Article

Transformative Learning Through Intercultural Collaborative Learning: A Case Study Across University and Primary School Contexts

Miki Horie, Xiaoxian Liang, Yuki Azuma
Ritsumeikan University, Japan

ABSTRACT: *As Japan's higher education institutions strive to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in response to globalization, Intercultural Collaborative Learning (ICL) has emerged as a promising pedagogical framework. ICL employs various theories to promote inclusive and meaningful collaboration among learners in diverse learning communities, including international students and individuals with multicultural identities. This interpretive study focuses on the Rits Global Gateway Camp, an ICL program based on the Guiding Framework of Inclusive ICL. The framework connects local primary school students and university students with various cultural backgrounds studying in Japan. This study aims to explore and illustrate university students' learning experiences throughout the program and to identify key facilitating factors that support inclusive ICL practices. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and complemented by contextual information from program observations. Through thematic analysis, we identified meaningful outcomes and transformative impacts of the program. This included strengthening participants' self-efficacy and sense of agency. Additionally, the analysis highlighted several facilitating factors that support effective ICLs, including cultivating safe climates that reduce fear of failure, grounding the program in theory-based design, and offering intentional pretraining. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how inclusive ICL practices can be effectively designed and implemented to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion in various educational settings.*

Keywords: cross-cultural learning, cultural marginality, intercultural collaborative learning, intercultural education, international students, peer learning.

INTRODUCTION

Amid Japan's growing foreign presence and evolving policy agendas, the promotion of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) has gained prominence across societal domains, with the educational sector no exception. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) underscored this trend in its Fourth Basic Plan for the Promotion of Education (2023), which emphasizes integrating DEI principles into education to advance the well-being of both individuals and society. Addressing the needs of diverse students from a social inclusion perspective has been identified as a key educational policy priority for the next five years (MEXT, 2023). These policy commitments underscore the pressing need to translate such visionary goals into effective educational practices.

As the internationalization of Japanese higher education advances through government-led initiatives, the growing presence of international students and the influence of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have intensified efforts to promote meaningful intercultural learning and collaboration among students from diverse cultural backgrounds (Goh et al., 2025; Horie, 2025). Within this policy context, Intercultural Collaborative Learning (多文化間共修論, ICL) has attracted increasing attention as a compelling pedagogical approach for fostering inclusion and collaboration. At its core, ICLs promote the intentional creation of learning communities in which students from different cultural backgrounds engage in meaningful interactions. Central to this goal is a pedagogical effort to foster inclusive intercultural learning, ensuring that every participant is recognized as an active and valued member of the community (Horie, 2017; 2025). In this vein, ICL can be understood as a practical application of DEI principles in education, offering a valuable platform for examining concrete practices that foster inclusive and meaningful intercultural learning.

This leads to the central research question of this study: what environmental and pedagogical factors exist, and in what ways do they facilitate inclusive and meaningful intercultural learning in ICL programs? A case study was conducted to explore the Rits Global Gateway Camp (RGGC), an ICL program that connects students from Ritsumeikan Primary School and the College of Global Liberal Arts (GLA) at Ritsumeikan University in Japan. The GLA offers a dual-degree curriculum conducted entirely in English and hosts a culturally diverse student body, including both international and Japanese students. Many GLA students,

regardless of their nationality, have grown up with multicultural experiences. Building on this diversity, the RGGC program was intentionally designed to provide a space where university and primary school students could engage in intercultural exchange and mutual learning. This study focuses on the learning experiences of GLA students in this ICL program and examines the factors that shape meaningful intercultural learning outcomes.

LITERATURE REVIEW: FOSTERING INCLUSIVE INTERCULTURAL LEARNING

As diversity is becoming increasingly recognized as essential to education, inclusivity and equity have been underscored as overarching goals in the UNESCO Education 2023 Agenda (UNESCO, 2016) and have emerged as central priorities in the global education landscape. Although scholarly and institutional initiatives are shaped by varying definitions of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), a common understanding is emerging that diversity extends beyond demographic categories such as gender and race to encompass broader social, cultural, and experiential dimensions (e.g., Chan, 2005; Tamtik & Guenter, 2019). The notion of equity often involves systematically addressing the barriers that disadvantaged groups experience in accessing learning opportunities and achieving outcomes, with the goal of enabling every learner to fully develop their potential (Tamtik & Guenter, 2019; Zhao et al., 2024). Achieving this, as UNESCO (2015) highlights, requires gaining deeper insight into the dynamics of teaching and learning in each learning community, which is responsive to the specific needs and contexts of its learners. Inclusion, which aims to integrate diversity into a cohesive community (Mor-Barak & Cherin, 1998), is realized in educational contexts by fostering an individual's sense of value and belonging and by promoting their active and meaningful engagement in the learning process (Zhao et al., 2024). Overall, these three interrelated principles advocate attending to the developmental needs of culturally diverse learners, with particular emphasis on addressing obstacles to participation while accounting for the challenges and strengths inherent in learners' distinct backgrounds. Together, these constitute a practical orientation for providing inclusive intercultural learning, in which the first step is recognizing the challenges and strengths learners may experience in intercultural learning communities.

Challenges and Strengths of Being Culturally Diverse: Matters of Identity and Marginality

One significant issue affecting learners in intercultural learning communities, particularly international students, arises from experiences of direct or indirect "displacement." This may result from moving to a new country themselves or having parents who have migrated and often involve adapting to unfamiliar cultures, managing feelings of disconnection from one's community, and reconciling complex identities (OECD, 2018). Individuals navigating between cultures often encounter cultural marginality, a concept introduced by Janet

Bennett (1993) to describe the sense of being situated on the margins of two or more cultures without fully identifying with any single culture. The experience of cultural marginality can generate emotional challenges such as anxiety and insecurity; for those living as oppressed minorities, these feelings may be further intensified by low self-esteem, internalized prejudice, and a persistent sense of alienation or hostility (p.112).

