Decolonial perspectives on intercultural research in a study of educational inclusion in rural Cambodia

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A B S T R A C T

This paper presents a critique of intercultural research in the context of a study of *Educational Inclusion in Rural Schools in Cambodia* undertaken by four U.K. researchers in partnership with four Cambodian researchers. Interculturality is an endeavour to recognise and engage with different ways of being and knowing across cultural boundaries and to address barriers to reciprocal understanding. This endeavour is a complex one and there is little research on the reality of intercultural research, especially in a Cambodian context. We therefore explored this reality within our own research team to address a gap in the literature. Our research question is: *What are participants' perceptions of interculturality based on their experiences of a 5-year research study in educational inclusion?* Using a decolonial framework and decolonial methodologies, this paper presents the findings of a qualitative study that draws on questionnaire, research diary and interview data. We critically examine affordances and challenges relating to knowledge exchange, cultural differences, language/translation effects and research orthodoxies. We found that whilst our decolonial approach proved mutually beneficial, fostering co-construction and enhancing power-sharing, the quest for epistemic justice is inevitably constrained by powerful, Western research orthodoxies and funding conditionalities necessitating ongoing, joint reflexivity. The significance of the paper lies in the examination of the lived experiences of these affordances and challenges using a decolonial framework. The paper will be of relevance to international development researchers, international research funding agencies, international NGOs and others working in low and lower middle-income countries (LMICs) in the Global South.

1. Introduction

This paper provides a critique of intercultural research in the context of a study on *Educational Inclusion in Remote, Rural Schools in Cambodia* using a decolonial framework (Dei, 2010). An intercultural approach 'aims to facilitate dialogue, exchange and reciprocal understanding between people of different backgrounds' (Wood et al., 2006 p. 9). The term 'interculturality' refers to the endeavour to

recognise and engage with different ways of being and knowing across cultural boundaries and to address any 'impediments to relations' (Aman, 2017 p. 103) that may undermine reciprocal understanding.

Whilst much has been written about interculturality and its inherent complexities (Dervin & Simpson, 2021), there is scant research that explores the realities of doing intercultural research, and none that examines a collaboration between UK and Cambodian partners. We seek to address this gap in the literature. The critique was undertaken by four UK and four Cambodian partners who have worked together since 2018. During this time, we have become increasingly aware of the complexities of our joint educational research and development endeavour. We therefore turn the research lens upon ourselves to reflect critically upon our experiences of interculturality.

In the next sections, we critically explore key concepts, themes and practices associated with interculturality. This discussion will include an analysis of decoloniality and a critique of decolonial methodologies. We then present our research on interculturality and the issues it raises. Despite its specificity, this analysis will be relevant to international development researchers and others working with partners from the Global South.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Intercultural research studies

There are few examples of global South-North research partnerships in education that have sought to examine and problematise interculturality itself, despite a global push towards equitable partnerships (Dutta et al., 2023). We did not find any examples specifically involving UK and Cambodian researchers, hence the significance of this study. Heng et al. (2023) propose that this is related to the many endogenous factors that undermine potential for research in Cambodia. For example, they report that teaching dominates the workloads of Cambodian academics leaving little time or incentive to engage in research. Low salaries and a lack of research policies, institutional support, training, resourcing and funding are also key barriers. 'Political sensitivities' to intercultural research may also be at play (ibid p. 326). All these factors reduce the potential for domestic, as well as international, research collaborations.

However, amongst the small body of wider intercultural research that does exist, there is an emerging consensus that whilst there are many benefits associated with interculturality, the process is complex and challenging. For example, Molosi-France and Makoni (2020) provide an analysis of a collaboration between two Global South/North Higher Education institutions that highlights the benefits of interculturality in terms of enhancing knowledge co-production and strengthening research capacity. However, they problematise the theme of trust in intercultural partnerships and note, in their study, that African collaborators are not always trusted by some Northern donors and funders. Thus, their partnership is essentially 'semi-colonial in nature' reflecting the 'coloniality of power' inherent in the structures of Western research and funding (p. 18). The distribution of power, especially 'power over others' (Mosse, 2007) is also highlighted. However, the powerlessness of partners in the Global South is attributed, 'not to a lack of power but a subjection to the domination of others' (Molosi-France & Makoni, 2020, p.18) which impacts on experiences of shared ownership and results in inequalities in knowledge creation and dissemination.

The term 'intercultural' is therefore problematic because it is a profoundly ideological construct which varies according to historical, social, economic and political context. This is complicated by the fact that 'some specific Western-centric ideologies dominate the way we think about it' (Dervin & Simpson, 2021, p. 7). Thus, arguably, there are many 'interculturalities' (ibid). Dervin and Simpson (2021) emphasise the importance of approaching intercultural research partnerships both critically and reflexively, with a keen awareness of the underpinning ideological influences at play. A decoloniality framework helped us to sharpen our awareness of these influences in this study.

2.2. Decoloniality

The notion of decoloniality arose in the 1980s in response to the way that the human condition was increasingly being 'defined and shaped by dominant Euro-American culture' without regard to local realities, experiences and practices (Dei, 2010, p. 113). Use of the term emerged as a 'corrective' to the perceived failure to 'recognise the legitimacy of different forms of knowledges'; problematise the 'continuing deprivileging and marginalising of subordinate voices in the conventional process of knowledge production'; and address the 'power imbalance between groups that own and have access to the technology of knowledge dissemination' (ibid, pp. 112–113). A key challenge for intercultural researchers is therefore overcoming subtle yet oppressive eurocentrism with respect to knowledge production and dissemination, power and voice, by embracing and privileging diverse ways of knowing when researching contemporary problems that have been largely conceptualised in the Global North. Decoloniality is therefore a quest for epistemic justice (Fricker, 2009) that we see as inextricably linked to intercultural research.

