The immersion imperative: Students' lived experiences of developing multicultural competence in interprofessional, multiethnic teams during the university third trimester field practical programme

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ABSTRACT

Multicultural competence is widely claimed as a graduate attribute in higher education, yet the evidence base describing how it develops is drawn predominantly from international mobility, classroom encounters, and short-term project teams in the Global North. Intra-national cultural diversity, the form of difference most African students navigate daily, remains largely unexamined. This article analyses the processes through which undergraduate students develop multicultural competence within the interprofessional, multiethnic teams of the Third Trimester Field Practical Programme (TTFPP) at the University for Development Studies, Ghana. The TTFPP is a mandatory, credit-bearing, two-year community immersion in which student teams live and work in rural Ghanaian communities for seven to eight weeks annually without resident supervision. The analysis is oriented by an integrated framework in which four bodies of theory, The Cultural Dynamic Framework, Experiential Learning Theory, Social Learning Theory and the Cultural Mosaic Theory. Adopting a social-constructivist paradigm and hermeneutic phenomenological design, the study draws on thirty-five individual in-depth interviews, eight focus group discussions involving fifty-four students, and four coordinator and supervisor interviews (ninety-three participants total), analysed through interpretative phenomenological analysis structured by reflexive thematic analysis. Findings reveal that multicultural competence developed through two processes: (1) learning driven by necessity, comprising communicative adaptation under task demand and the disruption of inter-ethnic stereotypes through counter-stereotypical relational encounters; and (2) structural enablers, comprising the reflective field notebook, the Year 2 development proposal as an interdisciplinary synthesis task, and peer-governed learning in the absence of supervisory authority. Year 1 generated adaptation and stereotype disruption; Year 2 converted these gains into disciplinary synthesis and pre-normed collaboration. The study argues that competence in this setting is produced by the institutional structuring of necessity rather than by exhortation or goodwill, and that assessment design functions as a pedagogical instrument of intercultural development rather than merely its measure.

Keywords: Community Immersion, Experiential Learning, Ghana, Inter-professional Collaboration, Multicultural Competence, Multiethnic Teamwork

I. INTRODUCTION

The claim that universities should produce graduates capable of working across cultural differences has become close to universal in higher education policy. However, the empirical account of how such capability is formed remains narrow. Multicultural competence, understood as the integrated set of attitudes, knowledge, skills, internal orientations, and critically conscious behaviours that enables a person to communicate, collaborate, and act effectively and appropriately across cultural differences (Deardorff, 2006; Susan et al., 2012), has been studied principally where it is most visible to Northern institutions: in study-abroad and exchange programmes, in internationalised classrooms, and in short-term or virtual project teams (Chan et al., 2021; Jin & Sercu, 2025). The developmental processes that operate when students encounter difference at home, among people who share a passport and a national curriculum but not a language, religion, kinship system, or disciplinary vocabulary, have received far less attention. This omission matters most acutely in contexts where intra-national plurality is the dominant experiential reality. Ghana's 2021 census documents major ethnic groupings including Akan, Mole-Dagbani, Ewe, Ga-Dangme, Gurma, Guan, Grusi, and Mande, with more than one hundred ethnic groups speaking approximately seventy-nine languages (Ghana Statistical Service, 2021). Yet the small Ghanaian literature on intercultural competence has concentrated on international students and external academic partnerships rather than on this domestic plurality (Abdulai, 2019; Alhassan et al., 2020; Mensah, 2019).

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Community-based and experiential learning offers the most plausible pedagogical route to such competence. Experiential and service-learning scholarship consistently reports that intercultural learning strengthens when learners meet differences in authentic settings that demand practical problem-solving, communication, and relationship-building (Kiely, 2005; Kolb, 1984; Passarelli & Kolb, 2023). Qiu et al.'s (2024) meta-analysis found that cultural intelligence yields its strongest learning outcomes when students are given authentic opportunities to apply it in real community contexts. Most documented programmes, however, are short, supervised, and structured around service delivery rather than co-residence.

The Third Trimester Field Practical Programme (TTFPP) of the University for Development Studies (UDS) departs from this pattern on every dimension. Launched in 1993, one year after the university's establishment under Provisional National Defence Council Law 279 with an explicitly developmental mandate to blend the academic world with that of the community (Tanko, 2015), the TTFPP is a mandatory, credit-bearing, two-year, team-based community immersion undertaken by all first- and second-year students. Teams of approximately ten students, typically balanced by gender and drawn from multiple faculties and schools, are deployed to rural communities where they reside communally for seven to eight weeks in each of two consecutive years without a resident university supervisor. In Year 1, they conduct a participatory community needs assessment and produce a community profile; in Year 2, they return to build on that profile and design community development interventions. Performance is assessed across six equally weighted components administered by the Directorate of Community Relations and Outreach Programmes (DCROP), with an explicit reward for linkages and integration across disciplinary perspectives and a zero-tolerance rule under which a zero score in any single component produces a zero total. In September 2023 alone, DCROP dispatched 8,746 students across twenty-two districts (DailyGuide Network, 2023; UDS DCROP, 2023).

Despite three decades of operation at national scale, the internal processes of the programme remain undocumented. Prior TTFPP research has recorded outcomes, benefits, and challenges (Kwoyiga, 2024; Kwoyiga & Apusigah, 2019; Mohammed & Yirbekyaa, 2018; Mwingyine et al., 2017; Tanko, 2015) without analysing multicultural competence development as the phenomenon of interest. What happens inside teams, how difference is experienced, negotiated, and converted into capability, and which programme features drive that conversion, has not been established. The gap is simultaneously contextual (no comparable African residential, peer-governed, interprofessional programme has been studied), conceptual (the interaction of disciplinary with ethnic and linguistic diversity is largely untheorised), and practical (DCROP cannot optimise orientation, team composition, supervision, or assessment without evidence of the processes those levers would act upon).