Although cultural marginality can present challenges to students' learning and well-being, it does not necessarily lead to negative outcomes. Bennett (1993) distinguished between encapsulated marginality, in which unresolved internal tensions hinder identity integration, and constructive marginality, in which individuals actively construct their own identities across cultural boundaries (p.113). Constructive marginal identity resolution cultivates competencies, including flexibility, self-reflectivity, personal responsibility, and tolerance of ambiguity, which are key components of intercultural competence and a vital skill set for individuals thriving in a globalized world (Bennett, 2014). Therefore, within educational contexts, it is important to provide developmental opportunities that support diverse learners in engaging constructively with identity formation and strengthening their intercultural competence (Bennett, 1993; 2014).

Significance of Learning Environments and Holistic Safety

While identity development is an ongoing process shaped by complex sociocultural contexts (Jenkins, 1996), the concept of "student empowerment", which is widely recognized as a core objective in both inclusive and intercultural education (UNESCO, 2009; Elias & Mansouri, 2023), provides a valuable perspective for supporting culturally diverse individuals in navigating identity-related challenges. Empowerment, as conceptualized by Hamelink (1994), refers to "a process in which people achieve the capacity to control decisions affecting their lives," which "enables people to define themselves and to construct their identities," and can be achieved through an "intentional strategy which is initiated externally by empowering agents" (pp. 132-133). In this sense, empowerment in educational contexts entails creating conditions that enable students to act as active agents in shaping their identity. An example of this approach is Bennett's (1993) view of assisting individuals in their transition into well-prepared constructive marginals.

In practical terms, Cummins (2001) highlights the critical role of learning environments in empowering culturally diverse students. By emphasizing identity negotiation within classroom interactions as a key mechanism for student empowerment, he advocates for environments that affirm the value of students' cultural backgrounds. This can, in turn, motivate students not only to explore and express their evolving identities but also to actively pursue further learning. Echoing Cummins' arguments, empirical studies have demonstrated that learning environments in which minority students feel supported in engaging with their cultural backgrounds facilitate the exploration and resolution of their cultural identities (Camacho et al., 2018; Schachner et al., 2024). In addition to supporting

identity development, students' perception that cultural diversity is acknowledged and valued at the classroom level has been associated with positive school and socioemotional adjustment among immigrant students. Such perceptions are linked to fewer school-related behavioral and psychological problems (Schachner et al., 2016) and to higher life satisfaction (Juang et al., 2024).

The literature has underscored the perception of safety as a central component in creating inclusive and empowering learning environments for culturally diverse students (e.g., Holden et al., 2023; Prehn et al., 2024). Within healthcare education and practice, the cultural safety approach has emerged as an influential framework for the inclusion of cultural minorities (Thompson, 2022). This approach centers on creating environments where individuals feel secure in their physical, spiritual, social, and emotional aspects, without feeling their identity and needs denied. It emphasizes mutual respect, shared meaning, and cooperative learning as essential elements for empowering individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, while also advocating attention to both interpersonal and organizational factors in shaping culturally safe environments (Williams, 1999). Cultural safety in practice is grounded in individuals' experiences of feeling respected and included during interactions. These experiences empower them to actively participate and collaborate in decision-making, thereby counteracting forces that undermine their cultural identity and well-being (Gerlach, 2012; Thompson, 2022). In this sense, ensuring holistic safety is fundamental to creating inclusive environments where culturally diverse individuals can construct and affirm their identities. Similarly, a growing body of studies in international higher education highlights the importance of providing safe environments to promote students' well-being. Empirical evidence from international student support programs consistently shows that students' perceptions of a safe space for self-expression foster positive outcomes in relationship building and personal development (Penman et al., 2021; de Saint Léger et al., 2024). Overall, actively and comprehensively fostering students' sense of safety is central to creating inclusive and empowering learning environments.

Pedagogy of Intercultural Collaborative Learning: Fostering Diverse Development in Inclusive Environments

As a pedagogical approach responsive to students from diverse backgrounds, Intercultural Collaborative Learning is grounded in the recognition of cultural diversity as a valuable resource for student learning and development. A central goal of ICLs is to cultivate intercultural competence, which is crucial for students' well-being and self-actualization in multicultural settings (Horie, 2017). From this perspective, intercultural interactions in the classroom function as critical moments of experiential learning that foster intercultural competence. Accordingly, ICLs underscore the intentional design of learning environments that facilitate such interactions and increase the transformative impact on student learning (p. 20). Drawing from Allport's (1979) theory on the key conditions for optimal intergroup contact, ICL practitioners highlight the importance of cultivating classroom interactions, affording all learners a role in cocreating the

learning community and providing institutional support that ensures that all learners feel psychologically safe and meaningfully included in the learning process (Horie, 2017, 2025; Akiba et al., 2023).

At their core, ICL initiatives seek to create learning environments that cultivate intercultural competence and support culturally diverse students in their identity development and wider personal growth. In Japan, ICL courses and activities have been steadily expanding across educational settings, accompanied by a growing body of scholarship documenting their implementation and outcomes (e.g., Takahashi, 2019). However, few empirical studies have examined the specific conditions and strategies that make intercultural learning meaningful. Against the backdrop of MEXT's (2024) advocacy for a university-wide framework to implement intercultural collaborative learning, it is imperative to advance research-based insights that clarify how ICL initiatives can be effectively translated into meaningful educational outcomes. This study addresses a gap in the body of knowledge by examining the RGGC program, which was designed with a pedagogical commitment to fostering inclusive environments and empowering learning opportunities for students from culturally diverse backgrounds.

Furthermore, in aligning the promotion of ICL with the broader goal of building an inclusive and multicultural society, MEXT (2024) emphasized the importance of initiatives undertaken in partnership with communities beyond the university. Reflecting this emphasis, this study offers insights from an inter-age ICL program connecting university and primary school students. Such efforts also hold promise for enriching global scholarship on how principles of DEI can be applied in education, extending academic discussions beyond the field's predominant focus on gender and racial dynamics within higher education alone (Yanıkoğlu, 2025; Filippou et al. 2025).

