The Key Is in the Other: Analyzing Global Interconnection in a Service-Learning Project

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Abstract

This article explores the characteristics of the BEA Project, an international service-learning (ISL) initiative promoting interaction and exchange between Italy and Brazil. Through a descriptive analysis, this article examines multiple dimensions promoted by our proposal within a glocal framework, analyzing participants' involvement in key global partnerships through such partners as universities, affiliated community-based centers, and communities. Best practices examples highlight the importance of reflective practices in fostering cultural competence and bottom-up strategies to approach communities. Finally, the article proposes a monitoring and evaluation strategy to address the project's limitations and enhance its impact, integrating quantitative and qualitative instruments. This research contributes to the ISL literature by offering insights into best practices for sustainable international collaborations.

Keywords: international service-learning, community engagement, intercultural competence, academic and community partnership, glocal approach

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The increasing accessibility of international learning programs has heightened universities' commitment to developing curricula aimed at nurturing students into global citizens. Community engagement projects and service-learning (SL) programs have emerged as functional pedagogical approaches to achieve this goal. However, a critical aspect lies in precisely defining these educational approaches, as misconceptions about their significance can lead to some issues; for example, students prioritize the broad development of personal skills over addressing the real needs of local organizations (MacDonald & Tiessen, 2018). Community-Campus Partnerships for Health (2005) has defined community engagement as "all the application of institutional resources to address and solve challenges facing communities through collaboration with these communities" (p. 12). On the other hand, the service-learning methodology delineates an academic approach wherein students accrue credits through participation in structured service activities benefiting the community (Bringle et al., 2023). Service-learning programs are distinguished from other forms of volunteering or community service initiatives primarily by their emphasis on active student engagement in learning about real-world contexts relevant to their educational curriculum, coupled with structured reflections on their roles as citizens (Reynolds, 2009). To facilitate a comprehensive and immersive experience for students, service-learning courses are ideally structured over an extended duration. Within this paradigm, international service-learning (ISL) is understood as an international education experience, encompassing active engagement of the students within community organizations (Bringle et al., 2023).

Service-learning is practiced throughout the world, even though most research on university and community engagement is influenced by paradigms from the Global North, especially in Europe and the United States (Sotelino-Losada et al., 2021). This imbalance of available theoretical frameworks may cause some countries to overlook valuable

knowledge and practices in other cultural contexts. However, original and innovative educational approaches are already available, notably in regions like Latin America. Latin American universities, in particular, have a history of developing unique pedagogical methods through their involvement with local communities (Appe et al., 2017). A similar issue can be found in other global regions, and literature has reported how in some countries, such as the Republic of South Africa and the Democratic Republic of Congo, the word "service" has a colonialist connotation, prompting a preference for the expression "community engagement." Within these contexts, a service-learning practice is mostly unavailable or, where present, constitutes mere adaptations of the U.S. model (Thomson et al., 2011).

In order to surpass the hegemonic transmission of knowledge and values from the Global North, some authors have suggested the adoption of a "glocal" vision that can bridge different political systems, ideologies, faiths, and lifestyles, thereby challenging the existing power structures (Mihr, 2022). In a nutshell, the concept of glocal encapsulates the dynamic interplay between global and local perspectives within educational practices. It emphasizes the transmission of universal knowledge and ideas within local communities, while simultaneously recognizing and responding to the unique needs and circumstances of those communities within a global context. This approach acknowledges the interconnectedness of our world, where local issues are often connected with broader global challenges. By integrating global knowledge with local relevance, glocal education seeks to empower learners to engage critically with both global trends and local realities. This approach can foster a deeper understanding of the complexities of our interconnected world, equipping individuals with the skills and perspectives needed to navigate and contribute meaningfully to a rapidly changing global society (Niemczyk, 2019). With glocalized learning and teaching, Patel and Linch (2013) referred to "the curricular consideration and pedagogical framing of local and global community connectedness in relation to social responsibility, justice and sustainability" (p. 223). This wide-ranging educational approach aims to engage with the global challenges associated with globalization, multiculturalism, migration, the weakening of civic engagement, and the breakup of social ties, among other

topics (Sklad et al., 2016). In response to these challenges and to foster the cultivation of global citizenship, students are encouraged to increase their civic engagement and develop their intercultural competencies. This approach aligns with the cultivation of intercultural competencies as defined by UNESCO, which involve knowledge, skills, and attitudes acquired through interactions with people from different cultural backgrounds (Deardorff, 2020). ISL programs offer a valuable opportunity to cultivate these intercultural competencies in students and young citizens, enhancing their ability to navigate and contribute meaningfully to a diverse and interconnected global society. By combining glocalized educational practices with ISL programs, local institutions can effectively foster the development of global citizenship and promote social responsibility, justice, and sustainability on a global scale.