1.1 Research Questions

i. How do students experience and navigate cultural differences within interprofessional, multiethnic TTFPP teams?
ii. What processes characterise the development of multicultural competence during community immersion?
iii. How do the experiences and developmental processes differ between Year 1 and Year 2 of the programme?
iv. Which structural features of the TTFPP enable or constrain the development of multicultural competence?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

The analysis is oriented by an integrated framework in which four bodies of theory perform distinct interpretive functions. The Cultural Dynamic Framework (Langstedt, 2018) supplies the ontological premise that culture is constructed and reconstructed through everyday social interaction rather than fixed in individuals or groups. TTFPP students are therefore not understood as carrying pre-formed cultural identities into the programme but as continuously reconstructing those identities through encounters with teammates and hosts. What the programme can produce is not merely knowledge about other groups but a change in how students construct their own cultural position. Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984, 2015) supplies the account of how encounter becomes learning, through the cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. Morris's (2020) revision of the model, which foregrounds the conditions under which experience reliably produces learning, is particularly germane: it directs attention to task demand as a determinant of whether the cycle is completed.

Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977, 1986) explains the peer-mediated mechanisms operating in the absence of resident supervision. Where no external authority models intercultural conduct, students acquire strategies by observing teammates, with the asymmetry Bandura predicts: teams containing members with strong conflict-resolution and intercultural skills model these upward, while teams without such members may model less productive strategies with no corrective intervention available. Contact theory (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) frames the analysis of stereotype change. Bennett's (1986, 2017) developmental model of intercultural sensitivity, together with King and Baxter Magolda's (2005) account of intercultural maturity, supplies the developmental vocabulary for describing movement from ethnocentric to ethnorelative orientation. Wenger's (1998) communities of practice concept is used to interpret the team-level distribution of competence that emerges in the second year.

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TTFPP programme environment (interprofessional team composition, the iterative two-year structure, participatory methodology, the six-component assessment framework), students' lived experiences (disorientation, negotiation of roles and communication norms, participatory community enquiry, reflective processing), and multicultural competence itself. The relationships are bi-directional: experience shapes developing competence, and developing competence shapes which encounters students seek and how they process them. Three programme conditions moderate the system: the intensity of round-the-clock communal living, the absence of resident supervision, and the mandatory assessment structure, to which the interprofessional composition of teams is added as a fourth. Cultural Mosaic Theory (Adler & Aycan, 2018) anchors the framework's normative premise: competence development should produce cultural enrichment rather than homogenisation, students more capable of engaging difference precisely because they have deepened rather than abandoned their own cultural foundations.

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 The Conceptual Architecture of Multicultural Competence

Deardorff's (2006) pyramid model remains the most empirically grounded framework in the field, organising competence into attitudes (respect, openness, curiosity), knowledge (cultural self-awareness, culture-specific and deep cultural knowledge, sociolinguistic awareness), skills (observation, listening, analysing, interpreting, relating), internal outcomes (flexibility, adaptability, empathy, ethnorelative perspective), and external outcomes (effective and appropriate behaviour and communication). Its process orientation, in which attitudes form the foundational layer enabling knowledge and skill acquisition, captures the developmental logic of competence better than static trait inventories.

Three critiques shape how the model is used here. Dervin (2010) objects that the competence frame implies an achievable endpoint, misrepresenting what is better understood as lifelong learning; competence is therefore treated below as a trajectory rather than a terminal state. Scholars in critical race and postcolonial traditions (Kubota, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1994) argue that dominant frameworks centre the norms of culturally dominant groups and critique them with direct purchase in northern Ghana, where students from historically marginalised communities may bring cultural knowledge that standard frameworks do not recognise. Susan et al. (2012) extend the framework to include critical consciousness, awareness of how privilege and oppression structure intercultural encounters, and commitment to equity in intercultural practice, an extension particularly apt where students are engaged in development work rather than cultural exchange. This article adopts the integrated conceptualisation combining Deardorff's cognitive-affective-behavioural dimensions with the critical consciousness component.

2.2.2 Experiential and Service-Learning Accounts of Competence Development

Kiely's (2005) longitudinal study of international service-learning remains the most methodologically developed account of how transformative intercultural learning occurs through immersion. Its central finding is counterintuitive: the deepest competence development was triggered not by positive cultural encounters but by dissonance, confusion, and moral disturbance, when students' existing frameworks were challenged by what they witnessed. Kiely names this transformative disruption productive disorientation that yields conceptual transformation when processed through reflection. Passarelli and Kolb (2023) locate the critical variable at the reflective observation stage of the experiential cycle: students who engage in substantive reflection after cultural encounters develop more flexible competence than those who move directly from experience to action. Collopy et al. (2020) shift attention from structure to relational conditions, finding that mutual respect, genuine co-learning, and critical reflection on power matter more than programme architecture. Cruz-Feliciano (2023), writing decolonially, argues for reframing community-based learning as process- rather than outcome-oriented. These accounts converge on reflection as the mechanism converting experience into competence, and on institutional support as the condition enabling reflection. What they do not establish is what happens when reflection is unsupervised and when the pressure to learn arises from task consequence rather than pedagogical invitation, precisely the conditions the TTFPP creates.

2.2.3 Contact, Stereotype, and Relational Encounter

Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis and Pettigrew and Tropp's (2006) meta-analytic confirmation establish that inter-group contact under appropriate conditions reduces prejudice. The literature has been less precise about the mechanism, and in particular about which features of contact do the work. Studies of intercultural learning in mobility programmes report attitude change without generally specifying whether the change follows generalised positive affect or the direct contradiction of specific prejudicial content. This distinction becomes analytically consequential in settings where the relevant stereotypes are locally specific, historically sedimented, and attached to named groups rather than to abstract categories of foreignness, as in northern Ghana following the inter-ethnic conflicts of the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s.