RGGC: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK, PROGRAM OBJECTIVE, AND CONTENT

The Rits Global Gateway Camp (RGGC) was developed using the Guiding Framework for Inclusive ICLs, which integrates the theories and concepts relevant to implementing inclusive ICL practices (Figure 1). Anchored in the guiding phrase "Be yourself. Be yourself. Respect everyone's story," the program seeks to provide experiential learning opportunities for university and primary school students of multicultural backgrounds through intensive interactions.
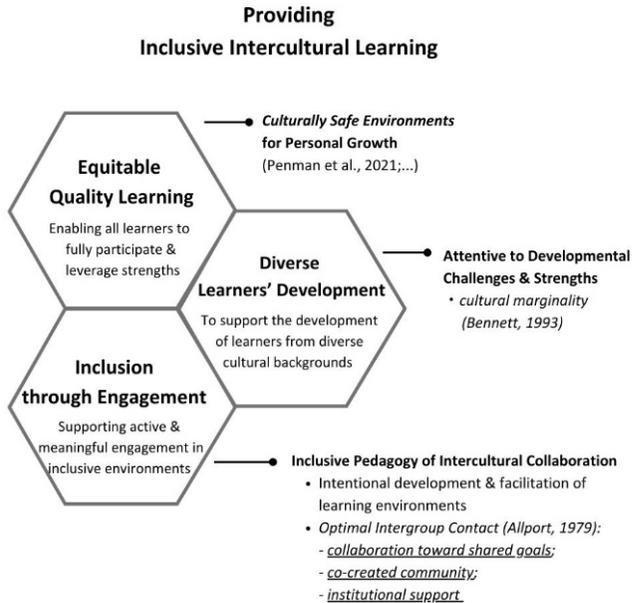
Providing
Inclusive Intercultural Learning

Culturally Safe Environments for Personal Growth (Penman et al., 2021;...)

Equitable Quality Learning
Enabling all learners to fully participate & leverage strengths

Diverse Learners' Development
To support the development of learners from diverse cultural backgrounds

Attentive to Developmental Challenges & Strengths
• *cultural marginality* (Bennett, 1993)

Inclusion through Engagement
Supporting active & meaningful engagement in inclusive environments

Inclusive Pedagogy of Intercultural Collaboration
• Intentional development & facilitation of learning environments
• *Optimal Intergroup Contact* (Allport, 1979):
  - *collaboration toward shared goals*;
  - *co-created community*;
  - *institutional support*

Figure 1: Guiding Framework for Inclusive ICLs

The primary language used in the program was English. While university students generally possess highly advanced to native-level English proficiency, the children studying English at school ranged from beginner to low-intermediate levels. The use of translanguaging practices (Garcia, 2009) was encouraged, allowing participants to flexibly draw on multiple languages in context. As a result, Japanese and other languages were naturally integrated into interactions.

The program was facilitated by a team comprising three primary school teachers, one university professor, and two program assistants, all of whom had practical proficiency in both English and Japanese and were familiar with the underlying theoretical framework.

The program consists of a pre-program session, a one-day camp, and a post-program session. This structure was designed with careful recognition of the importance of embedding reflective learning opportunities throughout the intercultural experience to maximize learning outcomes, as noted in previous critiques of intercultural program design (e.g., Akiba et al. 2024). Pre-program sessions were conducted separately for university students and primary school students to share the program's purpose, outline, and experiential learning process. The one-day camp was implemented as shown in Table 1, followed by separate reflective sessions for university and primary school students.

	Content	Rationale
9:30	**Welcome & Ice-Breaker** ・Group self-introductions: two Grade 5–6 students paired with two university students acting as "Camp Leaders" ・"Let's Find Commonalities" Game	Opportunity for all members and facilitators to connect and get to know each other
10:00	**Mini Campus Tour** ・Groups visit six campus checkpoints, completing English tasks such as description games, gesture games, tongue twisters, and group jump rope collaboratively	Help group members feel comfortable with each other by engaging them in shared tasks Familiarize participants with campus environments to help them feel less nervous
11:00	**In-Group Interview** ・Primary school students interview Camp Leaders about their life stories in multiple cultural and social contexts and prepare presentation drafts with the guidance of Camp Leaders ・Sample questions: "When I was young…", "Why did you come to Japan?", "How did you feel on your first day in Japan?"	Opportunities for (1) primary school students to broaden perspectives and envision their futures in a global society (2) university students to leverage their intercultural experiences in a mentorship role (3) foster group bonding and active interaction) Facilitators observing and giving assistance for group interactions
12:00	**Lunch break** ・Review the day's activities through a video summary. *12:45 – Wake-Up Game (plenary ice-breaker)*	
13:00	**"Talk Show"-Sharing Camp Leader Life Stories** ・Children introduce their Camp Leaders by telling their impressive life stories to all participants	
14:15	**Reflective group discussion** ・All members reflect on the day's learning and prepare for the final presentation	Spaces for making sense of learning experiences, engaging in dialogue, and processing emotions within the learning community.
15:00	**Final Presentation** ・All members share reflections and exchange final messages	
16:30	**Closing** ・Review the day's activities through a video summary	Parents are invited to the final presentation and closing

Table 1: Content and Rationale of RGGC's One-day Event

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative Research Design: A Case Study with an Interpretive Approach

This study employs a qualitative research design, using a case study methodology to provide an in-depth exploration of university students' experiences in the Rits Global Gateway Camp (RGGC) and the factors that facilitate Intercultural Collaborative Learning (ICL). Guided by this framework, the study adopted an interpretive approach that views reality as socially constructed and best understood through the meanings individuals assign to their lived experiences. It seeks to illustrate and interpret significant moments of

participants' lived experiences in the RGGC, with particular emphasis on the process by which participants reflect on, reinterpret, and reconstruct their experiences (Creswell, 1994; Dahlberg et al., 2001).