Arguably, 'decolonising methodologies' are vital to this quest and to the efficacy of intercultural research (Mutua & Swadener, 2004). These methodologies have emerged from a critique of conventional, Western research paradigms and processes based on knowledges rooted in the Global North and their tendency to subjugate and de-legitimate ontologies, epistemologies and axiologies rooted in the Global South (Foucault, 1980; Chilisa, 2012; Smith, 2012). At the risk of simplification, these knowledges will henceforth be referred to as 'indigenous knowledges' defined as:

> '…the understandings, skills and philosophies developed by societies with long histories of interaction with their natural surroundings…This knowledge is integral to a cultural complex that also encompasses language, systems of classification, resource use practices, social interactions, ritual and spirituality' (UNESCO 2021, n.p.).

It is widely argued that research paradigms, used unreflexively, result in research *on* or *to* indigenous communities, rather than *with* and *for* them (Windchief et al., 2018). The decolonial critique has therefore problematised the fundamentals of knowledge production by asking questions about:

'…who we focus our research on, the types of questions that are asked, the relationship between researchers and participants, the values underpinning research, what can be inferred from the study, and the contributions to equality and justice' (Barnes, 2018, p. 380).

Decolonising methodologies rest, in large part, on development of self-conscious, critical awareness of researcher internalisation of colonialist research practices. Taking deliberate, proactive steps to counter these practices lies at the heart of decoloniality (Beeman-Cadwallader et al., 2011). Three key steps are widely associated with a decolonial approach, and we sought to follow them.

2.2.1. Step 1—respect for indigenous knowledge traditions

The first step is use of discourses and methodologies that are explicitly respectful of indigenous knowledge traditions and use of practices that seek to support and preserve them (Smith, 2012; Chilisa, 2012). A considerable body of research describes how this theoretical imperative has been interpreted and translated into practice in different intercultural research contexts in the field of education (e.g., Connell, 2007; Aman, 2017; Kalyanpur, 2016; Maholo, 2017; Walton, 2018; Kamenopoulou, 2020). In Kalyanpur's (2016) study of educational inclusion in Cambodia, she suggests it is vital that indigenous researchers have space, at the heart of the research process, to voice 'local epistemologies', explore their 'own realities' and invest in and develop culturally appropriate, bottom-up ideas and processes in response to local issues, rather than being beholden to 'top-down directives' from the Global North (p. 20).

Decolonial research also resists the widespread 'universalising discourse on inclusive education' (Kamenopoulou, 2020, p. 1797) that tends to inform educational development in the Global South and questions the idea that key concepts such as 'disability', 'rights' and 'inclusive education' have a shared meaning within this discourse (ibid). Such research also commonly rejects positivist methodologies based on claims to objectivity, control and universality in favour of participatory and qualitative research that is relational, contextualised and articulates the plurality of participant subjectivities.

However, Barnes (2018) notes that whilst some researchers assert that qualitative and participatory methodologies are more aligned to the decolonial endeavour than positivist approaches, 'it should not be assumed that certain methodologies are *de facto* more likely to contribute to decolonisation than others' (p. 380). Paradoxically, qualitative research used unreflexively can perpetuate colonial practices, yet quantitative methods, used reflexively, may not (ibid). Barnes (2018) also argues that the claim that decolonising methodologies might be conceived of as a new methodological 'paradigm' betrays the complexities underpinning the term, the lack of agreement around the meaning of decolonising methodologies and the purpose of such a paradigm. There seems to be little consensus on these matters.

Gone (2019) questions whether there is clarity about what we mean by terms like 'indigenous epistemologies' that occur liberally without clear definition in the decolonial literature. He queries whether these epistemologies can be said to be comprehensive and coherent and asks what makes them distinctive. He also asks whether Western academics can truly access and understand such indigenous epistemologies, and wonders how, exactly, they can be integrated into university-based knowledge production. Here, arguably, Gone (2019) is questioning the legitimacy of indigenous epistemologies in the light of Western academic criteria, and in doing so, appears to adopt a position of coloniality. A more constructive approach is to jointly surface and explore these epistemologies as an intercultural team. For example, in Cambodia, understanding of disability and perceptions of the right of children with disabilities to education, are widely influenced by traditional beliefs about Karma linked to Cambodian Buddhism (Kalyanpur, 2016). In our research, we discussed this in order to learn about it from our Cambodian partners, integrate this knowledge into our understanding of Cambodian culture, and consider its impact on educational inclusion.

2.2.2. Step 2—embed collaborative practice

A second feature of decolonising methodologies is that they prioritise the development of strong, collaborative relationships with indigenous researchers who have insider (emic) knowledge and understanding of indigenous knowledge traditions and scholarship. Arguably, this reciprocal, relational approach, key to interculturality, helps to level power differentials and facilitates the co-production of knowledge (Beeman-Cadwaller et al., 2011). For example, it can be argued that bringing educational inclusion to Cambodia is a 'neocolonial project' (Walton, 2018) since the concept of educational inclusion is based on decades of Western scholarship. Imposing it on the countries of the Global South could simply perpetuate Western educational orthodoxies and marginalise indigenous education traditions to the detriment of local teachers and learners.

In the light of this critique, throughout all phases of our study, we collaborated with indigenous practitioners who 'set the agenda' based on their own questions and professional curiosities. We hoped to facilitate the development of a relevant, culturally sensitive and sustainable form of educational inclusion that empowers, is of direct benefit to indigenous communities, and will 'resist the coloniality of knowledge, of power, and of being' (Walton, 2018, p. 31).

However, there is growing caution about over-simplifying the experience of participatory intercultural research. Gone (2019) questions who these indigenous 'knowers' might be and what attributes they need to qualify as representatives of indigenous knowledge. Again, there is no agreed consensus on these questions. The 'knowers' in this study are all highly experienced practitioners in education who were born and live in Cambodia and understand both the local cultural context, the practice context and the wider policy and legislative context around educational inclusion. They were invited as 'equal' partners to contribute as 'experts' in their fields with much to bring to a collaborative, intercultural research process based on mutual respect and empowerment, knowledge

exchange and the development of shared understanding.