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2.2.4 Teamwork, Interprofessional Collaboration, and Diversity

The teamwork literature has addressed cultural diversity extensively but has rarely examined its intersection with disciplinary diversity. Salas et al. (2005) identify team leadership, mutual performance monitoring, backup behaviour, adaptability, and team orientation as core determinants of effectiveness, while acknowledging that the applicability of such models to culturally heterogeneous teams remains an open empirical question (Salas et al., 2008). Harrison and Klein's (2007) typology adds precision: diversity as variety (categorically different information and experience) is most reliably associated with informational gains, whereas separation and disparity (differences in status, language proficiency, or contextual knowledge) more often produce conflict and inequity. Van Knippenberg and Schippers (2007) conclude that diversity effects are mediated by communication processes and moderated by task complexity and member orientation; Pieterse et al. (2013) identify learning orientation as the critical moderator; and Guzman-Rodriguez et al. (2023) find that cultural sensitivity, adaptability, and cohesion predict multicultural team performance whereas diversity per se does not. The interprofessional education literature documents both the value and the difficulty of learning across professional boundaries (Reeves et al., 2016; Williams et al., 2024).

Empirical studies of student teams supply further relevant detail. Lohle and Terrell (2016) identify communication, accountability, and scheduling as dominant challenges, amplified by cultural and linguistic differences. Johnson et al. (2015) trace student team leaders' movement from self-doubt to cross-cultural confidence, a trajectory directly relevant where leadership emerges from peer negotiation rather than institutional appointment. Akbari et al. (2021) find that physical co-presence generates qualitatively different solidarity than virtual collaboration. De Vera and Marasigan (2020) report that experiential cooperation is experienced as more meaningful than instruction, but only where students take genuine ownership, with free-riding and diffidence among less assertive members as principal constraints. Kamau and Spong (2014) document students' difficulty in moving from instructor-led to self-directed learning in problem-based settings.

2.3 The Gap Addressed

Read together, this literature establishes that immersion, dissonance, reflection, contact, and learning orientation matter, but it leaves three questions unanswered for the setting examined here. First, the processes of competence development in intra-national African community immersion are undocumented; the Ghanaian literature addresses international encounters (Abdulai, 2019; Alhassan et al., 2020) and the TTFPP literature addresses outcomes rather than processes (Kwoyiga & Apusigah, 2019; Mohammed & Yirbekyaa, 2018). Second, the interaction of disciplinary factors with ethnic and linguistic diversity in shaping learning has not been theorised. Third, the field is methodologically dominated by cross-sectional survey designs that measure competence levels but cannot reach the meaning-making through which competence forms; phenomenological work exists but concentrates on international sojourners. Students' lived experiences across two consecutive years of the same immersion, in the same programme structure, therefore warrant focused attention: they offer access to competence as process rather than as score, and to the developmental difference that iteration makes.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Paradigm and Design

The study is underpinned by social constructivism, which holds that knowledge is actively constructed through interaction, language, and shared meaning-making rather than discovered as pre-existing objective reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Crotty, 1998). This paradigm was preferred over interpretivism because the phenomenon of interest is itself social: multicultural competence in the TTFPP is produced through peer learning, team negotiation, and communal living rather than through individual sense-making alone.

The design is hermeneutic phenomenology in the tradition of van Manen (1990, 2014), concerned with the rigorous study of lived experience as it is inhabited pre-reflectively rather than as it is subsequently theorised. Hermeneutic rather than descriptive phenomenology was chosen because the researcher, a UDS doctoral candidate familiar with Ghanaian higher education and the cultural landscapes of northern Ghana, brings interpretive horizons that cannot be bracketed and that, following Gadamer (1989), constitute the condition of understanding rather than an obstacle to it. Ethnography, case study, and grounded theory were each considered and set aside: ethnography privileges observed practice over experienced meaning, case study seeks explanatory accounts of bounded instances, and grounded theory aims at theory generation, whereas this study proceeds from an established theoretical framework toward interpretation of lived experience.

3.2 Study Context and Population

The study was conducted across the operational landscape of the TTFPP: the UDS campuses at Tamale, Nyankpala, and Dungu from which the programme is administered, and the rural host communities to which teams were deployed. Two deployment landscapes were involved. Second-year teams were deployed to communities in the

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Northern Region and surrounding northern regions, characterised by savannah livelihoods of smallholder agriculture, agro-pastoralism, and small-scale trade, chieftaincy-based traditional governance, and a plural religious landscape in which Islam, Christianity, and traditional religion coexist. First-year teams in the 2023/2024 cycle were deployed, under DCROP's regional rotation policy, to communities in the Ashanti Region, characterised by forest-zone livelihoods, Twi-dominant communication, and the Asante chieftaincy system (GBC Ghana Online, 2024). The contrast was analytically deliberate: in one or other deployment, students from every region of Ghana encountered community cultural worlds substantially unfamiliar to them. The target population comprised all first- and second-year UDS undergraduates participating in the TTFPP during the 2023/2024 academic year together with the coordinators and supervisors overseeing them, a population numbering in the thousands and distributed across multiple regions and campuses.

3.3 Sampling and Participants

Given the size and dispersion of this population, purposive sampling was adopted, in the criterion variant appropriate to phenomenological enquiry (Palinkas et al., 2015; Patton, 2015). The governing criterion was direct, meaningful experience of the phenomenon and capacity to articulate it. Sampling proceeded through three linked levels. At the community level, sites were drawn from both deployment landscapes. At the team level, eight student teams were selected against four criteria: ethnic diversity (at least four distinct ethnic groups per team, verified against DCROP placement records), interprofessional diversity (at least three faculties or schools), gender balance consistent with the Field Guide's recommended composition, and confirmed accessibility and willingness. At the individual level, selection sought maximum variation in information richness across cohort, faculty, ethnicity, religion, and team role.