Since 2002, the BEA Project has promoted these goals, facilitating the implementation of an ISL program between Italy and Brazil in which public, private, and civil society organizations collaborate at both local and international levels. The project aims to develop prosocial citizenship, peace, and intercultural dialogue by disseminating innovative strategies of internationalization and social responsibility of universities toward the community. To achieve these objectives, the BEA Project facilitates participants' immersion in an innovative glocal service-learning framework (Andrian & Sartori, 2023) while also fostering reciprocity in student exchanges between local universities in Italy and Brazil. In summary, the BEA Project can be considered to fall within ISL programs, as it retains the typical characteristics of service-learning (such as experiential learning in local community members, structured reflections, and recognition of learning credits) within an international framework for student mobility.

In Brazil, the BEA Project operates in the cities of Petrolina and Juazeiro, located between the states of Pernambuco and Bahia, in the Northeast region of the country (Figure 1). According to Oxfam International, Brazil is facing extreme inequality in distribution of economic resources (OXFAM, 2019). This disparity is particularly marked in the Northeast region, which has more than half of the country's extremely poor communities (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, 2022). Ethnically

speaking, the Northeast population is the result of the mixing of Europeans, Native Americans, and Africans. Pernambuco and Bahia, especially, experience discrimination and racial tensions in everyday life (Leite, 2008). Moreover, the Northeast is also one of the most violent regions in Brazil, with high rates of homicide and organized crime (Cerqueira et al., 2023), a determinant factor probably adding weight to an already precarious community and individual psychosocial well–being (Garcia et al., 2023).

Meanwhile, Brazilian project participants in Italy are based in the cities of Rovigo and Padua, located in the Northeast region of Italy, Veneto (Figure 2). This region is one of the most affluent in terms of per capita income in Italy; only 5.5% of families live in relative poverty. Tourism is a major revenue generator for the region (WHO, 2018). Italy has seen a rise in anti–immigrant sentiment in recent years, which is likely to be reflected in Veneto (Dennison & Dražanová, 2019).

Although the BEA Project recognizes the structural imbalance inherent in the exchange between Italy and Brazil, particularly regarding economic disparities and resource availability, these dynamics are uncontrollable. However, factors such as economic inequality, racial tensions, and the complexities of engaging with diverse cultural norms highlight the importance of developing intercultural skills when interacting with local communities. These skills could help participants navigate challenges more effectively, fostering mutual understanding and collaboration (Bennett et al., 2009).

To address these issues, the ISL project BEA has established partnerships with universities, community centers, and local communities, emphasizing a glocal perspective. This approach aims to support the development of intercultural competencies among participants, equipping them to engage constructively with both local and global dynamics.

In the following article, the authors will outline the activities conducted by project participants within local project partnerships through a descriptive analysis. Examples of best practices, based on the practical experiences of participants and stakeholders, are provided. Additionally, ongoing efforts to enhance the monitoring and evaluation process to measure the project's impact on participant intercultural competencies and community empowerment are discussed in their strengths and limitations.

Figure 1. The Regions and Provinces of Brazil and the Interconnection Between the City of Petrolina (PE) and Juazeiro (BA)
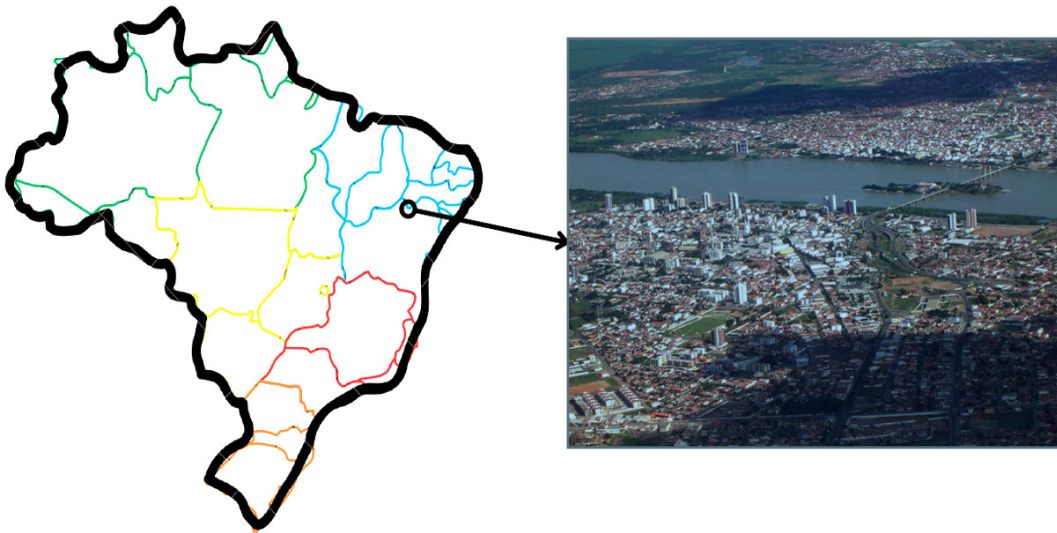
Note. Adapted from [Rio São Francisco dividindo as cidades de Petrolina-Juazeiro] by G. Carneiro, 2008 (https://it.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Ponte_Presidente_Dutra_%28_Petrolina-Juazeiro%29.jpg). Used under Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/deed.it).

