

Community-Based Learning and Intercultural Competence: Fieldwork Experiences of Psychology Students in Multicultural Sabah

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Abstract: This study examines how community-based learning (CBL) enhances intercultural competence and learning outcomes among final-year psychology students in Sabah, Malaysia. A total of 72 students conducted parenting talks in Kampung Bolong, Tuaran, engaging with a culturally diverse rural community. Using a qualitative narrative design, data was gathered through reflective journals, semi-structured interviews, peer assessments, community feedback, and instructor observations. Reflexive thematic analysis revealed three main themes: (1) increased cultural awareness and sensitivity, (2) improved communication and public speaking skills, and (3) challenges related to cultural expectations, language barriers, and emotional responses when discussing sensitive topics. Community members expressed high satisfaction with the students' presentations and emphasized the value of intercultural knowledge exchange. The findings highlight the effectiveness of experiential fieldwork in strengthening students' confidence, cultural understanding, and community engagement. This study contributes to Malaysian scholarship on experiential learning, multicultural education, and applied psychology training.

Keywords: Community-based learning, experiential learning, intercultural competence, parenting practices, multicultural communities, Sabah

In today's increasingly globalized world, education is beyond the confines of the classroom. As the boundaries between academic learning and real-world experiences blur, there is growing recognition of the importance of "learning outside the classroom." In the context of higher education, particularly in psychology and social sciences, community-based learning (CBL) enables students to engage directly with communities, fostering a deeper understanding of cultural nuances and real-world challenges (Echcharfy, 2019). Apart from that, the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education recognizes community-based learning (CBL) as a high-impact educational approach that integrates experiential and service learning (Amran et al., 2018). By engaging in societal challenges, students not only enhance their problem-solving abilities but also develop essential soft skills (Hamzah, Tajuddin & Romly, 2023).

In a multicultural society, understanding the nuances of child-rearing practices across different cultures is critical for fostering tolerance, inclusivity, and mutual respect (Bornstein, 2012). Parents shape their caregiving practices according to their cultural background, influencing both the cognitive and physical development of the child. Consequently, this project functioned not only as an academic exercise but also as a platform for fostering intercultural exchange of ideas to the extent to which the community practices child-rearing. The opportunity to engage with the community in a meaningful way allowed the students to bridge theoretical knowledge with lived experiences, providing both them and the community with deeper insights into cultural diversity and the practice of parenting. More specifically, it explores the multifaceted learning outcomes of this project, shedding light on how learning outside the classroom can help students and

communities alike develop a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of the world. By stepping outside the traditional classroom environment, these students not only applied their academic learning but also gained valuable skills in public speaking (Plandano et al., 2023), intercultural communication (Arasaratnam, & Doerfel, 2005; Wang, Zainudin & Yaakup, 2024), and community engagement (Vilaluz, Malonjao, Trinidad & Bojos, 2018).

This study explores an experiential community-based learning project conducted by final-year students, who were tasked with conducting parental talks on the topic of child-rearing in a multicultural context. The students were required to present their current knowledge on how different cultures approach parenting, fostering an open discussion about the diverse values, norms, and practices surrounding child development. Hence, the research questions are: 1) To what extent does the fieldwork project enhance students' learning outcomes? 2) How does the experience of delivering parenting talk in a community setting promote intercultural competence and communication skills?

To address the research questions, Berner's Intersecting Model (2008) was employed to understand the intersection of service learning and community-based research/learning in enhancing the learning experiences of final-year students. The primary objective of this study is to explore how this fieldwork project contributes to students' learning outcomes. Additionally, the study explores students' experiences in delivering a parenting talk within a community setting, focusing on the development of intercultural competence and interpersonal skills."

Method

This study employs a qualitative research approach to

explore the students' experiences in delivering a parenting talk within a community setting and how this fieldwork contributes to the learning outcome. Specifically, narrative analysis was used to interpret students' learning experiences during the parenting talk. To address the research objectives, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, student reflection notes, and peer assessments. Students were tasked with delivering a parenting talk on child-rearing practices in multicultural settings, aiming to foster intercultural understanding and awareness among community members. This approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of students' experiential learning, the development of their interpersonal skills, and the overall effectiveness of community-based learning.