In this interpretive framework, subjectivity is not treated as a limitation but as a source of insight. Participants are encouraged to freely express themselves, and their narratives may include elements that appear inconsistent with facts in reality. While empirical research may dismiss this type of information as inaccuracies, this study recognizes that perceptions of the same situation can differ depending on the participants' perspectives and backgrounds. This study emphasizes understanding how participants' diverse contexts shape the meaning of their experiences.

Data Collection: Semistructured Interviews

Semistructured interviews were used to collect the study data. Within the interpretive approach, the purpose of interviews is to understand the meaning of participants' lived experiences (Kvale, 1996). Through the interview process, participants are encouraged to make sense of their past experiences, reconstruct meanings and articulate them in response to the interview questions (Seidman, 1991). Therefore, interviewers are expected to respond calmly and support self-disclosure, regardless of what the interviewees express, and to assure them that there are no right or wrong answers (Dahlberg et al., 2001).

In interpretive studies, interviewers must remain aware of their positionality in relation to interviewees' lived experiences, as meanings are constructed through the process of communication between the interviewer and the interviewees (Kvale, 1996). In this study, the interviews were conducted by the authors, who are intercultural education researchers with postgraduate degrees and multilingual proficiency. Since the authors served as a program coordinator and assistants, the participants were already familiar with the interviewers through their collaborative work in implementing the RGGC. The authors were aware that such familiarity with the relationship may have influenced responses, with some participants answering questions in line with their program participation while refraining from discussing certain aspects they felt uncomfortable sharing.

With these principles in mind, we conducted semistructured interviews with nine students who served as camp leaders in the RGGC in 2024. All the camp leaders (14 in total) were invited, and nine agreed to participate in the study. The students' places of origin represented six different countries, including Japan.

After obtaining participants' prior consent, semistructured interviews were conducted individually. Drawing on the validity of similar research on the lived experience of college students' program participation (Shin, Hirai & Horie, 2016), the following questions were developed as key prompts to initiate semistructured conversation:
1. Please describe the most impressive moments in your interactions with the kids.
2. Did your interaction with the children give you any new insights about yourself? If so, what are they?

3. How would you describe the characteristics of this educational environment?

The interviews were conducted by two of the authors in either Japanese or English, depending on the participant's preference. The interviewers employed active listening techniques and asked follow-up questions to encourage participants to freely explore their lived experiences. The interviews were concluded once the interviewers recognized data saturation, as indicated by participants repeating the same ideas or meanings. As a result, each interview lasted approximately 30–40 minutes. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed into raw text data, which served as the basis for coding and thematic analysis.

Data Analysis

The interview data were manually analyzed via thematic analysis. Following the principles of consensual qualitative research (Hill et al. 2005), the three authors independently read the transcripts, coded and extracted notable statements, retaining only those on which consensus was reached. These statements were compiled along with keywords and concepts that captured their content. For interviews conducted in Japanese, one author provided English translations after themes were identified, and the other two authors verified their consistency with the original text. Through this process, 112 items were produced and categorized into the following two categories and six themes:

Category A: Essential features of students' experiences in RGGC

> Theme A-1. Experiences that Enhanced Self-Efficacy

> Theme A-2. Experiences of Stepping Out of the Comfort Zone and Being Innovative

> Theme A-3. Experiences of Gaining Diverse Insights through Collaboration

Category B: Environmental and pedagogical factors that the students thought would facilitate ICL in RGGC

> Theme B-1. A Climate that Encouraged Taking Risks Without Fear of Failure

> Theme B-2. Thoughtful Program Design and Learning Environment

> Theme B-3. Effective Preprogram (For Both Elementary Students and GLA Students)

FINDINGS

Category A: Essential Features of Students' Experiences in RGGC

Informed by interviews with the camp leaders, this category captures how they described and made sense of their experiences with RGGC. The following sections organize these accounts according to the themes introduced above.

A-1. Experiences that Enhanced Self-Efficacy

The definition of self-efficacy by Bandura (1986) is "a judgment of one's capability to accomplish a certain level of performance, whereas an outcome expectation is a judgment of the likely consequence such behavior will produce." For participants, RGGC was a space where their self-efficacy was strengthened. Offering linguistic support in two languages helped them assume meaningful roles that maximized their skills. In addition, the participants reported the value of sharing their own stories, particularly as the children's authentic reactions made them feel sincerely heard and accepted, such as:

> *"When I told them that I had gone to Canada at 15, they were surprised and said, 'Wow, you went alone?' … I could really relate to their reactions—it felt like I was looking at my past self."* (Student A)

Through interaction with the children, the participants described experiencing joy by observing the children's responses, expressions of appreciation, and approaches to coping with failure. The participants also attributed their own sense of accomplishment and pride to witnessing the children's growth as a result of their efforts. Furthermore, assuming roles beyond their prior experience enabled participants to recognize their capacity to succeed in new situations:

> *"For me, it was a new experience... I didn't really know if I was actually able to stay with kids and able to... teach them. but I gave them some insight and some new learning and a good time... that helped with my confidence. ...there were occasions where I volunteered with kids... I never really did something like this... It was something meaningful for me because I realized I could do it."* (Student C)

Overall, the participants indicated that the synergy between children and camp leaders expressed through active communication and sincere reactions enhanced their self-efficacy. By supporting others, sharing personal stories, reflecting on their growth, and witnessing children's efforts and development, participants gained confidence in their abilities and found a deeper sense of purpose in their roles as camp leaders.