The realised sample comprised ninety-three participants: fifty-four students across eight focus group discussions, thirty-five students in individual in-depth interviews, and four coordinators and supervisors. The individual interviewees spanned both cohorts (fourteen Year 1, twenty-one Year 2), seven faculties or programme areas, the Akan, Dagomba, Ewe, Gonja, Konkomba, Mamprusi, Frafra, and Kasena ethnic groups, both Christian and Muslim affiliations, and both leadership and ordinary member roles. Focus group participants were 51.9 per cent male and 48.1 per cent female, and 51.9 per cent first-year and 48.1 per cent second-year. The four coordinators held between seven and fourteen years of oversight experience across the deployment regions.

Sample adequacy was judged by information power (Malterud et al., 2016) rather than statistical logic, and saturation was assessed formally rather than asserted. Following Guest et al. (2020), transcripts were analysed in interview order, with the thematic structure provisionally established from the first ten interviews and the focus group corpus serving as the base against which each subsequent transcript's contribution was recorded in a saturation tracking grid. No new major theme emerged after the base series; new codes within existing sub-themes continued to appear up to the cluster of Interviews 28 to 30; no substantially new code emerged after Interview 30, and Interviews 31 to 35 contributed confirmatory and illustrative evidence only. Consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2021) caution that themes are interpretive products rather than pre-existing entities, this is reported as a situated analytical judgement documented in the audit trail rather than as an objective endpoint.

3.4 Data Collection

Four primary sources were used. Focus group discussions with intact student teams were the most data-rich source, chosen because they mirror the team-based context under investigation, because they accord with Ghanaian norms of collective deliberation, and because they allow participants to build on, qualify, and correct one another's accounts (Morgan, 2019). The eight discussions were conducted in community settings, typically under trees or in community centres, lasted approximately sixty to ninety minutes, and were moderated facilitatively, with a research assistant recording non-verbal interaction and group dynamics in a structured observation protocol. Individual in-depth interviews accessed reflections participants might withhold in a group, including private moments of disorientation, emotional response, and individual strategy; team leaders were deliberately included for their boundary-spanning vantage. Coordinator and supervisor interviews supplied comparative, longitudinal institutional perspective across many cohorts. Field observation and three-layered reflective journaling (descriptive, interpretive, and reflexive) accompanied all fieldwork. Interview and focus group guides organised enquiry around five thematic areas: (1) initial cultural encounters within team and community; (2) experiences of difference in daily team life, including food, communication, conflict, and decision-making; (3) strategies developed for navigating difference and building cohesion; (4) community engagement and participatory activity; and (5) reflections on learning and change in cultural self-understanding. Questions were phrased to elicit experiential accounts rather than opinions, consistent with the phenomenological orientation. Data collection was conducted primarily in English, the university's medium of instruction and the shared language across the participant group. Participants were encouraged to use terms in Dagbani, Twi, Hausa, and Ewe where these expressed an experience more precisely; such terms were recorded verbatim and translated with participants' assistance at the transcript-checking stage. The proportion of local-language use was not quantified, which is acknowledged as a limitation.

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3.5 Transcription and Analysis

All sessions were audio-recorded with consent, transferred to encrypted, password-protected university storage within twenty-four hours, and deleted from the recording device. Transcription was verbatim, under the researcher's supervision, using consistent conventions: ellipses for pauses, parentheses for laughter and notable non-verbal features, square brackets for clarifications and translations, and verbatim recording of code-switching with English glosses in square brackets. Transcripts were checked against audio before analysis, and participants were offered the opportunity to review, clarify, add to, or withdraw material. No participant withdrew at the member-checking stage; the number completing transcript review was not recorded in a reportable form, which limits the weight placed on member checking.

Analysis followed interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith et al., 2009) within the procedural structure of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021) and oriented throughout by van Manen's (1990, 2014) hermeneutic commitments. Six iterative phases were worked through: (1) repeated reading against audio with impressions recorded in the reflexive journal; (2) identification of meaning units and assignment of descriptive codes both inductively and deductively, reflecting the hermeneutic movement between prior understanding and fresh encounter; (3) clustering of codes into initial themes; (4) review of provisional themes against the full dataset; (5) definition of final themes with boundary descriptions and essence statements, with sub-themes preserving nuance; and (6) drafting and redrafting, writing being understood as part of analysis. Taguette (version 1.4, open-source). Analysis was conducted by a single primary coder; no inter-rater reliability coefficient is claimed, and interpretive credibility rests instead on supervisor debriefing, the audit trail, reflexive journaling, and the transparent presentation of analytical decisions.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Rigour was pursued through the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was supported by prolonged and repeated engagement with selected teams, triangulation across focus groups, individual interviews, coordinator interviews, field observation, and institutional documents, transcript checking, and supervisor debriefing. Transferability was supported by thick description of the programme, the deployment communities, the selection criteria, and the collection procedures. Dependability rested on an audit trail comprising interview guides, field notes, reflexive memos, the coding framework, provisional theme maps, and final analytical decisions. Confirmability was pursued through verbatim extracts, documented reflexivity, and explicit acknowledgement that the findings constitute an interpretive account produced through the researcher's engagement with participants' accounts rather than a neutral reproduction of reality. The breadth of the individual interview component multiplied the independent accounts against which each theme could be tested, extended the range of host-community contexts and team roles represented, and enabled a transcript-by-transcript assessment of saturation in place of an asserted one. Reflexivity was treated as an epistemological commitment rather than a procedure (Finlay, 2008; van Manen, 2014). Ethical approval was obtained from the UDS Institutional Review Board. All participants provided written informed consent, were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Findings

Analysis of the corpus identified two overarching themes accounting for the processes through which multicultural competence developed within TTFPP teams. The first, learning driven by necessity, comprises the communicative adaptation compelled by task demand and the disruption of inter-ethnic stereotypes through relational contact. The second, structural enablers of development, comprises three features of programme architecture that converted encounter into competence: the reflective field notebook, the Year 2 development proposal as an interdisciplinary synthesis task, and peer-governed learning in the absence of supervisory authority. A third section reports the coordinators' longitudinal observations of the developmental arc, which corroborate and qualify the student accounts. To align findings with the study's key variables, multicultural competence, interprofessional interaction, multiethnic teamwork, and immersion experiences, the presentation below is organised to address each dimension explicitly while maintaining the integrity of the thematic structure.

