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Special Issue: Reciprocal Learning
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Broadening Teacher Candidates’ Horizons:
An Introduction to the Teacher Education Reciprocal Learning Program
Shijing Xu, Guest Editor

Reciprocal Learning Between Canadian and Chinese Schools Through the 24 Natures Notes Project
George Zhou, Sonia Wai-Ying Ho, Yuanrong Li, Mingyue Luo, Haley Freedman, & Jian Luo

A Narrative Inquiry of the Influence of Canadian Pre-Service Teachers’ Chinese Language Learning on Cross-Cultural Learning Through Reciprocal Learning
Yuhan Deng

How Middle School Curriculum in Chongqing Portrays Chinese Socialism
Peter Miller

Reciprocal Learning: Academic Supports in Middle and Secondary Schools
Kaleb Lo Stropkovics

Reflections of an Ontario Student Teacher in Scotland: Cultural Language and Cross-Cultural Classroom Management
Alexandra Gayowsky

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Photo of Peter Miller, OCT, engaging with students during a spring 2018 school placement in Chongqing, China.

Back:

Photo of a common area at a school in Chongqing, China. Photo taken by photographer Gilbert Gilbert, OCT, while participating in the Reciprocal Learning Program as a teacher candidate in the spring of 2018.
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Introduction

Broadening Teacher Candidates’ Horizons: An Introduction to the Teacher Education Reciprocal Learning Program

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The Teacher Education Reciprocal Learning Program (RLP) is a collaborative initiative between the University of Windsor (UW), Canada, Southwest University (SWU), China, in partnership with Greater Essex County District School Board and Chinese schools associated with SWU. The program, founded in 2010 through SWU Teacher Education fund and UW Strategic Priority Fund with in-kind contributions from Greater Essex County District School Board, is designed to provide an exceptional experience with international engagement, to broaden teacher candidates’ horizons for a society of increasing diversity, to foster international collaboration among faculty members who are interested in cross-cultural studies and multicultural education, and to enhance the international reputation of the University of Windsor (Xu, 2011a). The RLP is one of the foundational programs which provide research contexts and settings for the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Partnership Grant Project entitled “Reciprocal Learning in Teacher Education and School Education between Canada and China” (Xu & Connelly, 2013-2020).

The collaborative nature of the RLP and its guiding concept of reciprocal learning are designed as positive responses to global conditions. The world is increasingly interdependent and relations between the West and the East are active and vital. Reciprocal learning is a concept designed to foster mutual adaptation and reciprocity in education as cultures come together. Immigrant countries like Canada have a history and future in which cultural, educational adaptation, and reciprocity are inevitable (Connelly & Xu, 2008; Xu, 2006, 2011b; Xu & Connelly, 2011; Xu, Connelly, He, & Philllon, 2007).

In response to the influx of newcomer students in Ontario schools, the Ontario Ministry of Education (2007) issued a series of policy and guiding documents aimed at “a shared responsibility” of teachers and administrators who work together with parents “to ensure that all
of Ontario’s students are ready to take their place in a cohesive and productive society” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 2). Our studies show that people from mainstream society tend to hold a Eurocentric view of immigration and multiculturalism that implies that it is the newcomers who should adapt and integrate (Connelly & Xu, 2008; Xu, 2006, 2011b, 2017; Xu & Connelly, 2011; Xu et al., 2007). While it is true that newcomers and visible minorities need help and support to adapt and integrate, they are also reshaping the host society and making significant contributions to the making of a new society economically, socially, and culturally. Thus, there are reciprocal learning needs for both the newcomers and host societies (Connelly & Xu, 2008; Xu, 2006, 2017; Xu & Connelly, 2011; Xu et al., 2007). The purpose of the RLP is not only to prepare pre-service teachers for the challenges in meeting the needs of linguistically- and culturally-diverse learners with broadened horizons, but also to engage them in international and intercultural reciprocal learning with mutual respect and appreciation among cultures so as to become both culturally responsive and globally minded teachers for the increasingly diverse society and the constantly changing international world (Connelly & Xu, 2008; Howe & Xu, 2013; Xu, 2011c, 2019; Xu, Chen and Huang, 2015; Xu & Connelly, 2011). As elaborated on by Xu et al. (2015), Southwest University is one of the top six Chinese universities that have had a long history of strong teacher education programs funded by the China State Council to provide free teacher education programs. The Chinese initiative is aimed at cultivating a strong atmosphere of respect for teachers and teaching and its main goals were (a) to make teaching the most respected career in Chinese society, (b) to train large numbers of excellent teachers, and (c) to encourage more excellent youths to become lifelong educators (Ministry of Education, China, 2007). Meanwhile, the SWU administration is aimed at a long-term goal of 10% of SWU students with study abroad experience, according to SWU Vice President Shijian Chen who has played an essential role in the development of the collaborative RLP between UW and SWU. SWU currently supports study abroad programs with over 130 universities in more than 30 countries and regions around the world (Personal communication, SWU Administrator, 2018). The main purpose of these study abroad programs at SWU, like that of the RLP, is to educate internationally-oriented, globally-minded university graduates.