A-2. Experiences of Stepping Out the Comfort Zone and Being Innovative

The participants reported that, in addition to enhanced self-efficacy, RGGC was a space where they stepped out of their comfort zones and explored innovative ways to interact with children. The participants reported feeling

motivated to help students face English with confidence by recalling their childhood dreams of studying abroad. Observing the children's active and genuine attitudes encouraged them to move beyond what they felt familiar with and to try new experiences. For example;

> *"I felt like I was going a little outside of my comfort zone. But it turned out to be good… There was a group of boys who asked me to draw an anime cat. I wasn't confident, but I tried, and it actually turned out well. I wasn't super comfortable, but it was fun, and I realized that at the end, it was okay."* (Student C)

When interacting with children, participants also devised communication methods that nurtured the conversation, such as discovering and sharing commonalities. The conversations often began with casual questions, such as asking about siblings and favorite foods. As the participants sought to stay connected to the children's perspectives and needs, they increasingly took the lead and stepped forward to provide support.

> *"(During lunchtime), I started by asking casual questions like, 'Who made your lunch today?' or 'Do you have siblings?' Then, we shared stories from when I was in elementary school, and they reacted with, 'Oh, we don't do that anymore!' or 'That's so true!' These lighthearted conversations helped build a connection."* (Student A)

To stay connected to children's perspectives and needs, participants increasingly took the lead and initiated support for children. For example:

> *"At first, they were nervous and hesitant to speak… By the final presentations, they were asking questions like, 'What should we do next?' on their own. I encouraged this by smiling, speaking brightly, and providing Japanese explanations when needed."* (Student D)

Overall, this theme demonstrates how RGGS encouraged camp leaders to step outside their comfort zones and be innovative. Inspired by the children's openness and motivation, the participants developed creative ways to connect, support learning, and reflect on their experiences. Through these moments, participants reported becoming more confident, flexible, and thoughtful in their interactions with others.

A-3. Experiences of Gaining Diverse Insights through Collaboration

The participants reported that RGGC was a space where they gained diverse insights through collaboration and interactions with others. This theme reflects the varied perspectives expressed in the interviews, revealing how participants strengthened their sense of belonging within the College of GLA, gained inspiration for future career paths, and cultivated admiration for teachers' excellence. Additionally, these interactions deepened the connection between the participants and their peers:

> *"During the process, I actually talked to other camp leaders whom I had never spoken to before, even though we're all in GLA. During lunch, we all sat together—it was like an icebreaker. I realized there are still people around me that I haven't known yet.*" (Student F)

The participants also gained insight from the children's sincerity and courage and willingness to take risks in learning, which reminded them of their childhood days. For some, the experience prompted reflection or reshaped their career aspirations, such as renewed interest in the field of education.

> *"This program gave me that kind of experience, where I was genuinely trying to support the children. It made me happy, and it's something I may want to consider for the future."* (Student H)

Many participants reported how impressive the primary school teachers were and shared how their presence made their experiences meaningful:

> *"It just shows that the professors (elementary schoolteachers) are so well integrated within these students' lives. The instruction was amazing. Honestly, if they were not there, I might have felt resistant throughout the day. The professors brought all of us out of our shells, making the environment so welcoming and special—it was a really good experience."* (Student B)

Furthermore, some participants reported that RGGC provided a chance to deepen their cultural awareness through mutual learning with children. Learning about Japanese school life directly from the children acted as a mirror, facilitating reflection on their own cultures:

> *"Parents in my country are very overprotective… Here, 6- and 7-year-olds walk to school by themselves and are so confident. Being here at 18 helped me get out of my shell… We also talked about this with the kids—I was in shock. Japan is so safe… it gives a sense of security and freedom."* (Student B)

The participants further reported that two-way learning also occurred with the children through both language and cultural exchange:

> *"Before the Treasure Hunt, he realized I was trying to learn Japanese as well. That's why we tried reading the ingredients on the bottle together, and he was like, 'Yeah, because I'm Japanese."* (Student F)

In summary, the participants reported that the RGGC experience helped them reflect on their future careers, deepened their understanding of both their own and Japanese cultures, and encouraged mutual learning and connection within their community. Overall, the Category A findings demonstrate that the ICL program provides culturally diverse students with meaningful learning opportunities, through which they build self-efficacy, embrace challenges, and broaden their perspectives. These learning experiences can help them draw on their cultural backgrounds as sources of strength for personal growth (Bennett, 2014). Building on these outcomes, the findings from Category B highlight the conditions and factors that enabled these positive learning experiences.

Category B: Environmental and Pedagogical Factors that Students Thought Facilitated ICL in RGGC

This category captures participants' views on what factors helped facilitate the learning experiences in RGGC, as detailed below.

B-1. A Climate that Encouraged Taking Risks Without Fear of Failure

The participants reported that RGGC created an environment that allowed them to take risks without fear of failure. This emerging theme connects to the earlier Category A theme "stepping out of their comfort zone and being innovative." Participants emphasized that supportive environments and peer collaboration encouraged them to challenge themselves. In particular, the supportive presence of primary school teachers was key to explaining activities thoroughly, checking in regularly without exerting control, and creating a cheerful atmosphere, helping many participants feel more comfortable or less worried about making mistakes:

> *"There were teachers…walking around the classroom like check this out and lent help from time to time. I was also feeling very grateful for their help. They helped (us) feel a lot more safe."* (Student F)

> *"The teachers checked in on us, encouraged the children, and gave advice, especially before presentations. Their support was reassuring."* (Student D)

The participants also noted that the atmosphere, which prioritized enjoyment and authenticity over their activities, encouraged everyone to try new things without pressure:

> *"The situation which can let people become honest and feeling comfortable and safe at the time, maybe not only kids but also the others, could enjoy the program more sincerely… the situation doesn't need to pretend something, aside from our real identity."* (Student I)

The collaboration exhibited between camp leaders also contributed to creating an accessible and welcoming atmosphere for children. Their teamwork, for instance, sharing roles for linguistic support, not only helped the children gain confidence to try new experiences but also enabled camp leaders to recognize the value of collaborative effort:

> *"At first, they were shy and hesitant to speak English, relying on me for translation. But by the end, they started trying to speak more English on their own… (another camp leader) played a big role by starting with simple questions and gradually encouraging them to speak more."* (Student A)

Notably, the participants reported that collaboration was not always smooth. At times, uneven engagement, sometimes due to personal factors, disrupted the positive climate that fostered mutual support, placing emotional burdens that made active involvement difficult:

> *"I think that my teammate was kind of tired during that day… But there were times when I felt like, when I talked, I wasn't actually being responded to. So I think that's the main thing that stressed me out during the session."* (Student F)

Ultimately, both positive and negative episodes underscore the critical role of holistically safe and supportive environments in facilitating challenge-taking and positive engagement. This aligns with prior research that highlights a sense

of safety as essential for inclusive and empowering intercultural learning (Penman et al., 2021; de saint Léger et al., 2024).