Participants and Location

The participants of this fieldwork project were a group of undergraduate students who were enrolled in a "Child Rearing in Multicultural Setting" psychology program course. A total of 72 students participated in the project, bringing with them knowledge gained from courses in psychology and child development. The project took place in Kampung Bolong, Tuaran, Sabah. It is a rural area primarily inhabited by the Bajau ethnic group.

Fieldwork Design

The fieldwork design was inspired by Berner (2008), incorporating the intersection of service learning and community-based research/learning elements within the Intersecting Model. (Figure 1: Intersecting Model).

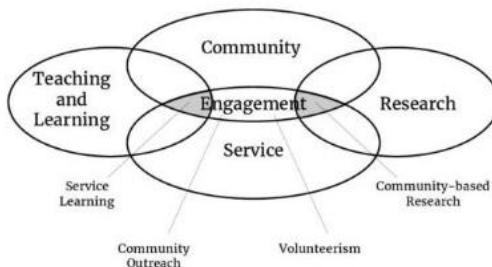


Figure 1. Intersecting Model

The assignment was structured to include both preparatory and fieldwork phases. In the preparatory phase, students were asked to research child-rearing practices in a variety of cultural contexts, using academic sources, case studies, and expert interviews. The students were expected to critically analyze these practices, identifying common themes, differences, and cultural values that shaped parenting behaviors. The topics presented by the students to the community included: 1) breastfeeding vs formula, 2) role of fathers in taking care of their children, 3) role of a mother and a father, 4) grandparenting in the new era, 5) role of culture in shaping the teen's moral value, 6) the role of peers in mental health issues among children.

The fieldwork phase involved the students delivering a parenting talk to a local community group. The community group consisted of families from diverse cultural backgrounds, and the students' parenting talks were designed to both inform and engage the audience. The students utilized visual aids, case studies, demonstrations, and storytelling techniques to make their presentation accessible and relatable to the community members.

To foster meaningful discussion, the students were also encouraged to incorporate interactive elements, such as group discussions or Q&A sessions, allowing community members to share their own experiences and perspectives on child-

rearing. This engagement allowed the students to gain real-time feedback from the audience, which would later inform their reflections and assessments.

Data Collection

Several methods were employed to collect data during the fieldwork and assess the effectiveness of the project based on the Intersecting Model proposed by Berner (2008):

Observations: During the community discussion, the lecturer and a tutor conduct direct observations of both the students' presentations and the reactions of the community members. This provided insights into the dynamics of the interaction, including the level of engagement, the types of questions asked, and the overall tone of the discussions.

Student Reflections: After the completion of the parenting talks, the students were asked to write reflective journals or essays, where they analyzed their own learning experiences, the challenges they faced, and their perceptions of the community's response. These reflections provided valuable insights into the students' emotional and intellectual growth during the fieldwork.

Community Feedback: Community members were asked to complete a brief survey or participate in informal interviews to gather feedback on the students' presentations. This feedback focused on the clarity of the information presented, the cultural relevance of the content, and the overall effectiveness of the talks in fostering dialogue about child-rearing practices.

Instructor Feedback: The lecturer who guided the students throughout the project also provided written feedback on the quality of the students' research, presentation skills, and overall contributions to the fieldwork. This feedback helped to assess the academic and professional growth of the students in relation to the learning objectives of the assignment.

Peer Assessment: In some cases, students also assessed each other's performance during the group presentations, providing peer feedback on their colleagues' strengths and areas for improvement. This peer assessment encouraged students to reflect on collaborative aspects of the assignment, such as teamwork, communication, and shared responsibility.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data collected from the student reflections, community feedback, and observations were analyzed thematically. Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) was used to analyze the data (Byrne, 2022). Phase one, familiarization with the data. Phase two: generating initial codes. The data were coded based on the final year students' feedback. Phase three, generating themes. Key themes that emerged from the analysis included intercultural communication, student engagement, challenges faced by the students, and the overall impact of the parenting talk on both the students and the community. Phase four, reviewing potential themes to determine whether the code and themes do not overlap. Phase five, defining and naming the theme. The data were then synthesized to provide a holistic view of the educational experience, highlighting the value of learning outside the classroom and the impact of real-world fieldwork on students' understanding of multicultural issues and community engagement.

Results

The analysis of the fieldwork project revealed several key outcomes related to the students' learning experiences, the

impact on the community, and the challenges encountered during the process. The findings are organized into three primary themes: student learning outcomes, community impact, and challenges faced by students.