Thus, while the motivations for reciprocal learning in Canada and China have different origins and take place in quite different contexts with different purposes and objectives, the basic philosophical view of reciprocal learning is applicable to both (Xu, 2019). Through the RLP, a cohort of 3rd and 4th year students selected from more than 20 pre-service teacher education programs across Southwest, China, come to the University of Windsor to audit courses in the pre-service teacher education program at the Faculty of Education and observe K-12 classes in local Windsor schools every fall. In reciprocity, a cohort of teacher candidates from the University of Windsor are recruited each new school year to participate in the RLP and make the reciprocal learning trip to China in the spring. There have been nine rounds of pre-service teacher exchanges

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1 Chinese universities that offer pre-service teacher education programs are known as Normal Universities with concurrent teacher education programs across the university in different disciplines. Southwest University, merged from Southwest Normal University and Southwest University of Agricultural Science, has become a comprehensive university but has kept its good tradition of teacher education.
between the two universities since 2010. We are entering the 10th round of the exchange in the 2019-2020 school year.

The Reciprocal Learning Program has been developed into a three-month international internship for UW teacher candidates since the 2014/2015 academic year by following the Mitacs Globalink Research Award criteria (see https://www.mitacs.ca/en/programs/globalink for details). Committed to its core vision of supporting research-based innovation by working closely with its partners in industry, academia, and government, Mitacs provides Globalink Research Awards to senior undergraduate students, graduate students, and postdoctoral fellows in Canada to conduct 12–24-week research projects at universities overseas (Mitacs, 2019). Mitacs Globalink brings top international students to Canada and sends Canada’s best students abroad to foster international innovation networks (Mitacs, 2016). Hence, UW teacher candidates have been mentored to apply for the Mitacs Globalink International Research Award each fall since 2014 through the infrastructure of the SSHRC Partnership Grant Project (Xu & Connelly, 2013-2020). RLP team members from UW and SWU serve as UW Mitacs interns’ home or host supervisors or co-supervisors during their first semester proposal writing at UW and three-month Mitacs internship in China at the end of the second semester. The Chinese schools associated with the Canada-China reciprocal learning partnership have become Mitacs internship placement schools for UW teacher candidates who succeed in their application for the Mitacs Globalink Research Awards ($6,000 each applicant since 2018) to participate in research-oriented international internships abroad. Their research, guided by narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Craig, Zou, & Pimbeauf, 2014; Xu & Connelly, 2010a, 2010b), is contextualized under the “reciprocal learning as collaborative partnership” framework developed by Xu and Connelly through the 7-year SSHRC Partnership Grant Project (Connelly & Xu, in press; Xu & Connelly, 2015). The Mitacs award has served as a source of funding to sustain the RLP over the last five years when UW teacher candidates have undertaken a rigorous application process to obtain the award to cover their three-month reciprocal learning trip to China. The infrastructure of the SSHRC Partnership Grant Project and the Mitacs Globalink Research Award have transformed and enhanced the RLP from a pre-service teacher education enrichment program into both a teacher development program and a research-oriented international internship which have made the participants both learners and researchers.