**Figure 2. The Regions of Italy and the View of the City of
Padua (A) and Rovigo (B)**
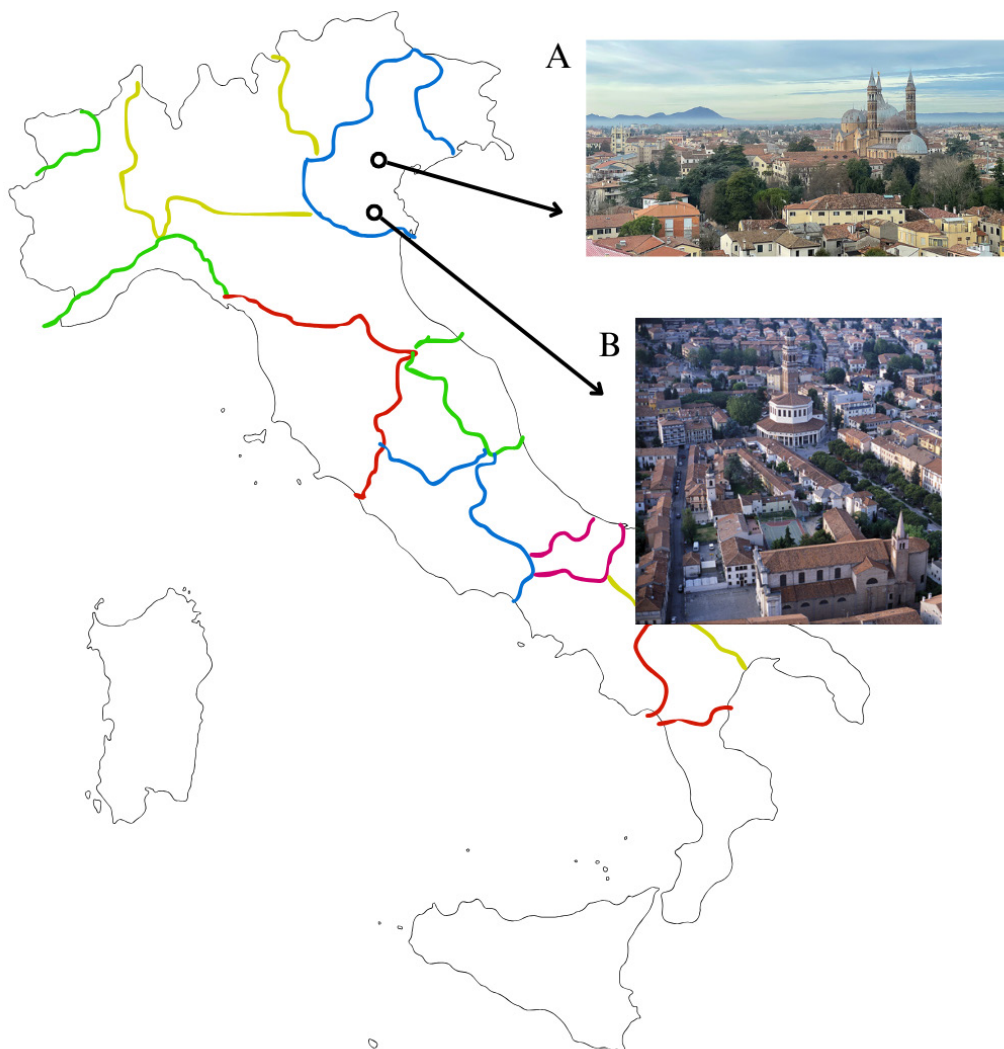
Note. Image A: Adapted from *Padova, Veduta aerea sulla Basilica di Sant'Antonio e i Colli euganei sullo sfondo* by R. Maniero, 2024. (https://bur.regione.veneto.it/BurvServices/pubblica/burvGalleryDettaglio.aspx?id=2585). Image B: Adapted from *Rovigo, Veduta aerea* by Archivi fotografici del Veneto, 2011. (https://bur.regione.veneto.it/BurvServices/pubblica/burvGalleryDettaglio.aspx?id=754)

The article focuses on cross-cultural challenges and strategies for fostering equality and reciprocity in global partnerships. Practical obstacles, such as language barriers, differing cultural norms, and structural inequalities, can impact collaborative decision-making and equitable engagement. The BEA Project addresses these challenges through culturally sensitive strategies, emphasizing a flexible approach and practice to promote equality and reciprocity between international partners. A bottom-up approach ensures that community needs drive activities, enhancing participation and empowerment.

Finally, the authors analyze the overall project's limitations, examining their underlying factors within the broader partnership dynamics between the Global North and Global South, following a glocal theoretical framework. This discussion underscores the importance of addressing cross-cultural challenges as a central factor in shaping project outcomes and offers insights into potential solutions to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of future international community-engaged learning initiatives.

