make these connections suggests a gap in critical reflexivity, which is one of the analytic tools used in this study to assess learning outcomes.

Another participant's response offered insight into how cultural values were judged against familiar norms:

"This was really hard for me to watch because back at home we encourage the kids to have access to books at any point of the day… It looked as though literature may not be valued as much here as it is back home."

Such commentary advanced, perhaps unknowingly, a view of cultural deficiency. By assuming that "access to books" equates to educational quality or care, this participant imposed a narrow, westernized ideal.

These reflections also aligned with theoretical tool #2: disruption (or lack thereof) of dominant narratives. While Critical Internationalization calls for deconstructing narratives of deficiency (Stein, 2021), many participants fell back on comparison-based models of engagement. Their

interpretations implicitly judged the value of unfamiliar practices through a Western lens, rather than considering context or cultural variability. For example, in Nepali classrooms, participants encountered teaching methods such as group recitation, rote memorization, and large class sizes with limited access to books or technology—practices that diverged significantly from the individualized, inquiry-based approaches emphasized in U.S. teacher education programs. These unfamiliar pedagogies often prompted discomfort or defensiveness, particularly among participants with no prior international experience. One participant reflected, "Although I need to look at this from a cultural standpoint, I am hesitant. This is something I feel strongly about, and I am not sure I will be able to accept that they teach differently in Nepal." This quote underscores a tension between openness and resistance—central to the process of intercultural development— and highlights how cultural difference can feel threatening when existing beliefs remain unexamined. Without adequate cultural grounding or critical reflection, these differences were sometimes interpreted as educational shortcomings, rather than as contextually appropriate practices shaped by local histories, resources, and values.

By using the three theoretical tools from the Critical Internationalization framework—critical reflexivity, ethical relationality, and disruption of dominant narratives—this study interpreted participants' reflections within a framework that acknowledges both developmental growth and persistent limitations.

These findings suggest that while intentionality can foster intercultural competence, ethnocentrism and unexamined assumptions can obstruct deeper understanding. Structured reflection, reciprocal dialogue, and culturally responsive program design are necessary for achieving more transformative outcomes in future iterations of study abroad programs.

Discussion, Conclusion and Implications

The findings from this study offer several important implications for teacher education programs, particularly those focused on preparing social studies teachers to be culturally competent and globally aware. Developing intercultural competence is not achieved through mere exposure to diverse cultures; rather, it is an active, reflective, and multifaceted process. For teacher education programs, this underscores the need for intentional, well-structured, and critically grounded curricular design. As emphasized by Shehneh (2024), cultivating citizenship education in pluralistic societies requires relationality, care, and ethical engagement across cultural boundaries,

principles that align closely with the findings of this study. Additionally, integrating open educational resources (OER) in teacher preparation can enhance engagement, provide flexible learning pathways, and support reflective practice, further facilitating intercultural and global competence (Ndiangui et al., 2025).

The Role of Cultural Competence in Teacher Preparation

Cultural competence is essential for teachers, especially in social studies, as it fosters inclusive classrooms and promotes understanding across diverse perspectives. As societies become more interconnected, educators must possess not only knowledge of world cultures but also the skills to navigate and respect cultural differences. Participants in this study initially associated cultural competence with adapting to and respecting unfamiliar cultures. However, post-study abroad reflections revealed that intercultural competence is a dynamic process influenced by personal beliefs, experiences, and biases.

To support this development, the study abroad programs integrated structured opportunities for cultural self-reflection and identity analysis. Pre-departure activities included reflective writing, critical discussions, and faculty-led seminars that modeled cultural humility. Participants established intercultural learning goals and engaged in guided journaling and dialogue throughout the program. Despite these efforts, some participants maintained pre-existing biases, emphasizing that self-awareness alone is insufficient for transformative learning.

Future iterations should expand emphasis on the political and historical contexts of host countries and incorporate post-program courses or workshops that deepen critical reflection. Self-awareness is crucial, but it must be paired with action that challenges bias and promotes equity. Intercultural competence must be embedded across the teacher preparation curriculum, not confined to travel experiences.

Intercultural Competence: Fluid, Shifting, and Personal

This study found that participants' willingness to engage with unfamiliar cultures varied significantly. While some developed openness and appreciation, others expressed resistance, particularly when cultural practices conflicted with personal values or beliefs. For example, one participant stated an unwillingness to "negotiate [their] Christian and White identity," highlighting entrenched ethnocentrism (Bennett, 2004).