In the academic year of 2017-2018, 10 UW teacher candidates succeeded in their Mitacs award applications and completed a three-month international internship in China as a cohort in spring 2018. Yuhang Deng, as my Master’s student and graduate research assistant, joined the UW 2018 spring cohort during their three-month study trip in China. Ten research reports generated by this cohort as a result were presented at the Faculty of Education during the academic year of 2018-2019. Dr. Ken Montgomery and Dr. Geri Salinitri spoke highly of their work and provided insightful comments and suggestions for the following reports presented at a research panel chaired by Dr. Zuochen Zhang and myself at the UWill Discover Undergraduate Student Conference at the University of Windsor in March 2019. The papers presented were:
1. “The Utilization of Creative Elements within an ESL Classroom” by Kayla Bacon
2. “A comparison of Canadian and Chinese Historical Narrative Formation” by Christopher Cuffaro
3. “China's Cultural and Social Influences on English Language Learning in Public Chinese Education” by Terry Dang
4. “The Role of The Arts in Chinese Middle Schools” by Samantha Di Fazio
5. “Technology in the Classroom” by Gilbert Gilbert
7. “English Writing in Chinese High School English Classes” by Sanah Malik
8. “How Middle School Curriculum in Chongqing Portrays Chinese Socialism” by Peter Miller
9. “Academic Supports in Middle and High Schools” by Kaleb Lo Stropkovics
10. “Influence of Canadian Pre-service Teachers’ Chinese Language Learning on Their Cross-Cultural Learning: A Narrative Inquiry” by Yuhan Deng

Out of these 10 reports, three papers have been selected for publication in this special issue of the Journal of Teaching and Learning. In his research project, “How Middle School Curriculum in Chongqing Portrays Chinese Socialism,” Peter Miller explores how the political science curriculum in Chongqing, China portrays Chinese socialism. He observed the politics curriculum in Chinese middle schools and talked with political science professors and teacher candidates at SWU in order to understand how Chinese socialism is portrayed in middle school curriculum, whether China’s “Core Socialist Values” campaign affects political science curriculum in Chongqing, and whether the Chinese middle school curriculum reflects any connections between the recent developmental gains in China and China’s socialist system. Miller offers his unique perspective on an understanding of the complexity of China’s politics curriculum with his insights into what the Canadian educators may learn from China. His research helps foster greater appreciation of educational similarities and differences between Canada and China. Kaleb Stropkovics, who studied the academic supports in middle and high schools, addresses mental health issues in the Chinese cultural context. His comparative study offers an understanding of the mental health stigma in China and explores the effective academic supports both Chinese and Canadian schools can provide for academic success and student motivation. Yuhang Deng, as a graduate research assistant who has worked with the UW 2018 RLP/Mitacs cohort since September 2017, explored the cohort’s Chinese language learning and cross-cultural experiences in China. Her study, which has been completed as a Master’s thesis, is valuable in helping better prepare Canadian pre-service teachers’ international internship and enhancing their intercultural reciprocal learning outcomes.

The selected papers presented in this special issue to some extent demonstrate how participating teacher candidates from the University of Windsor have acquired and enhanced their professional knowledge and 21st century competencies and skills (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015) in “understanding diverse worldviews and perspectives in order to address political, ecological, social, and economic issues that are crucial to living in a contemporary, connected, interdependent, and sustainable world,” with “an appreciation for the diversity of people,
perspectives, and the ability to envision and work toward a better and more sustainable future for all” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017). I would like to acknowledge the great efforts made by each of the ten UW 2018 RLP/Mitacs Cohort members, their supervisors and co-supervisors at the University of Windsor and Southwest University, the graduate research assistants and RLP participants at both universities, and especially the school principals, teachers and students they encountered and learned from during their three-month internship in China. Special thanks go to Xu and Connelly’s SSHRC Partnership Grant Project, the Mitacs Globalink Research Award, the University of Windsor Strategic Priority Fund for the successful and sustainable development of the RLP, and especially to Dr. Kara Smith, the editor of the Journal of Teaching and Learning and Brandon Sabourin, the editorial assistant of the Journal of Teaching and Learning, who have made it possible for us to share the work through this special issue.