However, Barnes (2018) is critical of the casual assumption that 'empowerment' is a by-product of such intercultural research, claiming it overlooks the 'drivers of social injustices' that researchers cannot influence, like neocolonialism, capitalism and globalisation (p. 383). Further, Aman (2017) draws attention to 'the language in which the 'Other' is approached' (p. 104) and how this subtly 'frames' dialogic interaction, research processes and expectations in ways that might be disadvantageous to indigenous partners. Our study sought to anticipate and surface such issues, as discussed later.

2.2.3. Step 3—challenge western research orthodoxies

It is characteristic of decolonising methodologies that careful consideration is given to writing about, publishing and disseminating intercultural research outcomes in ways that challenge Western orthodoxies. In most Western academic settings, a high premium is placed on the written word and the publication, in English, of research papers in peer-reviewed, academic research journals (Wieviorka, 2012). However, this orthodoxy inevitably limits the forms of knowledge considered legitimate within academia and excludes researchers from the Global South who do not speak English and lack access to the means of knowledge production and dissemination. Some decolonial researchers challenge this in innovative ways by adopting 'Indigenous Research Methodologies' (IRMs) that purport to:

> '…express logics that are unique and distinctive from academic knowledge production in 'Western' university settings…and result in innovative contributions to knowledge.' (Gone, 2019, p. 45).

However, Gone (2019) points out the danger that these innovative practices are not subject to the 'usual processes of critique' (p. 51) that underpin academic standards and that this way of practicing 'obscures our intellectual debt to 'Western' critical theories and approaches' (ibid). Of course, the assumption of such a 'debt' may be questioned by decolonial researchers who might argue that Gone's critique is positioned within a Western, colonial paradigm.

Evidently, decoloniality is a highly contested field and, arguably, an aspiration fraught with difficulty. It challenges the assumption that by working interculturally to explore a common desire for change, we are somehow creating an unproblematic, intercultural space. However, this is to overlook colonialities of knowledge, power and being and how these interact to perpetuate educational inequities, damage existing socio-cultural systems and undermine their potential for development (Aman, 2017; Walton, 2018). We wished to reflect critically upon how these influences might be at work in our own international research team.

In the next section, we will examine how this theoretical debate applies to practice by exploring researcher experiences of interculturality in a study of educational inclusion in rural Cambodia.

3. Interculturality and educational inclusion in Cambodia

3.1. Research context: a capacity building programme in educational inclusion

This paper is based on data on interculturality collected during Phase 3 of a study of educational inclusion in Cambodia involving the implementation of an online Capacity Building Programme (CBP) on educational inclusion. Details of the initial Scoping Study (Phase 1) that informed Phases 2 and 3 can be found in Ravet and Mtika (2024). This scoping study identified Cambodian headteacher/teacher development needs. The findings indicated that capacity building in educational inclusion was their highest priority; the need for knowledge and understanding of the key principles of inclusive practice were highlighted. Guidance on practical classroom strategies to promote inclusion, participation and enhanced learning, were considered vital. This was explored further in Phase 2 when the UK and Cambodian teams collaborated to explore the key elements of a CBP for practitioners. The final content and shape of the CBP also drew on the knowledge and insights of our Cambodian partners' many years of knowledge and experience of teacher education, policy and practice.

It was agreed that the CBP should be piloted with the Cambodian team in the first instance. Their needs were therefore a significant consideration since, though they were familiar with Western orthodoxies on inclusion, they were not fully conversant with the complexities of inclusive practice. It was jointly agreed that the three themes of social constructivism, inclusive pedagogy and formative assessment were central to addressing gaps in both practitioner and researcher knowledge and understanding. Action research was included as a fourth theme to prepare our partners to undertake classroom studies on educational inclusion following the completion of the CBP.

The CBP comprised 3×2-h interactive workshops on each theme held over 6 weeks (April- May 2021). It should be noted that this was during the Covid pandemic. The UK team drew on their knowledge and expertise in educational inclusion to provide the content of the programme. Our approach during the CBP was carefully framed by the decolonial literature and decolonising methodologies. A key priority was to avoid perpetuating Western orthodoxies, and to maximise 'power with' rather than 'power over' our Cambodian research partners (Windchief et al., 2018), by creating a context in which Western ideas could be critiqued.

We therefore designed the CBP as interactive workshops to ensure that everyone had opportunities to share perspectives and critical feedback in the light of local relevance and sustainability. The CBP would then be appropriately adapted for onward delivery to teachers in Phase 4.

The workshops were conducted in English since the Cambodian team could speak at least some English, whilst nobody in the UK team could speak Khmer. However, wherever necessary, challenging concepts and ideas were translated into Khmer by the more fluent English-speaking participants in the Cambodian team. Further, the language of the CBP was adapted in several simple but important ways to reduce language barriers and maximise participation (Aman, 2017) as listed in Table 1 below:

Overall, we hoped that these provisions would enable us to honour steps 1 and 2 of the decolonial methodology outlined above. To address step 3: Challenge Western Research Orthodoxies, we agreed that the research process should be conducted collaboratively, reflexively and critically, with as much participation as possible from all partners. Since our research training and experience varied considerably across the team (see, Table 2) we hoped to mentor each other through all stages of the study, make collaborative decisions about all aspects, and share the workload.

Since it was not possible for our Cambodian partners to secure local funding, the study was funded by an institutional pump-priming scheme secured by the UK team.

3.1.1. Research aims

The aims of Phase 3 of the research study were twofold: a) to evaluate the efficacy of the CBP for our Cambodian partners; b) to explore participants' experiences of interculturality. In this paper, we focus on the second aim and the following research question:

> What are participants' perceptions of interculturality based on their experiences of a 5-year research study in educational inclusion?