The BEA Project

"[Talking about 'decentralization'] being 'foreign' made me think a lot about the ability to leave my world, my way of thinking, the ability to 'move away from myself'" (G.P., final report, BEA Project's 2015 Team).

The BEA Project was born in 2002 as a 3-year cooperative development intervention, approved and cofinanced by the Veneto Region, International Relations Directorate, through the regional project Decentralized Development Cooperation. The first network was made of the former Faculty of Education Sciences of the University of Padua (UNIPD), Italy; the Petrolina Faculty of Training of Professors (FFPP) of the State University of Pernambuco (UPE), Petrolina Campus; the Association of Friends of PETRAPE, working with minors in difficult conditions; and by the San Domingo Savio Municipal School of Petrolina, a school attended by children and adolescents hosted by PETRAPE, in Brazil.

A second step for the project was developed from 2005 to 2008 through the creation of the BEA Project PETRAPE, approved and cofinanced for one year by the Veneto Region. In these 3 years, the project aimed to improve the quality of services offered to street children by the PETRAPE Association of Petrolina (PE). During this project, the international mobility of UNIPD students began solely as an educational internship abroad. One of the most important aspects of the network management was the signing of a bilateral agreement between UNIPD and FFPP, UPE, and Pernambuco state, and the signing of a training and orientation agreement between EnARS, the cultural association under which the BEA Project operates, and UNIPD.

From 2009 to today, the BEA Project has taken on a new scope, focusing its activities on the international mobility of students, offering a mixed system of study and internship. This system has seen significant development due to the expansion of local collaborations and the involvement of students in social engagement projects at partner universities. In addition to UPE, FFPP, the Federal University of São Francisco Valley (UNIVASF), and the University of the State of Bahia (UNEB) became project partners. The general aim of the project has been to develop good intercultural, educational, and training practices, through mixed experiences of study and university internship and volunteering abroad, with a focus on children, adolescents, and women in conditions of risk and social vulnerability. Special attention is given to moments of meeting and intercultural exchange of university students and volunteers, to promote active citizenship and social responsibility in the world (ENARS, n.d.).

As the project developed in more directions, gaining new partnerships, new questions emerged. What did an international service-learning experience like the BEA Project signify for students at UNIPD? How relevant was the proposal of the BEA Project from the point of view of internationalization and social responsibility of the university, and from the point of view of education for the students involved?

From 2015 to 2018, these questions were explored in a doctoral research project under joint supervision between UNIPD and UNEB. The aim was to examine the characteristics of the BEA Project and replicate its success while adapting to contextual differences within a bilateral agreement between an Italian and a Brazilian university (Andrian, 2020).

With annual cyclicality, the project includes three different phases: premobility, mobility, and postmobility. The premobility stage focuses on a specific training course to support and prepare students for the international experience and the development of civic, linguistic, and intercultural competencies. The mobility stage is the central part of the experience, involving physical presence in the host country for a period ranging from 3 to 6 months. Most of the activities are carried out during this phase. Finally, in the postmobility phase, participants are supported in closing the activities through an evaluation of the experience and the delivery of the end-of-mobility documentation (possibly a thesis). They are also required to be involved in supporting the next year's participants, through sharing their experiences.

The Project's Participants

The BEA Project has always been open to students from any university in the world and to volunteers of any origin and age. Indeed, although the majority of BEA Project participants are students in training, the group also can include volunteers from outside the higher education sector. For students in training, remuneration is possible only if their universities of origin

or the host facilities provide a scholarship or reimbursement for expenses. The BEA Project itself lacks the capacity to cover work or living costs. However, it consistently works to secure free housing for its participants wherever possible, striving to reduce financial barriers to participation.

The actual mobility of the BEA Project began in 2003, as a one-way from Italy to Brazil, and to date has seen the participation of 55 students from various Italian and foreign universities (undergraduate and postgraduate internship) and 11 volunteers,

The consistent involvement of the coordinator at every stage of the project, along with their active participation in activities within local communities, is an important peculiarity of the BEA Project. The added value of this professional figure lies in their ability to coordinate activities bridging the academic teaching and the practical community involvement, ensuring effective coordination and engagement throughout the project's implementation. This role is especially relevant because local university professors and representatives of various local partners often lack the financial resources and time to manage external activities, as these activities may go beyond the scope of their specific roles. Therefore, having a dedicated professional to oversee these tasks is essential for seamless collaboration and effective engagement among the different project partners.

Starting with the arrival of the project participants in the host country, the coordinator is instrumental in encouraging a process of self-reflection and decentralization. This process aims to foster an awareness of the cultural biases prevailing toward the Global South and the Global North. This transformative journey happens through intercultural and peer-to-peer educational activities, complemented by supervised weekly structured sessions. These initiatives serve to prompt participants to critically examine and deconstruct their prejudices, thereby stimulating the construction of authentic dialogues with local community stakeholders (Andrian & Carvalho Teles, 2021) and fostering a more horizontal relationship (Fong, 2009).

