



# The Power of Immersion

Women Educational Researchers of Kenya

Minority Education Series – 3

Authors

John Kabutha Mugo and Sara Jerop Ruto

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## WERK's Immersion Methodology

Immersion is an ethnographic methodology that provides researchers and potential project actors to gain rich understanding of the communities that they work or intend to work with. When the researcher is immersed personally in the ongoing social activities of a community, they generate rich understanding of the social action that occurs, in a way that no other method may offer (Reeves, Kuper & Hodges, 2008; Whitehead 2005).

For the last couple of years, WERK has made it mandatory for researchers and implementers of longer-term projects to immerse themselves in the communities they intend to work with, as an entry to get rid of the stereotypes and prejudices they hold against the communities, and more important, to achieve rich entry behaviour in understanding the communities and their members. This method has been instrumental in levelling power between WERK and the partner communities, an element that has helped to build lasting relationships with the intervention communities. WERK's immersion model follows through 4 key stages.

### Stage 1 Notifying Communities and Planning

Around 1 month prior to the immersion, the host communities are identified and notified of the intended visits, through a local partner. The partner visits the local community's village elder, briefs them of the purpose of the intended visit, and is requested to identify the host families. Host families need not be the wealthiest in the village, but ordinary citizens with potential to offer ordinary experience. This must be emphasized, as the tendency is always to identify the 'teacher's' or 'leader's' house, where the visitor would access the best facilities, and easily miss out a taste of ordinary life in the village. After this briefing, the village elder consults with the community and identifies families that would voluntarily host the visitors. The names of the host families are communicated to WERK, through the partner. The rest of planning is concluded, including purchasing the Immersion Kit, which comprises a mosquito net (especially for malaria-prone regions), sleeping bag, solar lamp (with mobile phone charging facility), sugar, tea leaves and a lesso.

### Stage 2 Pre-immersion Briefing Meeting

On the travel day, every member of the immersion team is convened for the briefing meeting. The brief consists of the theory of immersion as methodology, and sharing of past immersion experiences. Members are given an overview of the host communities and the travel logistics to the immersion sites. Members are then introduced to the immersion kit, on how each item is put into use. In African hospitality, the household is presented with the sugar and tea leaves upon arrival, and a lesso for the lady of the house. In the evening, the visitor unveils the solar lamp and presents this as gift to the family. It is encouraged that the lamp is unpacked and assembled by the family members. The researcher makes a choice on whether or not to use the mosquito net

and sleeping bag. The researcher is encouraged to participate through the household's daily activities, eating what they eat, going where they go, and becoming a part of the family for the days of visit, making effort not to disrupt the household's daily program. At the time of departure, the researcher leaves the mosquito net with the family, carries away the sleeping bag, and gives a token of (ordinarily) 3,000 shillings, which is usually taken as compensation to the family for the time and resources used on the visitor, as an ethical issue. The immersion team clarifies every question, obtains direction to site, and the meeting ends within 3-4 hours.

### Stage 3 Immersion

The immersion team travels to the immersion district. Normally, the team is dropped at a convenient point by hired means, but we insist that the last stretch is travelled using the means of transport used by ordinary citizens. This last stretch provides opportunity for initial interaction with the community, and wards off any prejudice the community may hold against the researcher. WERK's immersion duration is between 3-4 nights at the community. Ordinarily, two members are immersed in one village, though in different host families, mainly for corroboration of experience.

### Stage 4 Post-immersion Meeting

After the immersion, the team travels to a joint venue, and shares experiences while still fresh. Normally, this venue is a hotel that lies on the way, from the immersion site such that researchers have no chance to first get home before meeting. The one-night meeting centres on the sharing of experiences and perspectives of change.

### Three Guiding Principles of WERK's Immersion

1. **Respect the community** – the researchers hold utmost respect for the community, regardless of how primitive or backward that community may be considered to be. Respect is shown by listening and following the community's directions;
2. **Living the ordinary life** – researchers are instructed to open up for ordinary life, as much as that can be possible. Insisting on buying bread for breakfast or purchasing certain foodstuffs for the family is highly discouraged. The researcher eats what the family eats, sleeps where they sleep and participates in their daily actions and activities.
3. **Fly on the wall** – The researcher avoids intrusion as much as possible, and fits into the host family's program, rather than the other way round. The main methods of gaining understanding are through observation, and participation in normal conversation. There are no interviews conducted, nor questionnaires filled. Rather than carry a notebook or a file around to record proceedings, researchers are encouraged to record their notes either in the evening, or during the day as opportunities may arise.

## References

Reeves, S., Kuper, A. & Hodges, B.D. (2008). Qualitative Research Methodologies: Ethnography. In *MJ* 2008;337:a1020 doi:10.1136/bmj.a1020

Whitehead, T.L. (2005). Basic Classical Ethnographic Research Methods. Ethnographically Informed Community and Cultural Assessment Research Systems (EICCARS) Working Paper Series, July 17, 2005.