3.1.2. Research participants

There were eight participants in the study who were selected based on their membership of the UK and Cambodian research teams. Table 2 provides participant background information.

3.1.3. Methodology and methods

It was collaboratively agreed that Phase 3 should be conducted as a qualitative study which is best suited to an in-depth focus on personal and professional perspectives of interculturality and is aligned with a decolonial framework.

A variety of qualitative methods were used to gather data on participants' perceptions of interculturality

1. *Qualitative Questionnaire*: A qualitative questionnaire using open-ended questions, and taking around 20 min to complete, was jointly developed and distributed (via SNAP online software) to gather data on the Cambodian research teams' perceptions of interculturality (see Appendix A).
2. *Research Diaries*: The UK Team kept research diaries of observations and reflections on interculturality throughout the CBP period. The Cambodian team were not asked to keep a research diary since they completed the qualitative questionnaire.
3. *Interviews*: One-to-one interviews based on a semi-structured schedule (see, Appendix B), and taking 30 min to complete, were conducted with the Cambodian research team only, in order to follow-up questionnaire data. The interviews were conducted online in pairs with 2 UK researchers interviewing 2 Cambodian researchers. This facilitated simultaneous translation where necessary. The interviews were audio recorded.

3.1.4. Data analysis

We planned to conduct data analysis jointly using an inductive, thematic method commonly used in qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2008). Since some team members were more familiar with this method than others, we planned to approach the coding process in intercultural pairs so that mentoring support was available if needed. Themes and sub-themes would then be shared, discussed and agreed with all partners and form the basis of the discussion of the findings. Unfortunately, this plan did not unfold as anticipated for the reasons elaborated in the findings for Theme 1 below. The UK team therefore undertook the data analysis, first in pairs, then as a team, to compare analyses, identify commonalities and disjunctions, and come to a common understanding of the data and the meaning of themes and sub-themes. This analysis was then shared with the Cambodia team and is presented below (see Findings).

3.1.5. Ethics

In accordance with the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) ethical guidelines, all participants in this research study were given detailed information about Phase 3 of the project and their role within it. They were assured of anonymity and

Table 1
Communication adaptations.

1. Provision of CBP PowerPoints ahead of workshops to allow preparation time
2. Provision of pre - workshops activities to stimulate critical thinking and surface prior knowledge in focus areas
3. Use of visual supports wherever possible
4. Use of question/answer format to direct attention to key ideas where appropriate
5. Slower pace to allow for translation, thinking and processing time
6. Encouragement of use of chat function and emojis to support non-verbal communication
7. Encouragement of group discussion of key concepts in Khmer before translation into English
8. Use of straightforward language and avoidance of jargon wherever possible
9. Use of repetition/summaries to highlight and reinforce key ideas
10. Use of relevant/relatable examples to contextualise key ideas
11. Regular check-ins to review understanding of key concepts
12. Recording of all sessions to enable review
13. Post-workshop activities to stimulate critical reflection, check understanding of key ideas and link theory to practice.

Table 2
Participant background information.

Participant	Nationality	Age	Gender:	Qualifications	Employment	Overseas degrees/ overseas experience	(a) Research training (b) Research experience
1	Cambodia	–	F	BA Education	Teaching/Teacher Education	Experience of Teaching in Japan	Both Limited
2	Cambodia	40–45	M	BA Public Administration	Teaching/Teacher Training	Exchange visits/ study/ workshops in UK, Australia, Italy, Indonesia, Phillipines, Thailand, Vietnam.	(a) Limited (b) Some
3	Cambodia	45–50	M	BA Maths MA Business Administration	Teaching in Higher Education (25 years)	Courses in Malaysia (active learning)	Both Limited
4	Cambodia	40–45	M	BA Law MA Law PhD Education	Teaching in Higher Education (16 years)	Courses in Malaysia	(a) Yes -PhD level (b) Some
5	Scotland	60–65	F	B.Ed. PhD Education	Teaching Higher Education/Teacher Education (20 years)		(a) Yes - PhD level (b) Extensive
6	UK and Malawi	45–50	M	B.Ed. MA International Education; PhD Education	Teaching Higher Education/Teacher Education	Worked in several international contexts, with international teams in Asia and Africa.	(a) Yes—Ph.D. level (b) Extensive
7	Scotland	65–70	F	MA Education Diploma Inclusive Practice.	Teaching Higher Education/Teacher Education	N/A	(a) Yes—Masters level (b) Some
8	Scotland	35–40	F	BA (Hons) Management with Marketing PGDE Primary MEd Early Years	Teaching/Higher Education/Teacher Education	N/A	(a) Yes—Masters level (b) Some

confidentiality and their right to withdraw at any time. All participants provided signed consent for participation.

3.2. Findings

The findings under each theme are presented below. It should be noted that, given the small number of participants in the study, direct quotes are not attributed to individuals to preserve anonymity, though they are drawn from all 8 participants. Instead, quotes are attributed to teams: C for the Cambodian team and UK for the UK team. The quotes derive from questionnaire, interview and research diary data.

Fig. 1 presents the key themes that emerged from analysis of the data on interculturality.

3.2.1. Theme 1: research expertise and funding conditionalities

This theme was raised wholly by UK team members and relates to concerns about the ways in which our comparative research expertise, and our access to funding, gave us a significant, though unintentional, power advantage in relation to the Cambodian team.