An example of what this project has achieved, in terms of deconstructing inner prejudice, for project participants has been reported below. Participants are asked to reflect on their experience in the final evaluation questionnaire by answering the question "What are the most significant insights or reaffirmations you gained thanks to this experience?" (Responses are translated from Italian.)

> I have certainly learned many things that I would never have imagined while "sitting" at home. Through the acquaintances I made, I learned a lot about the history of Brazil, anticolonialism, economic inequalities, and the consequences these can have on people. All these factors made me deconstruct and reconstruct a series of knowledge and learning from the past that I had to dismantle. I learned a lot of new knowledge and tools related to nonviolent and assertive communication that I tried to implement during my journey. In my experience in particular, I have learned how a juvenile prison works, what the conditions can be that lead to finding oneself in certain situations and/or making certain choices; as well as learning so much about the social, psychological and legal work around this. (BEA Project team member, final evaluation questionnaire response, 2023)

Global Interconnection: Our Partnerships

Universities

The service-learning framework integrates participants' involvement in the local community with ongoing training, ensuring continuous intercultural reflection (Bringle et al., 2023). Local universities play a fundamental role as partners for the BEA Project, which collaborates with UNEB and with the Federal University of São Francisco Valley (UNIVASF), especially through their Multidisciplinary Residency in Mental Health (RMSM). Brazilian health residencies are academic institutions created to improve health training at the postgraduate level, with a 2-year duration and a focus on in-service training (UNIVASF, 2013). Thanks to this partnership, Italian volunteers also are able to join lectures and discuss mental health care with interdisciplinary Brazilian students.

Project participants assume a dual role within the university: as students attending courses and as language teachers. The

language course, open also to the local community, plays an important role in the project's self-sustainability and continuity.

In addition to attending and providing lectures, project participants are encouraged to actively engage with the local student community through various activities. In previous years, Italian project participants have helped organize the international scientific conference National and International Workshop on Education for Coexistence in the Brazilian Semiarid Region (Workshop Nacional e Internacional de Educação para a Convivência com o Semiárido Brasileiro), hosted at UNEB, now at its 13th convocation. Other relevant opportunities to learn and test professional and soft skills in an academic context change from year to year. For instance, the 2022 Italian team was involved as organizer and speaker at another conference, the First Full-Immersion Week in GloCal Solidarity Learning (I Semana de Imersão Total em Aprendizagem Solidária GloCal), hosted by UNEB in collaboration with the BEA Project.

The partnerships with universities and participant involvement have been facilitated by the academic involvement of the BEA Project's director at both UNEB and UNIPD. Although this specific example of best practice may not be universally applicable, involving a staff member from a local university in an international service-learning project can be encouraged in similar contexts. Doing so simplifies the integration of project participants into the local student community, which may feel more familiar.

In this context, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations related to maintaining local universities as partners. Although the BEA Project activities include an exchange program between UNEB and UNIPD, funding is currently sufficient only to support student mobility from Italy to Brazil. Brazilian students have access to limited reimbursement, which restricts participation primarily to individuals from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, resulting in uncertain Brazilian student participation from year to year. This limitation can be analyzed on various levels, including the need to address potential gaps in interest or understanding of community-engaged projects among academic staff and stakeholders, emphasizing the importance of fostering a mutual understanding of available resources. Additionally, the complex and demanding bureaucratic processes, such as securing visas and navigating university administrative procedures for the recognition of foreign students' credits, within both Italian and Brazilian academic systems, pose significant challenges that could hinder student participation in the BEA Project. As a best practice recommendation, project coordinators should collaborate closely with students and professors, where appropriate, to promote the benefits of ISL to academic stakeholders and advocate for streamlined processes that support student participation.

Affiliated Community-Based Centers

The BEA Project can count on several Northeast Brazilian community-based centers as partners, both in the city of Petrolina (PE) and Juazeiro (BA). Since the project's inception in 2002, the network of partner centers has grown significantly, expanding from an initial two community-based centers to 24 active centers in 2024. Currently, project participants can work within public psychosocial care centers, called CAPS (Centro de Atenção Psicossocial), inserted in the broader Brazilian Psychosocial Care Network (Rede de Atenção Psicossocial—RAPS). These public centers aid adults and children experiencing severe mental health disorders, or struggling with substance abuse (Brasil, Ministério da Saúde, 2005). Participants can also be involved as interns in other public facilities, inserted in the public Foundation for Socioeducational Care (Fundação de Atendimento Socioeducativo—FUNASE), which receives minors convicted of various offences. FUNASE divides these minors into separate detention centers (CENIP, CASE, CI, etc.). The placement is determined by a judge based on various factors, including the severity of the offenses. Each facility is specifically equipped to offer the essential support, rehabilitation, education, and care required by the minors under its supervision (Brasil, Câmara dos Deputados, 2014). Participants can also work in private community centers, such as Pastoral da Mulheres, a community center for sex workers, or APAE (Associação de Pais e Amigos dos Excepcionais, Association of Parents and Friends of Exceptional People), which aids individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Brazilian participants in Italy have been employed within the social association Porto Alegre (Porto Alegre Cooperativa Sociale, A. R. L., n.d.), offering socioeducational and housing services for migrants, promoting their inclusion in the territory of Rovigo (RO).