B-2. Thoughtful Program Design and Learning Environment

This theme highlights how the program design facilitated personal learning experiences while strengthening the program's overall effectiveness. In terms of structure, two aspects are frequently reported: the integration of icebreaker activities during the day and the reflection period at the end of the program. The icebreaker activities, including the games at the beginning, "Scavenger Hunt" across campus, and energizing activities after lunch, helped to ease tension between Camp Leaders and children, making it easier to connect:

"The outdoor activities also brought us together a lot. So that was when I realized that they were gradually breaking the ice." (Student F)

During the reflection session, the participants were given the opportunity to hear the children's appreciation and impressions directly, which they found rewarding:

"I was a little worried about whether the children were truly enjoying the program. But in the final presentations, they expressed that they had a great time and wanted to improve their English, which reassured me." (Student A)

The participants also reported that the intentionally structured learning environment, particularly the small-group arrangement, contributed to smoother communication and kept the event well organized.

"The kids are quite engaging, like they want to participate in this. So it was easier to teach in a smaller group, easier to target them and teach them more effectively compared to a classroom. ...In this small group, you can go one by one through the line to ask questions (...); it's more effective for them to learn." (Student G)

Overall, the icebreaker activities and reflection period helped foster trust and understanding, the outdoor and physical activities made the learning environment relaxed and natural for participants, and the small-group arrangement enabled closer communication and more effective learning among group members. Collectively, RGGC's program design and structured environment contributed meaningfully to positive learning outcomes, highlighting the importance of intentional facilitation in inclusive intercultural learning, which is consistent with ICL pedagogy (e.g., Horie, 2017).

B-3. Effective Preprogram (For Both Elementary Students and GLA Students)

In addition to the onsite factors outlined above, participants reported the importance of preprogram sessions. Camp Leaders reported that the orientation provided by event coordinators and primary schoolteachers, covering the program's purpose, schedule, and communication strategies, helped alleviate anxiety, as described in the quote below:

"The online (preprogram) orientation helped a lot. Seeing the faces of other participants and instructors beforehand made me feel less nervous about joining." (Student A)

Some participants also reported the positive impact of the preprogram sessions for primary school students. These sessions were seen as preparing the children for collaborative peer learning, particularly by encouraging smoother interactions and mutual support during the camp. This is illustrated in the following narrative:

"... two of them (primary school students) actually were really fluent in English, so they did not even bring up Japanese even once, and they were helping their team member who was not that good in English like to do everything as well. So it was overall a cohesive project... just them supporting each other. It was amazing" (Student B)

In summary, the preprogramme sessions for both Camp Leaders and children provided detailed guidance and helpful communication strategies that reduced anxiety and better prepared both groups for the program. The preparation enabled the students to support each other more effectively, enhancing the collaborative character of the learning environment. These findings offer a concrete example of how institutional support, as a key pedagogical strategy in ICLs (Horie, 2017), strengthens the environment for inclusive intercultural learning.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS: DESIGNING A ICL MODEL

This study explored an Intercultural Collaborative Learning (ICL) program designed to foster intercultural exchange and mutual learning among university and primary school students with diverse cultural backgrounds. With a focus on inclusivity and empowerment, the RGGC program aimed to support the personal growth of culturally diverse students through meaningful interactions with local children. In our exploration of university students' experiences, the program emerged as a catalyst for personal development and fostered enhanced self-efficacy. The students described feeling a sense of accomplishment and being valued in their mentoring roles with younger peers, which helped them recognize their ability to contribute based on their cultural backgrounds and perspectives. Assuming leadership roles as mentors required them to step outside of their comfort zone and develop their own approaches to enhance teaching and problem-solving capacities. Collaborating with people from diverse and previously unfamiliar backgrounds fostered new perspectives, including those related to cultural issues and career aspirations. Through these experiences, students engaged in agency, self-reflection, cultural awareness, and the exploration of new boundaries, which, in turn, facilitated self-appreciation and perspective-shifting. Such experiential learning also promotes personal responsibility, flexibility, reflexivity, and an expanded sense of identity, all of which are integral components of intercultural competence and are closely associated with the positive (re)construction of cultural identity (Bennett, 2014).

With respect to the facilitating factors for inclusive intercultural learning, the findings indicated that university students perceived an environment that

encouraged them to take on challenges without fear of failure. A program setting centered on enjoyment and authenticity, combined with professional support from experienced teachers and peer collaboration, created an environment where all participants felt safe and inspired to push their limits and engage more deeply. Research continues to underscore the role of inclusive and empowering learning environments in promoting students' learning and well-being (de Saint Léger et al., 2024; Hung et al., 2024). Our findings deepen this perspective by highlighting the microlevel dynamics that underpin a safe and supportive space conducive to personal growth.