During the CBP, Cambodian partners explained that their research experience varied, with two partners having limited experience of research and two with some direct research involvement. Only one partner had substantive formal research training:

'*(Some) experiences based on feasibility and base-line studies*.' (C)

'*Did qualitative study of student experiences in (a different discipline). Published. Learnt research methods.*' (C)

'*No action research experience.*' (C)

Nonetheless, it was clear that the Cambodian team appreciated the importance of research as a means of stimulating school
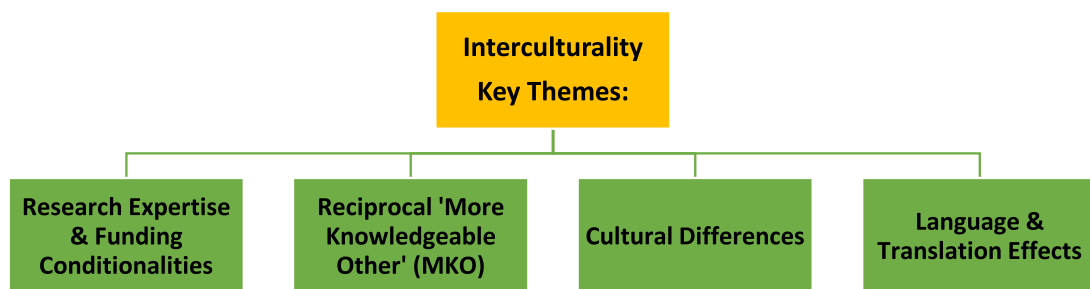

Fig. 1. Key themes on interculturality.

improvement:

> *'Cambodian partners feel a value in developing action research to improve pedagogy. It is clear everyone agrees that this improves teaching.'* (UK)

> *'(Research) can contribute to improving pedagogy and learning activities in 21st century teaching skills.'* (C)

However, though it was hoped that everyone could contribute to all phases of the research study, in reality, our Cambodian partners contributed to the development of the research design and research question, and to the questionnaire and interview schedules, but did not contribute to data analysis, data interpretation and the writing of this research paper. This was mainly because the data analysis phase of the study coincided with a Covid outbreak in Cambodia and a pause in research partner participation. This made it difficult to share the research tasks prioritised at the time. As a result, the UK team were largely responsible for the interpretation and construction of the research themes. Unfortunately, funding conditionalities exacerbated this.

Funding for this study was secured by the UK team. However, the UK funding came with specific conditionalities, such as strict completion deadlines. As a corollary, the UK team inadvertently found themselves in a position of project management and control during the Covid outbreak in Cambodia. This effectively prevented the Cambodian team from participating in the data analysis and the writing process. This is not what we had envisaged and undermined our genuine desire for equity and power sharing.

3.2.2. Theme 2: reciprocal 'more knowledgeable other' (MKO)

The Vygotskian concept of the 'more knowledgeable other' (MKO) (Vygotsky, 1978) is based on the claim that individuals learn best through interaction with others in a social context, especially others who have more knowledge, skills and understanding. MKO was a concept discussed in the CBP in relation to the theme: Social Constructivism. One participant commented:

> *'Social interaction and culture are important in Vygotskian theory. More knowledgeable other [MKO] – interesting discussion and involvement by all.'* (UK)

A key finding of this study was that both the UK and Cambodian teams acted as reciprocal MKOs at different times, and in different ways, throughout the project, which enabled us to learn from each other. Our Cambodian partners made many references to this idea throughout the project in their feedback. For example, they stated:

> *'…for me to work with UK team is very useful and opens up more learning.'* (C)

> *'I like sharing and talking with each other… and sometimes I had to learn more and get experience to change my mindset.'* (C)

> *'We think that some European countries discriminate. They do not want to work with the low-ranking countries and partnership is difficult… Thank you for including us to study and cooperate with us…to be involved in your research.'* (C)

These comments reveal that Cambodian partners viewed the UK team as a valuable source of knowledge and expertise, enjoyed 'sharing and talking' with us and were grateful for the opportunity to research educational inclusion together. They specified what they found useful:

> *'I have started to work and do research more on inclusion practices and get to change mindset of our target schools.'* (C)

> *'This helps me a lot to adopt and be advocate for educational inclusion…, not just physical (access) but mindset to adopt for a positive change.'* (C)

> *'I gained more knowledge about the benefits of cultural partners, teaching methods, leadership and management.'* (C)

> *'It has benefits to rural Cambodian children attending school.'* (C)

These quotes suggest that the CBP enabled the Cambodia team to advance professional goals, such as developing their own knowledge, skills and understanding of inclusive education which they could then apply to current professional practice. They also anticipated that it would enable them to contribute to wider educational goals in their region and improve educational outcomes for teachers and learners in remote, rural schools. It was therefore clear that our partners felt they were able to achieve more in collaboration with us, then they might have done if they worked independently.

However, the Cambodian team also recognised that what they were learning from us had to be transformed in some way to bring about change in their context:

> *'I would like to test the theory because I think that leads to change.'* (C)

> *'I don't want to ask someone to solve my problem. I just solve it and after that, if I cannot, I just ask someone to help. So, it's my idea I work with foreigner.'* (C)

> *'I have alerted my team about this partnership together from the beginning so that we are ready to get to do this practically with the concept of understanding a new learning, especially to ensure more quality inclusive education in the school we are working in.'* (C)

These quotes imply that the Cambodian team appreciated that educational transformation in Cambodia requires agency on their part, plus further engagement with key ideas, collaboration and development in the field to ensure cultural relevance and sustainability. They therefore recognised that they must be active participants if they wished to bring about change.

Equally, the UK team learnt from Cambodian partners so that there was a degree of knowledge exchange and reciprocal learning.

For example, Cambodia team responses during the CBP generated insights into their knowledge and experiences of inclusion and highlighted issues that were new to the UK team:

> *'It was good to get to know the participants and their work better by meeting them in an academic context. More insight into the differences between classrooms in Scotland and classrooms in Cambodia. Also, the political discourse and different perspectives on the rural/urban divide.'* (UK)

> *'(I learnt) from Cambodian partners that constructivism is a theory Cambodian schools are adopting. Cambodian partners referred to learning styles frequently…'* (UK)

> *'There are issues with access to resources that we need to be mindful of, and where they may be available. How much access to resources would rural communities have?'* (UK)

These insights enriched mutual understanding.