4.1.1 Theme One: Learning Driven by Necessity

Communicative Adaptation under Task Demand (Multicultural Competence)

Participants described the development of cross-cultural communication skills as a response to the operational demands of community diagnosis and team collaboration rather than as a deliberate project of self-improvement. The programme's task requirements made adaptation unavoidable. The structured practice of household interviewing was repeatedly described as the site where communicative clarity was forged:

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> *"The programme felt like conducting interviews, which helped me build courage and confidence. It taught me how to phrase questions clearly so others could understand and respond. You don't need complicated language; breaking it down helps people get the point."(*Interview 1, Year 2, IDS, Community B, 15 July 2024)

Language acquisition itself followed the same logic, pursued not as cultural enrichment but because the community diagnosis could not otherwise proceed:

> *"With the help of community members, I learned some of their language. If I did not understand, I let them explain it in a common way that I could follow."(*Interview 2, Year 2, Business/Economics, Community D, 18 July 2024)

For others, what developed was less a skill than an orientation. Exposure to divergent perspectives within a team that had to reach shared conclusions reshaped how participants listened:

> *"I have learned to consider others' points of view before forming my own conclusions. Being exposed to diverse perspectives has improved my communication and interpersonal skills significantly*."(Interview 7, Year 1, Engineering, Community E, 22 July 2024)

One participant was precise about what the programme had and had not given her, distinguishing the confidence she brought with her from the capacity she acquired:

> "*I have always had some confidence in speaking, but the programme taught me patience and the importance of understanding others before communicating."(*Interview 4, Year 2, Agriculture, Community C, 19 July 2024)

The institutional rhythm of the programme, its meetings, its data collection cycles, its collective writing, supplied the repeated occasions on which this adaptation was practised:

> "*My communication skills improved through group meetings and interactions with community members while collecting data. This also gave me valuable fieldwork experience."(*Interview 3, Year 1, IDS, Community A, 16 July 2024)

Evidence across the wider interview corpus confirmed communicative adaptation as a task-driven process and extended it into the domain of etiquette. P11, P12, and P34 described consciously adopting the community's elaborate greeting customs and learning, in their own description, to communicate more respectfully and politely. P22, P23, and P24 similarly adjusted to the local norm of greeting every person encountered on the way, initially experienced as onerous and subsequently understood as the community's grammar of respect. P33 combined English, Twi, and newly learnt Konkomba greetings, seeking translation assistance where these failed. In each case, adaptation was precipitated by the practical demands of household data collection and shared living rather than by abstract goodwill. Stereotype Disruption Through Relational Contact (Multiethnic Teamwork). What distinguished these accounts was their specificity: the stereotype was not eroded by generalised positive feeling but contradicted at the point of its content.

> "*Initially I assumed that Konkomba people might be violent. However, during our stay they welcomed us with accommodation and food, and even the chief assisted us on our way home. This experience showed me that cultural assumptions are often inaccurate." (*Interview 8, Year 1, Agriculture, Community A, 23 July 2024)

Beyond the correction of particular beliefs, some participants described a broader epistemic shift, from a hierarchy in which their own culture occupied the summit to an orientation that treated practices as variable expressions of shared values:

> "*Initially I thought my culture or religion was the best. But participating in the TTFPP exposed me to different cultures, and I realised that while practices differ, the core values are similar across cultures."* (Interview 7, Year 1, Engineering, Community E, 22 July 2024).

For others, the outcome was the abandonment of categorical judgement as a habit rather than the revision of any single belief:

> *"I no longer categorise or judge people based on culture. Initially I had misconceptions about certain groups being rude, but after living with them I realised those assumptions were not true*." (Interview 6, Year 2, Agriculture, Community B, 21 July 2024)
>
> "*I now approach people from different backgrounds with an open mind, understanding that individual behaviour does not represent an entire group."(*Interview 8, Year 1, Agriculture, Community A, 23 July 2024)

The condition common to these accounts is daily proximity of a kind the residential design uniquely supplies: accommodation, meals, ceremonies, illness, and shared work. The stereotype was disrupted not because students were told it was inaccurate but because they were housed, fed, and assisted by the people it concerned.

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4.1.2 Theme Two: Structural Enablers of Development

The Reflective Field Notebook as Instrument of Self-Development and Accountability (Immersion Experiences)

The programme's mandatory field notebook, a daily record assessed for consistency, detail, and clarity, functioned simultaneously as an academic requirement and as a personal reflective instrument through which students tracked their own cultural development. In the absence of supervisory authority, the notebook became the mechanism through which teams enforced participation:

> "*As group leader, I maintained daily activity notebooks for each member. If someone was absent, they could not complete their record, which encouraged participation and accountability."*(Interview 7, Year 1, Engineering, Community E, 22 July 2024)

Documentation practices were also the occasion for collective deliberation, since records had to be reconciled into shared outputs:

> "*We held regular group meetings, especially after field data collection. These meetings allowed everyone to share opinions and contribute to the report writing."*(Interview 9, Year 2, IDS, Community C, 24 July 2024)
>
> "*Work was distributed among team members, and we reviewed it collectively, making corrections where necessary. This ensured everyone participated."*(Interview 5, Year 1, Medicine/Nursing, Community A, 20 July 2024)