I hope we are able to continue with this bridge-making endeavour to connect more people across borders and boundaries to build “a multidimensional reciprocal learning bridge,” as described elsewhere, which “would prevent us from one-way inward-looking worldview and thus develop our intercultural and global competences for a sustainable world in which different and diverse cultures can learn together, work together and live together in a globally extended and expanded we” (Xu, 2019, p. 23).

References


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Reciprocal Learning Between Canadian and Chinese Schools Through the 24 Nature Notes Project

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**Abstract**

The 24 Nature Notes project was part of the China-Canada Reciprocal Learning Program. Two sister schools participated in the project. Following the same set of dates, students from both schools conducted outdoor observations and collected data. Skype meetings were arranged to exchange ideas and share student work. This study aims to understand the impact of the project on Canadian and Chinese teachers and students, what they learned from each other, and what challenges they faced. Data was collected through observation notes, meeting minutes, student work, and interviews with both Chinese and Canadian teachers and students. Data analysis revealed that the project was a positive opportunity for participants from both countries to gain cross-cultural understanding. The Canadian students enjoyed the freedom in topic selection and presentation formats. They particularly liked the life lessons that the Chinese students shared through their work. The Canadian teachers also valued the idea as it allows students to reflect their observations from a different context. The
Chinese teachers and students appreciated the Canadian students’ creativity. They gained inspiration from Canadian teachers and students and as a return their project work became more creative.

Introduction

In the contemporary globalized world, education is under increasing pressure to equip students with skills for their future success. In order to meet the needs of international currency, schools form, on a daily basis, a knowledge “delivery model” (Broadfoot, 2000). Governments face a similar situation to seek for changes in education with a pressure on student performance. Supranational organizations, such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), promote international tests (e.g. the Programme for International Student Assessment [PISA] and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study [TIMSS]) to measure students’ academic performance. The tests place an emphasis on quantifiable measurements, and comparative research has been conducted to “find out what work and to use such insights to inform educational policy-making and educational practice” (Broadfoot 2000, p. 366). Other studies that involve the measurement of students’ achievement have been conducted to generate a better understanding towards the curriculum (IEA, 2018). Data collected from these studies is used to compare student’s educational performance internationally, and factors which affected students are interpreted in order to foster academic achievement (Beaton et al., 1996; Carnoy, Khavenson, Loyalka, Schmidt, & Zakharov, 2016).

On the other hand, studies have also been conducted to investigate students’ collaborative experiences with international partners. The findings from these studies revealed that students from different countries obtained successful educational experiences (Ligorio & Van der Meijden, 2007; Wang, 2012; Yang, Yu, Chen & Huang, 2014). However, there has been relatively little research on how international collaborative education is being implemented in Canada, particularly at the elementary school level. The 24 Nature Notes project helped to fill this gap by focusing on students’ learning experiences. The project was a part of the Canada–China Reciprocal Learning in Teacher Education and School Education Partnership Grant Project funded by Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). Teachers from two sister schools integrated the 24 Nature Notes project into their curriculum. The students conducted nature observations in their local communities, and based on these observations, the students completed various projects step-by-step individually or in groups. Video conferencing through Skype regularly took place between the schools for participating teachers and students to exchange ideas and share work. This study was not designed to compare students’ educational attainment, but to explore the impact that the program had on teachers and students who participated in this unique international collaborative journey. This paper, therefore, intends to answer the following research question: What impact does the 24 Nature Notes project have on teachers and students in the Chinese-Canadian sister schools, and what did they learn from each other?
Literature Review

The 24 Nature Notes project was designed using the framework of reciprocal learning, which is increasingly taking hold in comparative and international education. Traditionally, comparative and international research mainly focused on investigating the differences between the education systems of two or more countries and to advocate for how and what one country learns from another. It has been more or less a static approach that mainly focuses on one-way knowledge transfer (Cowen, 2006). With the fast pace of globalization, contact and collaboration between countries have increased dramatically in all areas of society, including in educational settings. This increase creates a new opportunity for comparative and international education to move from static approaches to dynamic approaches which address mutual learning experiences in the context of reciprocal interactions (Lewis, Sellar, & Lingard, 2016). Researchers can explore differences, contradictions, negotiations, real life changes, mutual learning, and benefits in the process of interactions between participating education organizations, educators, and learners (Carney, 2009). Reciprocity of learning is the key idea built into such new perceptions of comparative and international education. Under this new perspective, cross-cultural learning needs to go beyond simple comparison in practices, values, and results and move to a paradigm that emphasizes two-way learning processes in the context of acting together (Connelly & Xu, 2015). As emphasized by Boud (1999), the two-way, reciprocal learning experiences should involve:

- Participants learning from and with each other in both formal and informal ways. It includes mutual benefits and a sharing of knowledge, ideas and experience among participants. The emphasis is on learning rather than teaching, and on the support and encouragement learners offer to each other, as much as the learning task. (p. 6)

The 24 Nature Notes project was designed as a school-based and science-related collaborative program. It also included a research plan that studied the participating teachers’ and students’ respective experiences in the cross-cultural learning process. Chang Rundgren (2015) suggests that a comparative study of cross-cultural learning should be embedded in educational practices, with an aim to facilitate the development of new pedagogical actions. He highlights the important roles of teachers in such efforts and suggests researchers should collaborate with teachers in a way that will enable them to develop their professional knowledge and teaching practices. In regards to the cultural influences, Chang Rundgren recommends that when researchers and teachers are evaluating ideas developed in another culture or country, they should be aware of reflecting on the good and important aspects of the local culture.

The 24 Nature Notes project involves a combination of activities that take place inside and outside of the classroom, and blends informal (outdoor observations) and formal learning experiences (in-class research). Some studies have reported on the impact on students’ learning experiences as a result of outdoor educational activities (Hofstein & Rosenfeld, 1996; Robertson, 2007). Hofstein and Rosenfeld (1996) indicated that the out-of-school project is an informal mode in science learning and fosters students’ learning, helping them to become “independent and
autonomous” learners. Robertson (2007) reported that through an out-of-school activity, such as an environmental field trip, the quality of science education is enhanced. Students received cognitive, affective, and social benefits from this informal learning experience.

The 24 Nature Notes project was an adapted format of project-based learning. Project-based learning engages students in learning authentic knowledge through project work (Tan & Chapman, 2016). It is seen as more effective than traditional teaching methods, as the project work is a learning experience where students deal with real-world challenges (Thomas, 2000). Bell (2010) reported that students effectively obtain information through the process of doing a project. This approach encourages students to conduct their own project and take on the role of an initiator of their own learning. In return, students can become self-responsible, independent, and disciplinary learners. Project-based learning shifts away from the traditional way of teacher-led or teacher-centered teaching to a more student-directed learning process. Teachers switch their role to that of a provider to equip students with necessary knowledge that is required for doing their projects (Tan & Chapman, 2016).

As Tan and Chapman (2016) observed, project-based learning is implemented well in both North America and Asia. In the United States, project-based education is successfully delivered at the elementary, secondary, and postsecondary levels, even through graduate level programs. In Asian schools, project-based learning is receiving increasing attention and group projects are being implemented in schools at different levels within each country. However, Tan and Chapman’s (2016) study reports that project-based learning in the context of international collaborations is rare. Among the few exceptions, Yang, Yu, Chen, and Huang (2014) studied a cross-cultural online collaboration learning program between Chinese and U.S. schools. They found that culture had an influence on learning strategies. Their findings also revealed that students from both sides demonstrated positive attitudes, and they were interested in each other’s culture (Yang et al., 2014).

In international collaborative project-based learning, information technology plays an essential role to engage students in interactions and discussions in a virtual space. Participants can interact with their partners from a different country synchronously or asynchronously through technology (Ligorio & Van der Meijden, 2007; Underwood, Smith, Luckin & Fitzpatrick, 2007; Wang, 2012). Wang (2012) explicitly indicated that a practical online platform such as Facebook can host a successful cross-cultural collaboration, but teachers need to consider students’ learning motivation and pedagogical design. Ligorio and Van der Meijden (2007) conducted a multinational project to investigate the successful partnerships which took place in seven middle schools located in Italy and the Netherlands. The participating students were 9 to 14 years old. Two online platforms were developed to engage students: a forum for discussion and a three-dimensional virtual world for storing notes and documents. The researchers attributed the success of the project to several factors including the availability of computer equipment, the quality of interaction with partners from another country, a sense of belonging developed from an in-class community to a virtual community, and competent teachers who can provide adequate instructional strategies (Ligorio & Van der Meijden, 2007).
Context of the Study