3.2.3. Theme 3: cultural differences

The term 'cultural differences' refers to the socially constructed attitudes, beliefs, values, norms, and behaviours associated with a particular culture (Smith & Bond, 2019) which may influence relationships and processes at all levels of the intercultural research endeavour. For example, it was notable that members of the Cambodian team explicitly referred to the UK team as 'Westerners' or 'foreigners' signalling a sense of 'otherness'. Westerners are traditionally perceived as 'authority figures' in Cambodian culture and treated with considerable deference (Kalyanpur, 2014). The UK team observed that this deference was sometimes linked to a reluctance to question ideas/concepts:

> *'I'm unsure of their understanding. Do they agree with what we say? What are their real thoughts?'* (UK)

This reluctance to question was acknowledged in the Cambodia team where it was noted it occurs in their own professional contexts, reflecting the hierarchical nature of Cambodian culture:

> *'Sometimes the culture in Cambodia is like this. Sometimes even the teachers - they don't ask for clarification.'* (C)

One partner commented that this trait is hard to overcome and must be frustrating for the UK team:

> *'I find expectations sometimes it's a bit difficult to respond to. … I understand you sometimes find it is frustrating to work together'.* (C)

Another key cultural difference was attitudes to time. There are cultural expectations of punctuality in the West, especially in formal professional contexts. However, our Cambodian partners did not always arrive on time for workshops or respond to communications in a timely way. One UK participant noted that this is simply a cultural difference to be respectfully accepted:

> *'Time is a concept that is different in different cultures and so meeting times and starting times are maybe not so important to our Cambodian partners'.* (UK)

Cambodian partners also commented:

> *'I think in this case, you need to know that the Cambodian culture, in relation to perspective of 'time', …we do not usually follow time in strict terms.'* (C)

Cultural differences also emerged related to openness. It was interesting to learn that our Cambodia partners appreciated these qualities in the UK team, emphasising the freedom of expression they afforded them:

> *'European people, I noticed that all of them say something- tell the truth. So, I like to tell the truth because it is easier to find a solution. But sometimes my culture is different.'* (C)

> *'We are free to talk, we can discuss with you…It's good that you are …open, open heart, open mind…'* (C)

This culture of openness seemed to enable partners to reciprocate and be candid. It generated trust.
The Cambodian team also commented that the UK team tended to listen carefully and without interruption:

> *'I feel respected, heard, and understood. You [UK team] pay attention'* (C)

Several cultural differences were highlighted by both teams. However, rather than being viewed as problems or barriers, there was a strong consensus that we could all learn from intercultural working and, in some cases, benefit from it:

> *'I love this way of cross-cultural working and it's fine to adopt this way of communication and punctuality of work.'* (C)

> *'I can say that I learnt a lot from this and it's about the cultural ways of learning a thing. We have shared lots of learning across the two cultures and learning systems'* (C)

Ultimately, there seemed to be agreement that we all had to try to find ways of working together and that the key to accommodating cultural differences was teamwork. This was summed up by two partners:

> *'I try to find a common culture that we can work together.'* (C)

> *'We can understand each other's languages and cultures by working as a team.'* (C)

3.2.4. *Theme 4: language adaptations and translation effects*

Participants engaged deeply with the CBP during the interactive workshops. For example, it was noted that the pre-workshop activities, designed to surface prior knowledge of workshop themes and to foreground the context of teaching and learning in Cambodia, proved effective:

'…a useful starting point for discussion (allowing) Cambodian partners time to think about and discuss vital elements of the project.' (UK)

It was also noted that explicitly inviting each member of the Cambodia team in turn to contribute their thoughts on key ideas fostered inclusion and prevented those more proficient in English from dominating discussions:

'Participants felt happy to share their experiences with the group. Using their names and asking for their points of view/perspective/ experience in turn enabled all the Cambodian partners to be both involved and engaged. It also provided an element of inclusion and demonstrated that everyone plays a role in the project.' (UK)

Other aspects of teaching methodology proved helpful, especially the communication adaptations built into the CBP (see, Table 1):

'UK presenters gave clear opportunities to hear from each participant who was, in turn, listened to respectfully.' (UK)

'Checking understanding and adding comments to clarify was helpful.' (UK)

'Sending the PowerPoints in advance was supportive. It gave Cambodian partners a chance to check the materials.' (UK)

However, these approaches did not work consistently and sometimes it was clear that key concepts were not fully understood.

'It was not always easy to ascertain the quality of understanding of new concepts. We tried checking in different ways using different words/simplifying, but this was not always effective. The assessment session was probably most difficult for our Cambodian partners as key ideas (e.g., formative assessment) were new and challenging culturally.' (UK)

Focus on rural schools at times being lost.' (UK)

'There were some difficulties with participation from the partners when we had discussion about how children play and what they learn from this.' (UK)

We tried to monitor and follow-up these issues and return to key ideas frequently to enhance understanding. Nonetheless, the Cambodian team were constantly challenged to work in an English language medium:

'The challenges are language and comprehension. I had to learn to understand the culture of communication.' (C)

'When you talk in [jargon]it is hard to understand, but after we talk or we talk together, maybe we will understand each other. Just keep talking and we can find the misunderstanding.' (C)

'It is a bit difficult to catch some of the whole meaning of the talk online; sometimes you missed the word and sometimes it's hard to ask the question back.' (C)

The UK team also commented on the difficulty of translating specific words into Khmer (the national language of Cambodia) for which a direct translation was unavailable:

'Certain words may not be easily translatable into Cambodian context – e.g., assimilation, social justice, children's rights. In Cambodia, how is this understood?' (UK)

Equally, it was challenging for the Cambodian team to translate Khmer ideas and concepts into English:

'Sometimes we don't know how to explain in English, to explain to you - it is a problem…' (C)