P28, P29, and P30 extended this pattern in an unanticipated direction: their team leader declined to sign the notebooks of members absent from fieldwork, so that the institutional requirement of reflective documentation doubled as a peer-enforced attendance mechanism. The artefact designed to support reflection had acquired a disciplinary function that the programme had not specified. The Development Proposal as Interdisciplinary Synthesis Challenge (Interprofessional Interaction): The central academic task of Year 2, the preparation of an integrated community development proposal using logical framework analysis, produced a qualitatively different form of interprofessional engagement from the Year 1 community profile. Participants described the two years as differing in kind rather than in degree, and the second year as the point at which interprofessional argument became interprofessional collaboration:

> *"In the first year, the community lacked public toilets and disposed of rubbish carelessly. We mobilised community labour and, with their cooperation, set up a designated waste area and a maintenance routine. In the second year, the community began digging public toilets using their own resources, inspired by the education we provided on health and disease prevention*."(Interview 3, Year 1, IDS, Community A, 16 July 2024)

The proposal task also brought students up against the ethical limits of cultural accommodation, requiring them to hold respect for local custom together with professional and personal commitments that custom contradicted:

> "*In some areas, girls were not allowed to attend school. These were issues we had to navigate carefully. I learned to respect local customs while also gently educating where possible; essentially, when in Rome, do as the Romans do, while maintaining your own values."* (Interview 4, Year 2, Agriculture, Community C, 19 July 2024)

Teams developed procedural devices to ensure that synthesis was substantive rather than nominal, most commonly the rotation of writing responsibilities across disciplinary lines:

> "*We distributed work among members and rotated tasks. For example, certain members prepared the executive summary while others handled different parts, ensuring a balanced contribution."* (Interview 6, Year 2, Agriculture, Community B, 21 July 2024)

The most culturally sophisticated innovations extended synthesis beyond the team to the community itself, incorporating traditional authority into the assessment event:

> *"Our respectful conduct and active engagement impressed both the community and our supervisors. Inviting the chief and elders during the assessment further highlighted our commitment, which contributed to our success*." (Interview 7, Year 1, Engineering, Community E, 22 July 2024)

The pattern recurred across independently deployed teams and varied problem domains. P11, P12, and P34 designed a public toilet system addressing open defecation; P19, P20, and P21 successfully advocated a communal refuse dump; P28, P29, and P30 proposed a community-dug refuse pit; P22, P23, and P24 outlined interventions for absent schools and health facilities; and P25, P26, and P27 organised a makeshift shaded school for community children. In each case, participants located the proposal as the point at which disciplinary perspectives had to be integrated rather than merely juxtaposed.

4.1.3 Theme Three: Peer-Governed Learning in the Absence of Supervisory Authority (Interprofessional and Multiethnic Teamwork)

The absence of resident supervisory authority emerged as both a significant challenge and a structural driver of competence development, compelling teams to construct their own governance, decision-making, and conflict-

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resolution arrangements. Participants described consensus as achieved rather than given, and difficult in proportion to its durability:

> *"It wasn't easy. Working with a lot of people you have never stayed with, not knowing each other, but coming to work as one, is not easy. Sometimes you agree, sometimes you disagree; someone raises a point, and others disagree, but in the end you all reach one decision."* (Interview 1, Year 2, IDS, Community B, 15 July 2024)

Leadership under these conditions was negotiated rather than conferred, as one team leader acknowledged with unusual candour:

> "*Sometimes they listen to me, and sometimes they do not."* (Interview 2, Year 2, Business/Economics, Community D, 18 July 2024)

The most mature teams described an orientation in which difference was expected rather than problematised, and managed by subordinating it to shared purpose:

> "*Differences in religion or culture were normal. We handled them by acknowledging the differences and focusing on collaboration."(*Interview 9, Year 2, IDS, Community C, 24 July 2024)

Where the team's own resources proved insufficient, particularly for communication barriers exceeding its linguistic capacity, participants turned outward to community authority:

> "*We consulted community leaders, who organised interpreters and facilitated communication. Within our team, everyone was encouraged to participate and to ask questions if they did not understand something."* (Interview 4, Year 2, Agriculture, Community C, 19 July 2024)

This resource is analytically significant. In the absence of institutional authority, teams did not simply improvise internally; they drew on the culturally legitimate authority available in the community, effectively substituting an external resource for the supervisory function the programme had withdrawn. Coordinator Observations of the Developmental Arc: The four coordinators, whose oversight experience ranged from seven to fourteen years, described a consistent pattern across many cohorts that both corroborates and dates the student accounts:

> "*In over a decade of supervision, I have seen this pattern reliably. Week one: cautious, polite, awkward. Weeks two to three: testing, sometimes conflict, sometimes withdrawal. Weeks four to five: something shifts; I call it the cooking moment. When teams start cooking together voluntarily, I know they have turned a corner. Weeks six to eight: genuine collaboration. They have built something they cannot easily take apart. The communities notice it too; by week seven, the community sometimes cannot tell clearly which students come from which background."* (Coord-1, TTFPP Coordinator, Nyankpala Campus, 10 August 2024)

A second coordinator identified a relationship between difficulty and developmental depth that qualifies any assumption that smooth team functioning indicates successful learning:

> "*The students who develop the deepest multicultural competence are rarely the ones who had the easiest teams. The ones who grow most are the ones who faced real difficulty, real cultural conflict, and stayed. Comfort can be the enemy of learning here."* (Coord-2, Community Supervisor, Tamale Campus, 12 August 2024)

Coordinators also identified two programme-design gaps bearing directly on the developmental process. The first concerns preparation:

> *"The biggest gap, in my view, is pre-departure orientation. Students arrive at their communities knowing PRA techniques and how to build a community profile. What they do not have is knowledge of how to live together across cultural differences. We orient them for the academic task. We do not orient them for the relational and cultural challenge*."(Coord-4, Associate Professor, Dungu Campus, 14 August 2024)

The second concerns assessment:

> "*The assessment framework is good, but it does not explicitly assess multicultural competence as a named outcome. A student can score highly on community stay, field notebooks, and oral presentation while having stayed within their own ethnic group throughout. We need an assessment component that specifically measures cultural bridge-building."* (Coord-3, DCROP Programme Officer, 13 August 2024)