Based on the expectation of developing reciprocal learning relationships, two Canadian and Chinese schools agreed to participate in the 24 Nature Notes project in 2015. This partnership program has run for three school years, from September 2015 to May 2018. Teachers from both sides chose a solar term to conduct the project according to their class schedules. The choices of observation time refer to the Chinese nature notes, which specify the 24 points where the weather noticeably changes around the year. Students were taken outside to observe nature, and as a result of their observations they chose a topic of interest to work on. The choice of topics was driven by students’ personal interests. Teachers from both countries designed the project according to their curriculum and school contexts.

In the first year, two video conferences were held, and two exploratory activities were shared between two participating schools. From September 2016 to May 2018, the learning space was successfully built and regular communication pathways were set up for both sides. Five collaborative activities took place, and six video conferences were organized for students to exchange their research progress and/or share their final work. The teachers also took these chances to build rapport, further enhance their understanding of each other’s culture, and exchange thoughts and ideas for the purpose of making the project a better learning experience.

The two sister schools that were involved in the project are quite representative of the cities of Windsor, Ontario, Canada and Chongqing, China. On the Chinese side, the participating school is affiliated to the Southwest University (SWU). According to the Chinese school’s website (Southwest University Affiliated High School, 2014), this is a school directly under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China and is also a key school in the Chongqing City Department of Education. The school has an excellent academic reputation in Chongqing, and the students in this school have high academic standing. Like the other Chinese secondary schools, science subjects are taught as separate classes, including biology, chemistry, and physics, for example. This school has several different science teachers to teach different subjects due to its large student population, and it traditionally provides an enriched environment for science education. The 24 Nature Notes project was first launched in this school in 2013. It was further developed into a scientific activity due to the fact that the designer of the 24 Nature Notes project was the lead science teacher at the school, and those who implemented the project were also from the science team. They became strong supporters in conducting this project, hence, it is no surprise that this project has continued to run smoothly from a scientific perspective. The school teaches students from grades 7 through 12, though this project was implemented at two levels: grades 7 to 8 and grades 9 to 11. The project became a part of the science curriculum and was implemented in different dimensions. Students can take on the 24 Nature Notes project as their science class requirement or as an extra-curricular activity. The choice of participating in the project was fully based on students’ personal interests. The project required frequent nature observation, so parental involvement became a support. Parents normally took a role as a material supplier or transportation provider.
On the Canadian side, the public elementary school involved in the project is located in a low socioeconomic community where students have diverse ethnic backgrounds. The school runs from Kindergarten to Grade 8. Like other Ontario schools, each class has a homeroom teacher who is responsible to teach a majority of school subjects. The teachers who were responsible for the design and implementation of the 24 Nature Notes project were not responsible for teaching science. This created some obstacles when the school started to run the project in the 2015-16 school year. The teachers spent a year exploring some of the possible ways to integrate the project into their curriculum, but it did not go very well. However, both sides built a mechanism of information exchange during this year. Back-and-forth discussions were held in order to clarify the primary focus of the project. Two video conferences were conducted and students shared information that they observed about nature as well as the work that they had done to represent their learning. A breakthrough came in September 2016 when two teachers took over the project and successfully integrated the project into the language arts curriculum in grades 7 and 8. In order to reflect the project’s scientific nature to the greatest extent possible, the teachers made the project into an inquiry-based learning activity. A work package was designed by one of the teachers for students to develop knowledge, design their presentation of such knowledge, and record information that they found. The goal that the teachers set for this project was to enable students to learn the combined knowledge of language arts and science. The students who participated in the 24 Nature Notes project were mainly from two Grade 8 classes and one Grade 7/8 split class. Some of them were identified as English as a second language (ESL) students. The students’ project work involved outdoor observation, information searching, group discussions, filling out work packages, and designing ways to demonstrate their learning. Most of the work related to the project was completed in school, but sometimes students were required to use their weekends and holidays to work on the project in order to meet the set timeline. Therefore, parental involvement was not expected.