Student Learning Outcomes

Cultural Awareness and Sensitivity: One of the most significant outcomes for the students was the increased cultural awareness and sensitivity they developed through the project. By researching diverse child-rearing practices and engaging in direct communication with individuals from different cultural backgrounds, students were able to see firsthand the complexities and variations in parenting styles. They reported a deeper appreciation for how cultural norms, values, and historical contexts shape parenting practices. Many students noted that the experience challenged their own assumptions and broadened their understanding of global child-rearing practices.

"I'm from West-Malaysia, and I found the final year project was meaningful as I was able to communicate with the local community and learnt a lot of parenting styles from them. R6-L"

"Even though I'm from Tuaran, but I didn't realize how diverse of the parenting of the local that shared with us! R3-M"

Enhanced Communication Skills: The act of preparing and delivering a parenting talk helped students refine their communication skills. They learned how to present complex information in an accessible and engaging manner, using language and examples that resonated with a diverse audience. Many students also reported an improvement in their ability to convey exciting topics with empathy and respect, which was particularly important when discussing parenting practices across different cultures. Students also practiced their public speaking skills and developed confidence in addressing a live audience, an important aspect of both academic and professional development.

"My primary language is English, but I have to speak Malay during the sharing talk. It was quite challenging, but our team managed to deliver the talk successfully. R1-S"

"I try to learn Bajau in order to build rapport with the community during the talk. R5-T"

Critical Thinking and Reflection: The students' reflective journals revealed that the assignment fostered critical thinking skills. They were required to synthesize academic knowledge with real-world applications, evaluating and discussing the implications of different child-rearing approaches. Many students reflected on how fieldwork allowed them to apply theoretical frameworks to practical situations, enhancing their understanding of child development in a multicultural context. Additionally, students demonstrated strong self-reflection, identifying areas for improvement and recognizing the personal growth they experienced during the assignment.

"I feel so relieved after the sharing talk. I have gained confidence in conducting programs now. R4-G"

"This is our first program under the course program, and we were so grateful to have the opportunity to explore the child rearing in community. R2-P"

Community Impact

Knowledge Sharing: The community's reception of the students' talks was overwhelmingly positive. Participants expressed appreciation for the students' efforts to make the topics of child-rearing accessible and relevant to their own cultural contexts. The community members engaged in rich discussions following the presentations, sharing their personal experiences with child-rearing and reflecting on how these practices compared to those discussed by the students. The talks sparked a greater understanding of how child-rearing is shaped by cultural beliefs and traditions, and many community members expressed interest in learning more about different parenting approaches.

"We are happy to have UMS students here to share with us how to take care of our children, from infancy to adolescence, especially the contact numbers that shared how to seek help for mental health. C13"

"I like the demonstration of how to massage our baby to have a better sleep. C9"

Fostering Intercultural Exchange: The community talks provided a platform for intercultural exchange, where individuals from different backgrounds could share perspectives and learn from one another. This exchange not only benefited the community members but also allowed the students to gain insights from the real-life experiences of the audience. The students reported that the interactive nature of the talks helped them feel more connected to the community, as they were able to listen to and learn from diverse voices. This reciprocal exchange of ideas highlighted the importance of community-based learning in fostering mutual respect and understanding.

"It was great to exchange knowledge with the community on how their culture shape the children's moral value. R5-T"

"Best to understand much new knowledge as a father, and I wont simply buy the milk bottle for my baby. C3I"

Strengthening Community Bonds: Several community members mentioned that the talks helped build stronger bonds within the multicultural community, as they encouraged greater understanding and communication between different cultural groups. The project facilitated the creation of a space where individuals could feel comfortable discussing parenting practices without fear of judgment, ultimately contributing to a more cohesive and supportive community environment.

"We hope that this program will be continue and benefit to us, with different topics next time. C2"

"At first, I was shy to talk to the community, but after I talked to them, I realized that they are so friendly and able to accept us. R6-W"

To mitigate the bias of self-reported data, community members were asked to evaluate the effectiveness of the parenting talk based on the suggested topics. Table 1 presents the overall community ratings, indicating a high level of satisfaction. A total of 55 community members participated in the evaluation, with mean ratings ranging from 4.40 to 4.51 on a 5-point Likert scale.