Participants were not asked to reject their identities but were encouraged to reflect on how cultural values are interpreted differently across contexts. Pre- and post-travel activities focused on identity, religious beliefs, and value dissonance. These reflections took place within a supportive, nonjudgmental environment (Stein & Andreotti, 2017), emphasizing the fluid and iterative nature of intercultural competence.

Teacher education programs must create learning environments that support discomfort, dialogue, and ethical engagement with complexity. This involves addressing controversial issues such as cultural imperialism or language hierarchies through guided reflection, critical dialogue, and culturally responsive facilitation by instructors with lived international experience. As de Wit (2019) and Jiang, Wang, & Tschudi (2014) emphasize, developing intercultural competence requires more than exposure. It necessitates pedagogical frameworks that support critical self-awareness and sustained reflection. In this study, growth often emerged from post-travel tension, rather than immediate understanding. Thus, teacher education must include structures for post-immersion reflection to help students progress from ethnocentric perspectives to intercultural curiosity   and   humility.

Importance of Well-Planned Cultural Immersion Programs

A key implication of this study is the importance of intentional and well-structured cultural immersion programs in developing intercultural competence. Participants who engaged in guided, structured experiences such as classroom shadowing, co-teaching, and reflective dialogue with host country educators showed greater appreciation for cultural differences and were more likely to challenge their assumptions (Jiang et al., 2014; Terzuolo,2018).

In contrast, participants who lacked such structure often interpreted cultural differences through deficit lenses. This suggests that the success of cultural immersion relies heavily on thoughtful program design. Teacher education programs should embed experiential and dialogical learning, aligned with Critical Internationalization (Knight, 2004; Stein, 2021), to support identity negotiation   and   critical   global   understanding.

Creating Safe Learning Spaces for Intercultural Growth

This study highlights the importance of safe learning environments for developing intercultural competence. Participants expressed discomfort when confronted with ideas that challenged their values, such as the role of colonialism in shaping poverty in the Global South. While some resisted, others   grew   through   supportive,   structured   reflection.

Safe spaces were created through a multi-phase learning model: (1) pre-travel sessions on cultural humility and identity mapping; (2) in-country debriefs and peer discussions in a judgment-free setting; and (3) post-travel reflections and interviews that allowed for revisiting and reinterpreting experiences. These practices aligned with Bell's (1980) model of interest convergence by centering mutual benefit and empathy. Participants were encouraged to question assumptions and build cross-cultural understanding.

Programs can replicate this by embedding trauma-informed facilitation, critical pedagogy, and non-evaluative reflection throughout their design. When supported effectively, intercultural discomfort becomes a site for transformation, not avoidance.

Recommendations for Social Studies Teacher Education Programs

Social studies teacher education programs must intentionally embed critical reflection on identity, positionality, and systems of power within their curriculum to prepare future educators for culturally responsive and justice-oriented pedagogy. Given that social studies is inherently political concerned with democracy, citizenship, and civic participation, teachers must be equipped to examine their own biases, cultural assumptions, and social locations. This self-examination is foundational for teaching inclusive histories, addressing structural inequities, and fostering students' critical consciousness (Andreotti, 2006; Bell, 1980; DiAngelo, 2018).

Based on the findings of this study, one key recommendation is that teacher preparation programs should integrate sustained, scaffolded intercultural learning across all phases of study abroad experiences—before, during, and after travel. This includes embedding reflective practices such as journaling, guided group discussions, and structured debriefs that allow pre-service teachers to grapple with discomfort, critically examine global power dynamics, and develop intercultural competence in psychologically safe environments. Moreover, leveraging open educational resources (OER) and digital tools can support ongoing reflection, increase engagement, and provide flexible, accessible platforms for scaffolded learning (Ndiangui et al., 2025).

Such intentional structuring, grounded in frameworks like Critical Internationalization and culturally responsive pedagogy, helps transform study abroad from a superficial cultural encounter into a deep site of pedagogical and personal growth. It also supports teacher candidates in becoming ethically grounded, empathetic educators capable of engaging diverse learners and advancing equity in their future classrooms.

Conclusions and limitations

This study reinforces the value of critically structured study abroad programs in fostering intercultural growth among pre-service teachers. Guided by Critical Internationalization and supported by reflective pedagogy, these programs can challenge ethnocentrism and promote self-examination of identity and power. Intercultural competence must be viewed as an ongoing, relational, and context-driven process.