Methodology

This project was participatory qualitative research. The researchers were among the key members to coordinate the project and facilitate communications. Data collection started in 2015 on the first day of the project implementation; the majority of data was collected during the 2016-17 and 2017-18 school years, as the research team conducted regular school visits and facilitated the research process for these two years. The research team accumulated rich data which can be summarized in three types: a) documentary data, b) observation notes, and c) interview data. These multiple types of data helped the researchers to assure the validity of this study and enhance the transferability of findings (Burns, 1994) as these documentary and observation data allowed for triangulation with interview data (Punch, 2005).

Documentary Data

Documentary data were collected during class visits and project meetings over a period of three years. They included project meeting minutes, video conference minutes, and photos that
captured students’ work processes and final work products. The minutes included teachers’ thoughts and ideas that they exchanged with their partner school, and information about students’ performance and experience while sharing work in presentations through video conferences. Photos of the students’ products were collected as valuable data as they led to the identification of changes in students’ work. The changes included their perception of the project, which affected the topics that they chose and the ways that they used to present their work.

**Observation Notes**

Observations were made at different stages of the project and information was recorded about various components of collaborative student work, including nature observation, inquiry question generation, discussions with partners, topic selection, and presentation design. Student observation reports consisted of the information that they searched for, the data that they collected, and the ideas that were generated for their Nature Notes projects. Class observation notes documented the teachers’ instructional methods, their mutual understanding and interpretations of the project and each other’s cultures, and how such interpretations and understandings reflect on the project’s implementation.

**Interview Data**

In order to collect participating teachers and students experiences and perceptions of the project, interviews and focus groups were conducted at the end of the second year and the middle of the third year of the project’s implementation. Two Canadian teachers (both females) participated in one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Eleven Canadian students participated in two face-to-face focus groups. One focus group took place with six Grade 8 students, three females and three males. The other group had five student participants, all females. Two Chinese science teachers (both male) and three Grade 10 and three Grade 8 Chinese students (2 males and 4 females) were interviewed individually through teleconferencing. These interviews and focus groups captured students' and teachers’ perceptions and experiences toward various aspects of the project. Teachers recalled their experiences of preparing and conducting the project, students’ performances, the changes of their views towards each other’s culture, the learning from sister school teachers, and their perception about such international collaboration. Students shared their experiences and feelings about how they explored their topics, how the project contributed to their science learning, what they learned from their sister school counterparts, and their suggestions for improvement of such international collaboration. In sum, the data gathered from school visits, video conferences, and interviews provided researchers sound information to generate understanding of how teachers and students from the two sister schools experienced the project and impacted each other through the project.

**Data Analysis**

An inductive approach (Berg, 2009; Miles & Huberman, 2014) was adopted for data analysis. It includes three concurrent flows of action: data reduction, data display, and drawing and verifying conclusions. The researchers first read through all text information several times,
Study Results

Positive Experiences

Both the participating teachers and students from the two sister schools highly valued the project as a positive learning experience. For the Chinese teachers, the positive impact they gained was to have “actual practice” in the science field. Teacher L reported that the project allowed him to “pay attention to the nature and to the creatures” that they had seldom noticed before. Teacher X indicated that this project was designed as “a cover for the shortage in traditional education.” After doing the project, a positive impact on the Chinese students was that they gained a general understanding of the real world by using an integration of multidisciplinary knowledge. The students also learned to record observations. Teacher X explained that the project “fostered students to observe even more carefully.” Teacher L felt that students who participated in the project showed higher interests towards science than those who did not get involved. In short, students’ self-motivation towards science learning increased.

Beyond these academic impacts, the project had a profound influence on other aspects of student life. Teacher X shared one student’s amazing experience when she and her dad were going to the wild for observation:

A student usually had little interaction with her dad who was a businessman. Once, her father took her to observe nature and shared some childhood stories with her. She found that her dad was a very interesting guy. This made her feel that her relationship with her father had changed, and since then, they had more interactions. (Teacher X, personal communication)

The teacher commented that this project really helped foster parent-child communication and improve their relationship. He felt touched as “this important achievement is beyond the educational goal that was originally set for the project.”