The online context also exacerbated language difficulties:

'It would be easier if we met and sat in the same room and you can read all, you know…what people say and body language to get the proper sense of what is being discussed.' (C)

Despite these considerable challenges, working in a different language enabled some participants to build on prior experience:

'I speak English, and talking together gives me more understanding and learning.' (C)

'I have been working with UK friends before, so this gave me more understanding.' (C)

Though, in accordance with good practice, double translation was arranged for all documents generated during the study, there were still concerns about the ad hoc verbal translations provided by members of the Cambodian team during the CBP:

'Important to explicitly check that key concepts, that might not have direct translation, are fully understood.' (UK)

'Translation effects—I have concerns about reliance on, and uncertainty about, translator understanding and interpretation of ideas.' (UK)

However, it is interesting to note that concerns about translation effects were only raised by the UK team, perhaps because they were discussed in an earlier paper (see Authors, 2021) and we were sensitised to their importance.

4. Discussion

The findings suggest there were several affordances and challenges associated with our experiences of intercultural working which will now be discussed.

4.1. Affordances

4.1.1. Knowledge and cultural exchange

There are repeated concerns within the decolonial literature that intercultural studies can inadvertently marginalise indigenous knowledge traditions and deprivilege indigenous voices (Dei, 2010). This can have serious deleterious effects on local realities and practices and may serve to perpetuate Western educational orthodoxies (ibid). However, we used the Vygotskian (1978) concept of reciprocal 'More Knowledgeable Other' (MKO) to provide evidence that these outcomes are not inevitabilities, and to highlight the mutual knowledge exchange between the Cambodian and UK partners involved in this study. Arguably, we created a collective 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD) (ibid) for mutual learning and development.

The findings provide many examples of such mutual development through joint discussion and problem solving, and evidence that much was achieved through collaboration. The CBP at the heart of this study was therefore beneficial, in this sense, to all.

Further, though the literature warns of the danger of marginalising indigenous voices (Dei, 2010), we are confident in claiming that the communication adaptations made in advance of online workshop delivery enabled the knowledge and perspectives of our Cambodian partners to be surfaced, valued and respected. We also reduced the risk of imposing Western concepts by generating reflective questions and encouraging our Cambodian partners to discuss them first in their mother tongue, the Khmer language. This was effective because it helped to ease the language processing burden and ensured critical analysis of key concepts. Other interventions, such as frequent check-ins, helped to clarify misunderstandings.

This approach using reflective questions enabled the Cambodian team to draw on, and share, their professional knowledge and expertise in Cambodian education, and brought to light illuminating educational disparities to the benefit of the UK team. For example, it was helpful to explore the traditional focus in Cambodian schools on mixed age grouping and rote learning. This exemplifies the knowledge exchange that typically took place. Both knowledge traditions were equally important and equally valued.

The findings therefore provide evidence that, used reflexively within a decolonial framework, qualitative research paradigms can generate research with and for indigenous communities, rather than research on or to them (Windchief, 2018). We were successful in enabling different ways of knowing across cultural boundaries, and in disrupting, to some degree, universalist discourses (Kamenopoulou, 2020). Importantly, we were able to find ways of addressing 'impediments to relations', highlighted by Aman (2017), that might have undermined reciprocal understanding by, for example, making pedagogical adaptations to the communication environment. However, it takes time to work in this reciprocal, relational way (Beeman-Cadwaller et al., 2011). It requires sensitivity to partner needs, flexibility and adaptability. It also requires awareness of the subtle ways that reciprocity can be undermined by communication and structural constraints as discussed further below.

Similarly, the findings of this study suggest that, though cultural differences inevitably create a challenging context for joint research (Kalyanpur, 2014, 2016), they can also bring significant richness to the research endeavour. Cultural exchange yielded deep, reciprocal insights into each other's values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours. Indeed, it was fascinating to learn how we were 'seen' by each other and to bring this more clearly into view. It was interesting to learn that our Cambodian partners welcomed the UK research partners' openness and felt 'free to talk'. The findings therefore suggest that where cultural differences are surfaced, it is possible to achieve a level of shared understanding, equity and power, and reduce gross cultural inequities and social injustices. Indeed, there was a feeling that the frustrations of working together were offset by the advantages, and that the common goal of enhancing educational inclusion for children in remote, rural schools was a powerful force that drew us together. This research team have collaborated since 2018. This long-term relationship has built resilience and trust, and enabled us to sustain momentum during the Covid pandemic. Overall, there is agreement that we are an effective team and that a common culture will continue to evolve. However, the journey towards 'cultural reciprocity' (Kalyanpur, 2016) requires ongoing dialogue, problem solving and teamwork. We certainly do not suggest this journey is over.

4.1.2. Inclusive communication

It is widely recognised that language barriers are a key issue for intercultural researchers and can undermine dialogic processes in ways that deprivilege indigenous partners (Sutrisno et al., 2013; Aman, 2017). Decolonial methodologies therefore prioritise inclusive communication and, to achieve this end, we were keen to reduce language and translation barriers by adapting the communication environment in advance of the CBP workshops. The findings suggests that the adaptations were helpful, supported understanding, strengthened voice and enabled partners to develop and refine their use of English.

A key finding is therefore that language and translation effects can be reduced and perhaps even minimised, but they cannot be completely eradicated. For example, there were problems with 'conceptual equivalence' where there was no corresponding term in Khmer language for a term in English. This is widely reported in the literature (Levine et al., 2007; Kalyanpur, 2014). Where this was noted and surfaced, there were concerted attempts to address the problem dialogically. However, we are mindful that subtle concept variabilities may have been missed (Levine et al., 2007).