Although some participants demonstrated meaningful growth, others resisted engagement with unfamiliar norms, underscoring the need for deeper interventions. Programs must address historical and political dimensions of host cultures, provide safe reflective spaces, and guide students through post-immersion meaning-making (de Wit, 2019; Liang, 2025; Jiang et al., 2014). Limitations include a small, homogenous sample of eight White pre-service teachers from a rural U.S. university, limiting generalizability. The study's geographic and institutional specificity also narrows its applicability. Future research should involve larger, more diverse cohorts and broader cultural contexts.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes to the literature on teacher education and global learning. It signals the importance of preparing future social studies teachers not only to encounter cultural diversity but to interrogate systems of inequality and reflect ethically on their role as educators in a globally interconnected world

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<div align="center">**Appendixes**</div>

Appendix A:

Research instruments and protocols

This appendix details the research instruments and protocols used in the study, including interview guides, focus group questions, journaling prompts, and validation strategies such as triangulation. These tools were designed to explore participants' experiences in study abroad programs to Kenya and Nepal and to examine the development of intercultural competence through immersive cultural learning.

1. Individual Interview Protocol

The individual interviews were semi-structured and conducted both pre- and post-travel. Pre-travel interviews focused on participants' cultural backgrounds, expectations, definitions of intercultural competence, and perceived readiness for cross-cultural immersion. Post-travel interviews revisited these themes and allowed participants to reflect on their growth and challenges faced during the immersion experience.

Sample Questions:

- How do you define intercultural competence?
- What do you expect to learn from the study abroad program?
- Can you describe a moment that challenged your cultural perspective during the program?

2. Focus Group Protocol

Focus group sessions were held at three stages: pre-departure, mid-program (in-country), and post-return. These group discussions encouraged peer reflection on shared experiences, cultural challenges, and personal growth.

Guiding Questions:

- What has surprised you the most so far about the culture you are engaging with?
- How are your beliefs or teaching assumptions being challenged?

3. Reflective Journaling Protocol

Participants maintained reflective journals throughout the program. Journals were reviewed weekly by the research team. Prompts encouraged introspection about daily experiences, cultural differences, emotional responses, and teaching practices.

Sample Prompts:

- What cultural difference did you notice today and how did you respond to it?

- What assumptions did you find yourself questioning?

4. Validation and Trustworthiness

To ensure credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability, the following strategies were employed:

- Triangulation: Data were triangulated using interviews, focus groups, journals, and field notes.
  Member Checks: Participants reviewed and confirmed key findings and thematic interpretations.

- Peer Debriefing: Co-researchers reviewed coding and analysis to ensure consistency and minimize bias.

- Audit Trail: Detailed documentation of coding decisions and analytic memos was maintained.

Appendix B:

Coding Decisions and Analytic Memos

Example Excerpt from Participant Journal (Kenya):

"I was surprised by how students in Kenya seemed eager to learn, even though the classroom had so few resources. It made me realize how much I've taken for granted in my own schooling."

Initial Codes:

- Resource Awareness

- Student Motivation

- Cultural Surprise

Analytic Memo 1 (Kenya Coding Meeting #2):

This journal entry reflects a moment of cultural dissonance. The participant is re-evaluating their assumptions about resource availability and its relationship to student engagement. This suggests movement toward ethno-relative thinking and indicates the participant is beginning to question deficit narratives they may have held. We decided to code this under both Critical Reflection and Re-evaluation of Privilege, aligning with the study's focus on intercultural competence development.

Example Excerpt from Interview Transcript (Nepal Participant):

"I found it hard to adjust to the different way teachers communicated with students. At first, I thought it was wrong, but later I saw it was just a different style."

Initial Codes:

- Communication Differences

- Adjustment Challenges

- Perspective Shift

Analytic Memo 2 (Nepal Coding Round #1):

This comment marks a clear shift from ethnocentrism to ethno-relativism, aligning with Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity. The participant demonstrates perspective transformation, which is a critical indicator of intercultural growth. We added the new sub-code "From Judgment to Curiosity" to track similar transitions across the data set.

Thematic Clustering Decision:

After several coding rounds and memo reviews, related codes such as:

- Re-evaluation of Privilege

- Perspective Transformation

- Cultural Humility

were collapsed into a broader theme:

Theme 1: Intercultural Competence as an Intentional and Evolving Process