Table 1. Community Rating of the Parenting Talks

Topics	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. Breastfeeding vs formula	4.47	.663
2. Role of fathers in taking care of their children	4.51	.635
3. Role of a mother and a father in parenting	4.51	.663
4. Grandparenting in the new era	4.40	.655

5. Role of culture in shaping the teens' moral value	4.47	.634
6. Role of peers in mental health issues among children	4.51	.663

Challenges Faced by Students

Cultural Sensitivities: One of the primary challenges students encountered was navigating cultural sensitivities. In discussing child-rearing practices, students had to be careful not to present any one culture's practices as superior or inferior to another. Some students struggled with how to approach potentially controversial topics, such as discipline practices, in a respectful and balanced way. This challenge highlighted the importance of cultural competence in educational settings, as students needed to understand the cultural contexts of the topics they were addressing.

"I was nervous about the grandparenting topic. I worried that the grandparents would disagree with us, and our knowledge is more too general and not specific to local culture. R1-H"

Language Barriers: Although all students were fluent in the language of instruction, some faced challenges when engaging with community members who were non-native speakers or who had limited proficiency in the language of the talk. In these cases, students had to adapt their communication style, simplifying language and using visual aids to ensure clarity. While the language barrier was an obstacle, students reported that the experience taught them valuable skills in cross-cultural communication and the importance of ensuring that their message was accessible to a wider audience.

"Even thought we did not speak Bajau, but we able to communicate with simple Malay. The only challenge was we spent longer time understanding. R3-B"

Presentation Anxiety: Many students experienced anxiety prior to delivering their presentations. Public speaking in front of a community audience, particularly on a sensitive topic like child-rearing, was a source of stress for several participants. However, after the presentations, students reflected that the experience ultimately helped them overcome their fears and develop greater confidence in their speaking abilities. This challenge underscored the importance of experiential learning in building resilience and self-assurance.

"I was nervous during the presentation as this was the first time talk in front of the community. Even though we practiced during the lecture class, the feeling was totally different. R4-E"

Discussion

The findings from this fieldwork project emphasise the educational benefits of integrating community-based learning experiences into academic curricula, particularly in the context of multicultural education. The data revealed several important trends and insights that further enhance our understanding of the outcomes and challenges of this type of learning.

Student Learning Outcomes

One of the most pronounced effects of the fieldwork was the growth in students' confidence, particularly in their public speaking abilities. Many students reported that this assignment pushed them outside their comfort zones, forcing them to engage with a real-world audience and communicate complex ideas effectively (Ibrahim & Shahabani, 2020). This newfound

confidence extended beyond the assignment, with students noting that they felt more prepared for professional environments that require public speaking and community engagement. In addition, many students reflected on how this experience deepened their understanding of the emotional and cultural factors that shape parenting practices. This emotional growth was particularly evident in their ability to listen attentively and respond with sensitivity during the community discussions. The fieldwork also fostered strong teamwork and collaboration among students. Working together to design and deliver a presentation encouraged peer-to-peer learning, where students could exchange ideas, provide constructive feedback, and support one another in overcoming challenges. This collaborative aspect of the project was particularly valuable, as students learned to leverage each other's strengths and expertise, enhancing both their academic and interpersonal skills.

Another key finding was the students' ability to critically engage with multicultural perspectives on child-rearing. Rather than simply presenting facts about various cultural practices, students delved into the underlying values, norms, and beliefs that influence these practices (Warren & Sellnow, 2021). This deeper level of engagement enabled them to recognize both the similarities and differences in how different cultures approach child development. For instance, during their community engagement, students shared their own cultural perspectives on bedtime routines, prompting community members to share their practices. The majority of community members revealed that their bedtime routines differed significantly from those of the students, and many of these differences were found to be rooted in socio-economic conditions and cultural traditions. This allowed students to appreciate the complex interplay of cultural factors that shape child-rearing practices across diverse communities.

Community Benefits and Engagement

The community-based nature of the fieldwork enabled a vibrant exchange of ideas between students and community members. The interactive components of the presentations, such as Q&A sessions and group discussions, provided a platform for community members to share their experiences and perspectives on child-rearing. This conversation not only facilitated knowledge-sharing but also encouraged mutual respect and understanding among individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. Through the talks, community members gained new insights into different parenting practices, which contributed to a broader understanding of multiculturalism. The community members appreciated the opportunity to reflect on their own practices while also learning about others. Many community members expressed a desire for more such talks, indicating that the fieldwork had a lasting impact on their willingness to engage in discussions about parenting, child development, and cultural diversity.