All these community-based centers operate within an interdisciplinary framework. (We use the term "interdisciplinary" to refer to any context that includes professionals of different educational backgrounds, training, and experience working together to provide comprehensive care to a community [Orchard et al., 2005]). Collaborating with other professionals, through both formal and informal sharing processes, is perceived as crucial for the effectiveness of any therapeutic plan (Jafelice et al., 2022; Laverack et al., 2019). Project participants came from different disciplines: psychology, educational sciences, and social services are the most common. They are asked to work in synergy with other professionals, coming not only from different fields but also from other cultures. This experience involves understanding the intersections of various contextual variables, putting emphasis on self-awareness and confronting biases to ensure a culturally competent practice (Fong, 2009). Below, we share the experience of an Italian team member hired as an intern by FUNASE in 2023 (translated from Italian):

> Regarding knowing how to live together, in addition to what has already been said, I have certainly learned, in a more consistent way, the importance of nonjudgment, of actively listening to the other, of trusting the other by modulating one's expectations; as well as the importance of collaboration, teamwork, support, asking for help in times of difficulty and being there on the other side. Especially within the internship institution, these learnings allowed me to establish a relationship with teenagers, to find a key to get in touch with them, with their essence, and build a different perspective together with them. (BEA Project team member, final evaluation questionnaire response, 2023)

The partnerships with the community centers have been promoted and cultivated following some necessary rules/steps.

- Participants undergo a structured onboarding process upon arrival at the centers, which includes scheduled tours to introduce them to the objectives and values of the institution. They meet the interdisciplinary team and gain insights into the team's objectives and values in working with vulnerable communities. Participants often arrive with an idea about where they would like to conduct their internship, but they frequently change their preferences after interacting with the interdisciplinary teams.

- Affiliated community-based centers should host only one or two participants. In this way, each participant can count on a deeper cultural and linguistic immersion. This approach also helps the local team adapt more easily to language and cultural differences. Additionally, having fewer participants allows appointed supervisors to dedicate focused time to each intern's professional training within their daily work tasks.

- Project participants must be employed under an internship contract with the selected center. In this way, the responsibility of both the intern and the work supervisor are established by a formal contract. The participants can count this international service-learning experience in their professional journey. Likewise, the interdisciplinary team can legally count on the intern competencies, while feeling more responsible toward their training (Bringle et al., 2023).

- Participants are encouraged to engage in a 2-week "cultural observation" period before proposing a formative project to their center supervisor. This time frame is essential for several reasons. First, it enables participants to identify and address any internalized prejudices or biases toward the culture they are immersed in, with support from peers during weekly team meetings. Second, it allows participants to gain a better understanding of team dynamics, which can be challenging, especially when working with disadvantaged communities and implementing new projects (Jafelice et al., 2022). Finally, this period fosters culturally sensitive attitudes and informs service-learning initiatives based on genuine community needs, following a bottom-up approach (Andrian & Carvalho, 2021).

• Monitoring and evaluation can be considered fundamental stepping stones in community-engaged projects (UNESCO, 2009, pp. 10–14). Informal feedback from participants occurs during the internship through the team's weekly meetings, and the community-based center supervisor has a direct line to the project director for formal evaluation. When the contract comes to an end, both participants and supervisors are invited to provide an assessment of their experiences through qualitative analysis, involving reports and interviews assessed by the project director.

In conclusion, these steps provide an example of best practices adopted by our project to maintain meaningful partnerships with local community-based centers. Through a real work experience, formalized with an internship contract, participants gain valuable insights and skills that not only benefit the communities served but also enrich their professional development in the field of social work. Monitoring and evaluation of the experience are conducted both formally and informally to allow for flexible adjustments in any aspect of the partnership.

Communities

The affiliated centers specialize in working with specific communities, each with unique needs, resources, and power dynamics influenced by different factors, like the center's function (e.g., detention facility, psychosocial support) and overall team values. Participants are encouraged to integrate with the team while also forming their own relationships with individuals and groups within the community. Given that these relationships may differ significantly from those developed with team members, we will address communities as partners, even though participants have access to them only through the affiliated community center. Professional relationships with community members can be personalized to some extent, allowing participants to form meaningful connections. However, these interactions must adhere to specific rules and guidelines, which are sometimes necessary for safety reasons, particularly in sensitive settings such as juvenile and psychosocial care centers.

The project considers two main factors for facilitating the involvement of participants in the local community.