Year 1 and Year 2 in the Developmental Process (Immersion Experiences): Read across the two years, the data indicate a division of developmental labour rather than a repetition of experience. Year 1 was the year of adaptation and disruption: the year in which communicative strategies were improvised under the pressure of first contact, in which protocol breaches taught the existence of protocols, and in which stereotypes about named ethnic groups were contradicted by hospitality. Its principal academic task, the community profile, permitted disciplinary contributions to remain parallel. Year 2 was the year in which these gains were converted into capability. Participants who had completed both years described the second deployment as beginning from a qualitatively different relational position:

> "*During the first year, teamwork was weak because many members were not actively involved. By the end of the first year, and throughout the second year, the team became much more cohesive and collaborative." (*Interview 7, Year 1, Engineering, Community E, 22 July 2024)

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"In the first year, the bond was moderate but functional. In the second year, new members brought energy that strengthened the team, and we are still in contact today." (Interview 9, Year 2, IDS, Community C, 24 July 2024)

Independent corroboration came from participants with two-year perspectives: P25, P26, and P27 described first-year cohesion as merely functional and second-year cohesion as excellent, while P28, P29, and P30 traced a movement from poor initial teamwork to a strong, mutually accommodating unit by the second year. The Year 2 development proposal then demanded of these relationally established teams a form of integration the first year had not required. The two years therefore operate at nested time scales: a within-immersion arc from caution through friction to cohesion, and an across-year arc in which the second deployment begins where the first ended.

4.2 Discussion

4.2.1 Necessity as the Engine of Competence

The most consistently evidenced mechanism in these data is what the analysis terms communicative necessity: the development of cross-cultural communication capability driven not by educational intention but by the practical demands of community diagnosis and shared living. Kolb's (2015) cycle identifies concrete experience as the starting point of learning; the TTFPP data confirm this while specifying which concrete experiences reliably produce learning. Interview 1's development of clear, simple questioning was not pursued as self-improvement but was compelled by the operational requirement that community members understand and answer. This aligns with what Morris (2020) terms the necessity principle in experiential learning: experience produces competence most reliably where task demands render competence developmentally unavoidable rather than merely desirable.

The dominant institutional response to the multicultural competence agenda is training, workshops, modules, and orientation sessions that exhort students towards openness. These data suggest that the more powerful lever is task design: the construction of situations in which effective cross-cultural communication is a precondition of completing work that matters. This finding also carries a theoretical consequence for developmental models. The sequences described by Bennett (1986, 2017) and the movement from external formula to internal foundation theorised by King and Baxter Magolda (2005) were both visible in participants' accounts. But the engine of movement in the TTFPP was not the voluntary curiosity these models tend to presume. It was consequential necessity, generated by shared residence, task interdependence, and a high-stakes assessment regime. Theories of intercultural development should therefore treat the institutional structuring of necessity as a distinct developmental condition rather than as background context.

4.2.2 The Specificity of Stereotype-Disrupting Contact

That sustained relational contact disrupted inter-ethnic stereotypes more effectively than prior education is consistent with Allport (1954) and Pettigrew and Tropp (2006). The data, however, indicate a mechanism that the original formulation does not fully capture. Interview 8's assumption of Konkomba violence was not dissolved by a generically positive inter-group experience but by the specific experience of being welcomed, housed, fed, and personally assisted by a chief of the group he had feared. Interview 5's revision of her assumptions about Dagomba exclusivity was produced by the experience of equal communal treatment in shared living.

What did the work in each case was the direct contradiction of the stereotype's content, not merely the accumulation of positive affect. This suggests a refinement of the contact literature: contact produces the deepest disruption where it contradicts the specific proposition the prejudice asserts. Its operation requires the daily proximity, accommodation, meals, ceremonies, illness, shared labour that residential immersion provides and that no classroom programme can replicate. It is worth registering that several of these stereotypes concerned ethnic groups involved in the inter-ethnic conflicts of recent Ghanaian history, which had survived years of superficial co-presence in schools and towns; what dissolved them was not more contact but contact of a particular kind.

Interview 7's movement from "my culture or religion was the best" to the recognition of shared core values beneath divergent practices represents a different and higher-order outcome: not the correction of a specific prejudice but the acquisition of a general epistemic orientation. This corresponds to the acceptance stage of ethnorelativism in Bennett's (2017) model, and its emergence across sustained participation suggests that the programme's iterative structure produces not only attitudinal change towards particular groups but the broader developmental shift that underpins durable intercultural competence.

4.2.3 Assessment as Pedagogical Instrument

A significant and underexplored finding concerns the role of the TTFPP's assessment architecture as an instrument of competence development rather than merely its measure. The daily notebook used to secure participation, the collective preparation that ensured every member could answer for the whole report, and the strategy of inviting chiefs and elders to the assessment all reveal how specific design features generated incentives for the inclusive, culturally sensitive, interprofessional collaboration the programme's pedagogy intends. The framework's explicit reward for linkages and integration, its community-stay requirement, and its zero-tolerance structure actively shaped cultural

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dynamics within teams and between teams and communities throughout the immersion. In the TTFPP, assessment is constitutive of the learning process. The corollary is uncomfortable. Coord-3's observation that the framework does not name multicultural competence as an assessable outcome is not an administrative oversight but a pedagogical one: if assessment shapes practice, then the absence of a multicultural competence component means the programme's most significant educational outcome is not reinforced through its most powerful pedagogical instrument. A student may, as Coord-3 notes, score highly across all six components while having remained within their own ethnic group throughout.

4.2.4 The Double Edge of Peer Governance

The deliberate absence of resident supervision produced both the deepest learning and the highest operational risk. Interview 1's account of consensus won only through sustained disagreement captures the productive difficulty of peer governance: agreement reached this way is more genuinely held than agreement imposed. Interview 9's normalisation of difference reflects the mature orientation such governance can produce, and Interview 2's admission that his authority was intermittently accepted illustrates the same dynamic from the leader's position.