The project also contributed to strengthening the sense of community (Vilaluz, 2018). By bringing people from different cultural backgrounds together to discuss shared values and parenting challenges, the students' presentations helped foster a more cohesive, supportive environment. Several community members reported that the talk allowed them to see similarities between their own parenting practices and those of others, helping to bridge cultural divides and promote social cohesion.

Student Challenges

While most of the talks were well-received, some students struggled with maintaining cultural sensitivity when discussing practices that might be viewed as controversial or unfamiliar (Plandano et al., 2023). This challenge was particularly apparent when discussing disciplinary methods or differing expectations around children's autonomy in various cultures. While most students navigated these challenges successfully, some reported

that they felt uncertain about how to present these topics without reinforcing stereotypes or generalizing. This highlighted the need for more explicit guidance on cultural competence in the preparatory phase of the project.

As mentioned earlier, language barriers were another challenge encountered during the fieldwork. Students had to adapt their communication style to accommodate community members who spoke different languages or had limited proficiency in the language of instruction. This posed a challenge in terms of ensuring that all members of the community fully understood the material being presented. The students responded by simplifying their language, using visual aids, and providing opportunities for community members to ask questions in smaller groups, which helped overcome these barriers.

Several students reported experiencing emotional challenges during fieldwork, particularly when discussing sensitive topics such as child-rearing practices in low-income or marginalized communities. These discussions sometimes triggered emotional reactions from both the students and the community members, highlighting the need for students to be prepared for emotionally charged discussions (Ibrahim, & Shahabani, 2020). In their reflections, students noted the importance of emotional self-regulation and sensitivity when engaging with complex cultural topics such as mental health issues with their children. Hence, future studies are encouraged to involve a professional practitioner or registered counselor in the community-based project.

Conclusion

This fieldwork project, focused on delivering community-based parenting talks on child-rearing practices in a multicultural setting, exemplifies the value of "learning outside the classroom" in fostering meaningful educational experiences. The findings demonstrate that such projects provide students with an invaluable opportunity to apply academic knowledge in real-world contexts, engage with diverse communities, and develop essential skills in cultural competence, communication, and public speaking.

The results highlighted significant personal and professional growth for the students, including enhanced confidence, critical thinking, and empathy. By researching and presenting diverse child-rearing practices, students gained a deeper understanding of how culture shapes parenting, fostering greater intercultural awareness. Additionally, the project facilitated the development of important transferable skills, such as teamwork, public speaking, and emotional intelligence, all of which will serve students well in their future careers and as engaged citizens in a multicultural world.

For the community, the project provided a platform for intercultural exchange, allowing participants to reflect on their own parenting practices and gain new insights into the diverse ways in which children are raised across cultures. The community-based nature of the fieldwork helped strengthen social bonds, promote mutual respect, and foster a sense of shared understanding between individuals from different cultural backgrounds. However, some challenges were noted, including navigating cultural sensitivities and accommodating diverse viewpoints. These findings align with Berner's Intersecting Model (2008), reinforcing the need for a multi-source learning approach that integrates teaching, service, research, and community engagement.

A key limitation of the study was the time constraints, with student feedback indicating that the 30-minute duration of the parenting talks was insufficient for community members to fully grasp the material. The limited time hindered students' ability to explore complex topics in depth or address the community's questions effectively. Many community members expressed a desire for more time to better understand and discuss the cultural nuances of child-rearing practices. A longer session would have allowed for more interactive dialogue, deeper engagement, and the opportunity for students to tailor their presentations to the specific needs of the community, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness of the knowledge transfer.

To enhance the effectiveness of community-based learning, teachers should provide pre-fieldwork training focused on cultural sensitivity and effective communication strategies, ensuring that students are well-prepared to engage with diverse communities. Additionally, institutions should implement multi-perspective assessment methods, such as community feedback, peer assessments, and reflective student narratives, to mitigate self-report bias and obtain a more comprehensive evaluation of learning outcomes. Furthermore, encouraging students to document their experiences through structured reflection exercises will help deepen their understanding of intercultural interactions, enhance personal growth, and refine their communication skills. By integrating these approaches, educators can create a more meaningful and impactful learning experience for students while strengthening their engagement with the community.

In conclusion, this fieldwork project has proven to be a successful model for learning outside the classroom, offering valuable lessons for both students and the community, and highlighting the transformative power of experiential education in fostering intercultural discussion and understanding.

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