The accuracy of 'on the spot' translation of spoken communications was also difficult to determine. Such translation 'has always been central to intercultural communication' and is impossible to avoid (Kosal & Yuruk, 2020). However, it is difficult to establish what inaccuracies and misunderstandings might have arisen owing to the speed and immediacy of such translation, and the subjective

interpretation inherent to it (ibid). There could be no check for accuracy. However, it is hoped that the next phase of the project will provide further opportunities to identify and address conceptual misunderstandings.

4.2. Challenges

4.2.1. Power asymmetries: research expertise

Despite the affordances arising from this study, our greatest challenge came in implementing the third step of the 3-step decolonial approach: Challenge Western Research Orthodoxies. We had hoped that a collaborative approach, with opportunities for knowledge exchange, communication adaptations and support for the research process, might enable us to create a fairer and more balanced context for research participation. Yet this proved difficult to achieve. The Cambodian and UK's teams' limited command of English and Khymer language respectively, and the relatively limited knowledge and experience of research processes among the Cambodian team were key challenges despite our attempts to ameliorate them. Interruptions caused by Covid outbreaks exacerbated these challenges.

Heng et al. (2023) confirm that limited language proficiency and limited research training widely hampers research engagement amongst academics in Cambodia. This is driven, in part, by cultural context (Heng & Sol, 2021). Cambodia's weak research infrastructure is largely due to the legacy of the Khmer Rouge and years of civil war which decimated the education system, including higher education, across the country (ibid). Though the past decade has seen growing investment in research (Un, 2018), it is worth noting that exogenous factors, such as Western investment in education and educational research, has shaped policy and practice in Cambodia and promoted Western epistemologies. Western orthodoxies are therefore well embedded in Cambodian culture and have powerful reach. This, perhaps, explains why these orthodoxies were not specifically questioned by the Cambodian team and why local epistemologies did not figure strongly in our findings. This is a common problem highlighted in the intercultural research literature (Aman, 2017). It is also possible that if the Cambodian team had contributed as equal partners to the writing of this paper, there would have been more mutual examination of this matter.

4.2.2. Power asymmetries: funding conditionalities

Challenges associated with asymmetries in access to funding were also highlighted by the findings. This issue is linked to the discussion above in the sense that a lack of funding is another outcome of the weak research culture at all levels of Cambodian education (Heng & Sol, 2021). Cambodian researchers currently rely largely on overseas funding to facilitate educational development projects which play a key role in advancing understanding and transforming practice (ibid). Arguably, overseas funding is therefore vital at this stage in Cambodia, though, paradoxically, it contributes directly to the perpetuation of a Western cultural hegemony. This creates dilemmas for Western researchers who, on the one hand, seek to support overseas development projects but, on the other hand, must be accountable to Western project funders when implementing it with partners in the Global South.

The conditionalities associated with funding in Western universities are highly problematic in an intercultural context. Such funding invariably comes with prescriptive organisational and ethical requirements, strict publishing expectations and specific timeframes (Keiner & Karlics, 2018). Things simply must get done by imposed deadlines. Funding therefore had a strong influence on the research agenda and timeline during Phase 3, putting the UK team in a position of responsibility, accountability and control, especially during Covid outbreaks in Cambodia, and creating further power imbalances. Funding also influenced research dissemination in the sense that the research paper had to be written in English.

Yet, things are starting to change in Cambodia with the launch of their 'National Research Agenda 2025' for sustainable development (ESCAP, 2023). Arguably, if this agenda finds traction and new initiatives take hold, inequalities linked to reliance on overseas expertise and funding may slowly diminish over time, and Cambodian researchers will be able to lead and write up their intercultural research in Khmer. However, this could be a long, difficult journey (Sok & Bunry, 2021). Indeed, Sok and Bunry (2021) confirm the point made by Barnes (2018) earlier in this paper, that intercultural research is always subject to the 'drivers of social injustices' like neocolonialism, capitalism, and globalisation that researchers simply cannot influence.

5. Conclusions

This study makes a globally significant contribution to international education and development research and global equitable partnerships. It demonstrates the complexity and tensions associated with the '*business as usual approach*' to international education and development research and the value of adopting a decolonial perspective underpinned by interculturality. The findings provide evidence that the intercultural endeavour can be a fruitful one, resulting in effective knowledge exchange that will contribute to future capacity building in educational inclusion in remote, rural Cambodian schools and beyond. Cultural exchange was of considerable benefit in facilitating shared understanding and in helping us establish a 'common culture' that will, hopefully, continue to evolve. A decolonial ethos, and use of decolonial methodologies, were a vital backdrop to the project, enabling us to foreground intercultural communication to reduce language and translation effects, foster co-construction, and ensure that different ways of knowing and being could be critically discussed and appreciated.

However, despite our attempt at a decolonial approach, we could not overcome the subtle drivers that influence research processes and create power asymmetries, such as funding conditionalities. Indeed, as an international research team, we have only just begun to challenge the 'tendency to privilege systems and structures of domination' inherent in our work (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005). This is a key limitation of the study. If we are to address these asymmetries, sustained reflexivity amongst the UK team regarding our privileges as Western researchers will be vital as the research moves forward.

In the next phase of the study, Phase 4, we plan that the Cambodia team will introduce the CBP to local teachers in remote rural primary schools in Cambodia and will support them in undertaking practitioner action research to enhance educational inclusion. Here, the Cambodia team will, inevitably, be in more direct command of project management and design, data collection, analysis and dissemination. However, the funding remains a significant challenge, and this may still require involvement by the UK team. The intention will be targeting funding that does not have strict conditionalities. We hope that in this phase, the power imbalances and inequities discussed above can start to be redressed, our intercultural collaboration will continue to thrive, and our quest for epistemic justice will begin to bear fruit.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Jackie Ravet: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Peter Mtika:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Amy McFarlane:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Catriona MacDonald:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Bunlee Khun:** Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Vandy Tep:** Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Rany Sam:** Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Hak Yoeng:** Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Supplementary materials

Supplementary material associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at doi:10.1016/j.ijer.2024.102466.

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