Teams lacking members with intercultural or conflict-resolution skills have no external authority to redirect them, which is precisely the asymmetry Bandura (1977) predicts for peer modelling: strong strategies model upward, weak strategies model unchecked. That the corpus contains no accounts of complete team breakdown is analytically meaningful, suggesting that the programme's scaffolding, community entry protocols, field notebooks, periodic supervisory visits, and access to elders suffice for most teams to navigate difficulty without collapse. Interview 4's recourse to community leaders for interpretation and mediation identifies the partial resolution: by embedding teams in communities over extended periods, the programme supplies a culturally authoritative resource that compensates for the institutional authority it withholds. The community, in other words, is not the setting in which peer governance occurs but part of the mechanism that makes it survivable.

4.2.5 The Developmental Significance of Two Years

The Year 1 to Year 2 comparison indicates that the programme's iterative design is a developmental architecture rather than a duplication. Tuckman's (1965) model assumes that each team experience begins at forming; the TTFPP's returning teams do not. Beginning the second deployment with established communication norms, identified roles, and partially resolved cultural tensions, they approximate what Wei et al. (2023) describe as cultural pre-norming in multicultural teams with prior shared experience, moving more rapidly to performing and engaging the more demanding integration requirements of the development proposal from a position of relational strength.

The division of developmental labour between the years is therefore functional. Year 1 supplies the disorientation that Kiely (2005) identifies as the trigger of transformative learning, together with the stereotype disruption and communicative improvisation that first contact compels. Year 2 supplies the synthesis task that converts relational gains into interprofessional capability. Neither year alone would produce what the sequence produces: a single year would deliver disruption without consolidation, while a repeated first year would deliver consolidation without escalating demand.

4.2.6 Interprofessional and Intercultural Competence as a Single Achievement

The interprofessional dimension extends the existing literature in a direction it has not previously taken. Accounts of Year 1 disciplinary argument- medical students insisting on disease, agriculture students on food, engineering students on absent structures- followed by integrated analysis in Year 2, show the development proposal generating communicative necessity at the level of disciplinary integration. Students were compelled to communicate across epistemic as well as cultural boundaries, and in ways that required substantive engagement with others' knowledge frameworks rather than polite acknowledgement of them.

This is precisely what the linkages and integration criterion rewards, and the data suggest that the criterion functions as an effective institutional prompt. More significantly, it indicates that in this setting interprofessional and intercultural competence are not two capabilities but one: the capacity to take a way of seeing that is not one's own, whether its source is a discipline or an ethnic tradition. The interprofessional education literature, developed in clinical settings (Reeves et al., 2016; Williams et al., 2024), and the intercultural competence literature, developed around national and ethnic difference, have proceeded separately. The TTFPP's deliberate superimposition of the two forms of diversity suggests they may be more productively theorised together.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

This study set out to analyse the processes through which students develop multicultural competence within the interprofessional, multiethnic teams of the TTFPP, attending to how those processes unfold across Year 1 and Year 2 of community immersion. The findings establish four principal conclusions. First, multicultural competence in the

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TTFPP is not taught; it is required. Students learned to phrase questions simply because households would not otherwise answer them; they learned the community's grammar of greeting because relationships depended on it; they abandoned assumptions about ethnic groups because the members of those groups housed and fed them; they integrated disciplinary perspectives because the proposal could not otherwise be written. The programme's most powerful instruments, its assessment framework and its withdrawal of resident supervision, were not designed as interventions in intercultural learning, yet they function as such.

Second, the two-year architecture is integral rather than incidental. Year 1 produces the disorientation and relational disruption from which learning begins; Year 2 converts what has been gained into interprofessional capability by imposing a task that parallel contribution cannot satisfy. Teams returning for a second deployment do not begin again but begin further on, and it is this pre-normed position that makes the more demanding synthesis of the second year achievable.

Third, the interaction of interprofessional and intercultural diversity produces a unified developmental outcome. In this setting, the capacity to take a way of seeing that is not one's own operates identically whether its source is a discipline or an ethnic tradition. The TTFPP's deliberate superimposition of the two forms of diversity suggests that interprofessional and intercultural competence may be more productively theorised together than separately.

Fourth, assessment design functions as a pedagogical instrument of intercultural development rather than merely its measure. The daily notebook, the collective preparation requirements, and the reward for linkages and integration actively shaped cultural dynamics within teams and between teams and communities. The absence of an explicit multicultural competence component in the assessment framework therefore represents a pedagogical gap rather than an administrative oversight. The TTFPP, conceived three decades ago as an instrument of development education rather than of intercultural learning, has become one of African higher education's most substantial environments for developing multicultural competence largely by accident of design.

5.2 Recommendations

The finding that competence develops under task demand rather than exhortation implies that curricula seeking intercultural outcomes should invest less in stand-alone training and more in the design of tasks whose completion requires cross-cultural collaboration. Where such tasks exist, the pedagogical work is largely done by the task; where they do not, modules addressing intercultural competence are unlikely to compensate. The evidence demonstrates that Year 1 and Year 2 perform distinct developmental functions. Programme administrators should resist any pressure to compress the immersion into a single year, as this would deliver disruption without consolidation.

The absence of resident supervision, while carrying operational risk, is the source of the deepest learning. Supervisory practice should support peer governance without displacing it; the appropriate intervention is scaffolding rather than substitution. The coordinators' unanimous identification of this gap is corroborated by the students' accounts of protocol breaches committed before they knew protocols existed. Orientation should equip students to anticipate the fourth-week transition and to interpret early friction as a developmental phase rather than as team failure. Participants described disorientation, frustration, and moments of conflict. Orientation should normalise these experiences and provide students with frameworks for processing them constructively.

Declaration of Interest

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