Moreover, university students perceived that certain activities were particularly effective in promoting meaningful interactions. The icebreaker activities, for example, were effective for both university and primary school students, who initially felt nervous but became more comfortable as they engaged in physical exercise and shared tasks. Reflection-sharing at the end of the program also created opportunities for camp leaders and children to acknowledge each other's efforts and achievements, fostering mutual appreciation through giving and receiving feedback. These findings underscore the importance of thoughtful program design in cultivating inclusive and meaningful learning experiences for all participants. They also illuminate specific approaches for enacting strategies that cultivate interactions toward collaboration and foster learners' sense of participation in the ICL environment. Thus, this study extends the implications of the Guiding Framework for Inclusive ICLs (Figure 1) to educational practice and informs the development of practical guidelines.

Despite its implications, this study is subject to several limitations. First, as a case study based on a small sample of interviewees from a single geographic and institutional context, the generalizability of the findings is constrained. Additionally, voluntary participation may have led to self-selection bias, as those who chose to join the study may have been more likely to report positive experiences. This may also account for the relatively limited negative feedback, with only one case noted in Category B.

Considering these limitations, several directions for future research are suggested. A longitudinal survey of RGGC alumni, for example, could examine the sustained impact of the program on participants' personal growth while also capturing negative experiences or challenges that may inform program improvement. Additionally, a comparative analysis of ICL programs with similar design principles but implemented in different contexts, such as the one-week intercultural mentorship program where university students mentor primary school children, was performed (Horie & Mitsugi, 2024). This could shed light on how contextual factors shape participants' experiences and outcomes. Collectively, these studies contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of ICL implementation and inform the development of practice-ready models that are both theoretically and empirically grounded.

Finally, as these research agendas are advanced, we emphasize two underlying philosophical assumptions. First, we view cultural diversity as a resource to enrich learning rather than a barrier in educational settings. The presence of international students and students with diverse cultural backgrounds

on campus reveals the extent to which our pedagogical practices are truly inclusive, prompting us to consider ways to address these gaps and promote diversity, equity, and inclusion. Second, we advocate for interactive learning that focuses on individual diversity, recognizing more fluid and noncategorized cultural identities, and moving beyond simplistic divisions such as "Japanese students vs international students". We believe this perspective is essential for educators seeking to cultivate inclusive and empowering learning environments.

Note. The authors used generative AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT) to improve the English language and readability of this manuscript. All academic content, citations, and interpretations were created and verified by the author.

REFERENCES

Akiba, H., Fudeuchi, M., Horie, M., & Matsumoto, Y. (2024). *Kokusaikyouiku de hagukumu ibunkakanjusei: Tabunkakankyo de no taiwateki de hukai manabi no tameni* [Intercultural competence nurtured through international education: For dialectic and deep learning in cross-cultural environment]. Gakubunsha.

Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory.* Prentice-Hall.

Bennett, J. M. (1993). Cultural marginality: Identity issues in intercultural training. In R. M. Paige (Ed.), *Education for the intercultural experience* (pp. 109-135). Intercultural Press.

Bennett, J. M. (2014). Cultural marginality: Identity issues in global leadership training. *Advances in Global Leadership*, *8*, 269–292. https://doi.org/10.1108/S1535-120320140000008020

Camacho, T. C., Medina, M., Rivas-Drake, D., & Jagers, R. (2018). School climate and ethnic-racial identity in school: A longitudinal examination of reciprocal associations. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, *28*(1), 29–41. https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.2338

Chan, A. S. (2005). Policy discourses and changing practice: Diversity and the university-college. *Higher Education, 50*(1), 129–157.

Creswell, J. W. (1994). *Research design: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Sage Publications.

Dahlberg, K., Drew, N., & Nystrom, M. (2001). *Reflective lifeworld research*. Studentlitteratur.

de Saint Léger, D., Lysk, J., Sallis, R., McConville, K., & Clayman, D. (2024). International students creating comedy to foster wellbeing and connectedness: 'Are you joking?'. *Journal of International Students, 14*(3), 1-20. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v14i3.5841

Elias, A., & Mansouri, F. (2023). Towards a critical transformative approach to inclusive intercultural education. *Journal of Multicultural Discourses, 18*(1), 4–21. https://doi.org/10.1080/17447143.2023.2211568

Filippou, K., Acquah, E., & Bengs, A. (2025). Inclusive policies and practices in higher education: A systematic literature review. *Review of Education, 13*(1), Article e70034. https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.70034

García, O. (2009). Education, multilingualism and translanguaging in the 21st century. In T. Skutnabb-Kangas, R. Phillipson, A. K. Mohanty, & M. Panda (Eds.), *Social justice through multilingual education* (pp. 140–158). Multilingual Matters.

Gerlach, A.J. (2012). A critical reflection on the concept of cultural safety. *Canadian journal of occupational therapy, 79*(3), 151–158. https://doi.org/10.2182/cjot.2012.79.3.4

Goh, M., Akiba, H., Yonezawa, Y., Hirai, T., & Horie, M. (2025). Developing intercultural competence through internationalizing higher education: Case studies of three Japanese universities. *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies*, 1–29. https://doi.org/10.1080/24761028.2025.2469950

Hill, C. E., Knox, S., Thompson, B. J., Williams, E. N., Hess, S. A., & Ladany, N. (2005). Consensual qualitative research: An update. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 52*(2), 196–205.

Holden, L. R., Tanenbaum, G. J., & Ashley, A. E. (2023). Toward inclusive and identity safe learning for supporting racialized student achievement. *Infant and Child Development, 32*(6), e2477. https://doi.org/10.1002/icd.2477

Horie, M. (2017). Tabunkakan kyōshū to wa: Haikei, rinen, riron-teki wakugumi no kōsatsu [What is intercultural collaborative learning? Consideration on its background, philosophy, and theoretical framework]. In T. Sakamoto, Y. Yonezawa, & M. Horie (Eds.), *Tabunkakan kyōshū: Tayō na bunkahaikei o motsu daigakusei no ma nabiai o shiensuru* [Intercultural collaborative learning: Supporting mutual learning among university students from diverse cultural backgrounds] (pp. 1–33). Gakubunsha.