First, the cultural differences between the participant and the community are intensified by an initial language barrier. Engaging with people and immersing oneself in a new culture can be challenging, particularly when the emphasis of learning shifts from language understanding to cultural application (Byram, 2009). This aspect is mostly aided by activities already introduced, such as the language courses, the weekly team meetings, and the intercultural competence university course.

Second, one of the core aspects of the intercultural approach adopted by the BEA Project is to address needs defined by the local communities themselves (Bringle et al., 2023; Mackenzie et al., 2019). In this way, the project tries to avoid the reinforcement of top-down community interventions, and so the risk of lacking meaningful community engagement, which can lead to resistance from community members (WHO, 1986). Therefore, participants are encouraged to engage in a 2-week cultural observation period before proposing community-based activities to their center supervisor. This time frame enables participants to identify and address any internalized prejudices or biases toward the culture they are immersed in, an aspect of the experience that they come to appreciate in time, as one participant explained (translated from Italian):

> One of the greatest learnings in my training institution was to be able to separate the adolescent as a violation of the law [*sic*] and the adolescent as a human being, which allowed me to be able to establish a helping relationship with the kids and create a workshop with them—starting from needs analysis, planning, fund raising, implementation and management of the project, as well as evaluation of the results—without ever forgetting the context of immersion but with the humanity of leaving it aside, in specific moments. Throughout the experience, despite the tiredness and sometimes tight schedules, I learned to be present, to leave anything unnecessary at home and, even though with initial difficulty, not to let the emotional part emerge within the professional context. Furthermore, I learned new tools from the Italian [language] course, learning more of a culture, facilitating the dialogue

during the exchange. (BEA Project team member, final evaluation questionnaire response, 2023)

When ready, participants can propose community-based activities formalized in a formative project. The formative project is an opportunity for participants to apply their formal learning, engage with the community, contribute positively to addressing local challenges or issues, and foster culturally sensitive attitudes (Fong, 2009). Having a formative project, approved by both the center supervisor and project director, can reinforce accountability in the participant and provide reliable material for the monitoring and evaluation of the activity proposed.

Over the years, several formative projects have been developed following this approach. One such project, published as an independent article by D'Attis et al. (2020), serves as a best practice example. In this project, adolescents attended a psychosocial care center, and the impact on the community was documented in a video available on YouTube (D'Attis, 2020). Following evidence of the protective effect of meditation on stress and anxiety (Goyal et al., 2014), a project participant carried out guided meditation sessions. An adolescent who attended the sessions reported the following (translated from Brazilian Portuguese): "Before, I thought it was a stupid thing. I thought it was useless. But when I did it [the meditation] calmed me down, I stopped thinking, in my mind and my body" (D'Attis, 2020, 3:15–3:16).

Finally, addressing the needs of individuals and groups composing the local communities is a structural part of the BEA Project. Through the planning and development of the formative project, the participants can promote relevant actions within vulnerable communities, contributing meaningfully to community empowerment (Sabo et al., 2015).

The BEA Project's Future Direction

So far, the BEA Project has implemented a range of monitoring and evaluation procedures during the service stage to assess its impact and effectiveness. These procedures include participant observation, focus groups conducted through weekly team meetings, final questionnaires, and documents such as final reports, dissertations, articles originating from the experience, and evaluations from community supervisors. Final evaluation is also performed by the project director and EnARS collaborators on all produced materials.

The final evaluation questionnaires collect data beyond personal reflections, including participants' self-assessment of intercultural and professional competencies, feedback on their integration within interdisciplinary teams, and insights into their contributions to the host communities. These evaluations also include specific suggestions for program improvement. For example, collected data highlighted the need for greater participant preparation before engagement with community centers, leading to the 2021 adjustment: community center selection now occurs only after participants complete a group visit, ensuring a more informed and collaborative decision-making process.

The lack of a clear monitoring and evaluation strategy is the main limitation of the BEA Project. Addressing it is crucial for enhancing program efficacy and ensuring a meaningful impact on participants and communities. In the future, we aim to implement a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation framework to assess the development of civic and intercultural competencies, as well as the quality and impact of ISL projects.

To analyze the development of civic and intercultural competencies among participants, we will employ the Intercultural Knowledge and Competence Value Rubric (Bennett et al., 2009). This rubric assesses intercultural competencies informed by Bennett's developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (DMIS; Bennett et al., 2017) and Deardorff's intercultural competence model (Deardoff, 2012). Administered to students pre- and postmobility, this rubric will provide insights into the evolution of intercultural competencies throughout the program. Furthermore, we will adopt the Global Citizen Scale (Reysen et al., 2013). This scale evaluates various aspects of global citizenship, including global awareness, intergroup empathy, and valuing diversity, social justice, and environmental sustainability. Administered to students after their return from international mobility, this scale will assess the extent to which participants embody the principles of global citizenship.