Horie, M. (2025). Ta bunka-kan kyōshū wa muzukashī?: Gakushū-sha no shiten kara kangaeru igi to manabi o fukameru shikake-dzukuri [Is Cross-Cultural Peer-Learning difficult? Its significance and tips for effective practices from the learner's perspective]. *Daigaku Kyōiku Kenkyū, 33,* 31-46.

Horie, M. & Mitsugi, Y. (2024). *Shotō kyōiku ni okeru 'tayō-sei o manabu' kokusai kyōiku jissen no jirei kenkyū: Shōgakusei to daigakusei no ta bunka-kan kyōshū o tōshite* [A case study of international educational practices for "learning about diversity" in primary education: Through multicultural colearning between elementary school students and university students]. Paper presented at the 45th Conference of Intercultural Education Society, Kanazawa, Japan.

Hung, L., Chan, S. C. Y., Ren, L. H., Ito, H., & Chakraborty, B. (2024). Using appreciative inquiry to empower international students to flourish in research. *Journal of International Students, 14*(5), 41-66. https://doi.org/10.32674/grzhy846

Juang, L.P., Schwarzenthal, M. & Schachner, M.K. (2024). Heritage culture and national identity trajectories: relations to classroom cultural diversity

climate and socioemotional adjustment for adolescents of immigrant descent. *Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft, 27*, 63–87. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11618-023-01204-5

Kvale, S. (1996). *InterViews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing.* Sage.

Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology [MEXT]. (2023). Basic plan for the promotion of education. https://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/keikaku/index.htm

Mor-Barak, M. E., & Cherin, D. A. (1998). A tool to expand organizational understanding of workforce diversity: Exploring a measure of inclusion-exclusion. *Administration in Social Work, 22*(1), 47–64.

OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development). (2018). The resilience of students with an immigrant background: factors that shape well-being. OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264292093-en

Penman, J., Malik, G., Chu, E., Kett, G., Hampton, K., Thomacos, N., Ebrahimi-Zanjani, M., Zhong, Y., & McKenzie, W. (2021). Empowering International Students to Succeed: An Innovative and Beneficial Initiative for Health Professions. *Journal of International Students, 11*(4), 832-852. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v11i4.2226

Prehn, J., Guerzoni, M., & Graham-Blair, J. (2024). Nurturing cultural identity: creating an inclusive school environment for Indigenous youths. *The Australian Educational Researcher, 52*(2), 1685–1705. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-024-00781-6

Schachner, M. K., Noack, P., Van de Vijver, F. J., & Eckstein, K. (2016). Cultural diversity climate and psychological adjustment at school-equality and inclusion versus cultural pluralism. *Child Development, 87*(4), 1175–1191. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12536

Schachner, M. K., Hölscher, S., Moscardino, U., Ceccon, C., Juang, L., & Pastore, M. (2024). Adolescent cultural identity development in context: The dynamic interplay of the identity project with classroom cultural diversity climate in Italy and Germany. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 53*(11), 2480–2498. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-024-02031-5

Seidman, I. E. (1991). *Interviewing qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences.* Teachers College Press.

Shin, K., Hirai, T., & Horie, M. (2016). Gakusei pia ri-da-no seicho prosesu to sono ioni ni kansuru shitsuteki kenkyu: Ritsumeikan aj ia taiheiyo daigaku no teichingu asisutanto heno intabyu- wo toshite [A qualitative analysis of growth process of student peer leaders and its facilitative factors: In-depth interviews with undergraduate teaching assistants at Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University]. *Ritsumeikan Higher Education Studies, 16*, 65-83.

Takahashi, M. (2019). Kokusai kyōshū jugyō no fukyū to tayōna bakkuguraundo no gakusei dōshi no tabunkakyōsei [Popularization of coeducation for students with diverse backgrounds and multicultural collaboration in the classroom]. *Ryūgaku Kōryū, 95,* 1-14.

Tamtik, M., & Guenter, M. (2019). Policy analysis of equity, diversity and inclusion strategies in Canadian universities – how far have we come? *Canadian Journal of Higher Education, 49*(3), 41–56. https://doi.org/10.47678/cjhe.v49i3.188529

Thompson, P. B. (2022). Cultural safety and social inclusion. In P. Liamputtong (Ed.), *Handbook of social inclusion: research and practices in health and social sciences* (pp. 251–263). Springer Nature Switzerland AG.

UNESCO. (2016). *Education 2030: Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning.* UNESCO. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000245656

Williams, R. (1999). Cultural safety: What does it mean for our work practice? *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health, 23*(2), 213–214.

Yanıkoğlu, Ö. (2025). Decoding diversity, equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in higher education: A linguistic and theoretical exploration. *Educational Academic Research*, *57*, 146–159. https://doi.org/10.33418/education.1560565

Zhao, X., Wider, W., Jiang, L., Fauzi, M. A., Tanucan, J. C. M., Lin, J., & Udang, L. N. (2024). Transforming higher education institutions through EDI leadership: A bibliometric exploration. *Heliyon*, *10*(4), e26241. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e26241

Author bios

MIKI HORIE, PhD, is a Professor at the College of Global Liberal Arts at Ritsumeikan University in Japan. Her major research interests lie in intercultural education, intercultural collaborative learning, and education for promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion.
Email: mhorie@fc.ritsumei.ac.jp

XIAOXIAN LIANG, PhD, is a Senior Researcher at Open Innovation & Collaboration Research Organization, Ritsumeikan University. Her work addresses intercultural issues across disciplines, with a current focus on empowering minority students through culturally inclusive and responsive education.
Email: wxliang@fc.ritsumei.ac.jp

YUKI AZUMA, M.A., is a second-year master's student at the Graduate School of International Relations, Ritsumeikan University. They also hold a Master of International Service from American University. Their research focused on intercultural communication, inclusive community building, and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in education.
Email: ir0377xp@ed.ritsumei.ac.jp