To evaluate the quality and impact of our ISL project, we will utilize as a reference the Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice (Grönlund et al., 2014). A project

assessment tool has been developed in reference to these six aspects of the service-learning framework: integrated learning, effective collaboration, student voice, promotion of civic responsibility, reflection opportunities, and intentional evaluation. The assessment tool will be administered to stakeholders involved, including students and community members, after each mobility. Although the seven aspects may seem primarily focused on student experiences, they also indirectly assess the effectiveness of collaboration and the alignment of goals between partners and participants. For example, effective collaboration evaluates how well the partners and participants worked together, and promotion of civic responsibility and reflection opportunities can provide insights into how the partnership contributed to community-centered goals. This tool will provide valuable insights into project effectiveness.

Integrating qualitative evidence with quantitative analysis is crucial to better measure the program's impact on participants and communities. However, it is important to account for contextual flexibility in this process. By triangulating insights from reflective practices with quantitative metrics, we can obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the BEA Project's impact.

Finally, the BEA Project has seen steady growth in its participant pool over the past two decades, incorporating students and volunteers from diverse academic and cultural backgrounds. However, challenges remain in achieving greater socioeconomic diversity, particularly in enabling participants from the Global South to engage fully, further highlighting the need for a more robust and systematic monitoring and evaluation framework to better track progress on participant diversity and program impact.

Overall, by implementing these assessment instruments, we aim to establish a robust monitoring and evaluation framework that captures the multifaceted impacts of the BEA Project. Through systematic data collection and analysis, we can track the development of participants' competencies, evaluate the quality and impact of the project, and identify areas for improvement. This iterative process of assessment and reflection will enable us to continuously improve our practices and ultimately contribute to positive social change within local and global communities.

Conclusion

The glocal framework emphasizes the interconnectedness of global and local phenomena, highlighting the importance of contextualized interventions that address local needs while acknowledging global influences (Mihr, 2022). In describing the journey of the BEA Project and its implications for ISL, it becomes evident that the transformative power of experiential learning extends far beyond academic boundaries. By integrating global perspectives with local realities, the project exemplifies the principles of glocalization in action, promoting mutual understanding and collaboration across diverse cultural landscapes.

Furthermore, the project draws upon educational theory to inform its pedagogical approach, emphasizing the importance of experiential learning, reflection, and community engagement in shaping transformative educational experiences. As participants engage in hands-on activities, immerse themselves in local communities, and reflect on their experiences, they not only gain academic knowledge but also develop critical thinking skills, cultural competence, and a sense of social responsibility. This approach to education aligns with the principles of a glocalized education theory (Patel & Lynch, 2013, p. 223), which advocates for learner-centered, experiential approaches that empower individuals to become active agents of change in society.

However, while recognizing the best practice proposed by the BEA Project, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations and contextual challenges it faces. Funding constraints pose a significant barrier to equitable participation, particularly for students from underprivileged backgrounds. Moreover, bureaucratic complications within academic structures undermine program implementation and student engagement. Addressing these limitations requires collaborative efforts to advocate for increased funding and streamlined processes to ensure inclusivity and accessibility.

This descriptive analysis has identified several best practices. As a way of recognizing the need for contextual adaptation, these practices can serve as foundational steps to foster mutual understanding and collaboration between countries of the Global North and South within ISL projects. First, the presence of dedicated coordinators in each country facilitates effective communication and reciprocal relationships between participants

and community partners. Second, creating intercultural competencies is a long-term effort that necessitates time for development and immersion, allowing participants to integrate and comprehend the foreign cultural context fully. Third, designing and incorporating bilateral mobility in ISL experiences is a tool to ensure reciprocal exchanges between Global North and South countries. In our experience, the lack of resources remains a significant challenge, particularly for participants from the Global South seeking ISL opportunities in the Global North. Addressing this challenge requires not only advocating for increased funding but also implementing practical strategies, such as fostering resource-sharing partnerships, leveraging existing institutional infrastructures, and creating cost-effective program components. By adopting these best practices, ISL programs can enhance accessibility, foster meaningful cross-cultural exchanges, promote collaborative partnerships, and ultimately contribute to positive social change.

In conclusion, the BEA Project has been in operation for 20 years, and now it is employing new strategies to improve and adapt to contemporary challenges. As we continue to explore the complexities of global engagement and local community empowerment in ISL projects, it is recommended to adhere to best practices, advocate for greater inclusivity and accessibility, and embrace reflective practices. For the latter especially, we emphasize the importance of a judgment-free structured environment to enable participants' reflection on their own biases. These initial steps toward acknowledging personal and cultural differences can serve participants as resources for growth, both as citizens and as individuals.

> I have certainly learned to put myself out there, not to get involved in anxiety or the fear of failing. I have learned to be more and more patient, not to expect too much from myself because things cannot always be under my personal control, just as I have learned to value myself, to recognize my potential and my successes, to believe in myself more. (BEA Project team member, final evaluation questionnaire response, 2023).

Declaration of Interest

We have no conflict of interest to disclose.

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