The Canadian teachers enjoyed participating in this project because—influenced by their Chinese partners—they learned to view nature from a new angle. Teacher F liked the whole idea behind the 24 Nature Notes project being supported by the Chinese culture. She enjoyed communicating with the Chinese side. Teacher F felt that it was very interesting to experience the same thing as the Chinese teachers did, but in completely different ways. She gave a detailed explanation to this thought:
This project really forced me to look at things in different ways that I haven’t done in the past…Every time that we would share with our Skype meetings and I would learn something new…I was able to have discussions afterwards about the things that we have learned… I think that kind of self-reflection aspect is very valuable as a teacher. (Teacher F, personal communication)

Teacher F liked this project because she expanded her own knowledge through her participation.

To Teacher H, this was a project that she “would not have thought about doing” in her class, and she “was excited to try something new.” She viewed the project as a great learning experience, not only for herself but also for her students. She reported that the experience of participating in this project was beyond her expectations.

During the focus group interviews, the students shared their personal feelings respectively. Canadian participating students felt that the 24 Nature Notes project was an interesting experience for them. The reasons that they felt this way can be summarized in the following four ways: a) the possibility of experiencing nature and connecting with animals and plants, b) the freedom of choosing topics and presentation forms, c) the chance to learn new things about nature, and d) their expanded understanding throughout the project.

On the Chinese side, all participating students reported positive experiences with the project. Students were dedicated to their task and learned more than they would have during classroom lectures. Student Q was encouraged by her science teacher to participate in the Nature Notes project. She spent 25 days studying a caterpillar. She brought the caterpillar everywhere she went so that she would never miss observing any minor changes. She took pictures of it every day to document her daily observations. Student E indicated that the project was meaningful as the outdoor observation set her free and helped her “balance the heavy workload” of her study. She enjoyed doing the project because she could “learn and extract knowledge beyond the textbook.”

The Effectiveness of the Project Implementation

On the Chinese side, the project has been ongoing for two years before it was officially introduced to the Canadian sister school. According to Teacher L, the project was first launched in their school and later became a popular program in the local city. It was designed to be implemented in two dimensions: either as an integral component of the mandatory science curriculum or as a specific topic for elective courses. Students who participated in the project either conducted their study during school hours or in their spare time. The actions that the Chinese teachers took, as summarized in their sharing during video conferences and interviews, included teaching knowledge related to the 24 Nature Notes, taking students to observations, encouraging students to pick an interesting topic, and facilitating students to study their chosen topics. The school held competitions as a way to increase students’ interest and engage them to continue participating in this project. Participating in the project was rewarding. Teacher L explained that, “we reward them if students show excellent work in this project. We will continually nurture them when they enter our high school. The project also helped some students to get admission offers from good universities.” Such rewards are especially convincing to the senior students as the
Reciprocal Learning Through the 24 Nature Notes Project

In general, Chinese teachers made every possible step to make the project a successful experience for their students. Through participating in the multiple activities which were specially designed for the 24 Nature Notes project, students became confident learners as they received recognition from the school and teachers. Their satisfaction and achievements reflected that the project was successfully implemented.

In the Canadian sister school, the teachers integrated the 24 Nature Notes project into their literacy curriculum, and made it into an inquiry-based learning project. In other words, they combined both teaching goals into one single project, and students had to fulfill successful criteria that covered aspects from both curriculums. Students were allowed to work in groups or individually. In order to increase the effectiveness of the project, participating teachers designed a work package to help students to sort out their thoughts and ideas and prioritize their tasks. Practice sheets were provided as a guide for the students. Students could take the package home during breaks. Professional instructions were provided by the teachers according to students’ interests and their research plans. The inquiry-based package included the following contents: a) selecting a topic and planning an inquiry, b) retrieving information, c) evaluating sources, d) processing (include learning to complete an MLA-style bibliography), and e) an assessment rubric for self-reflection. Students were expected to complete five steps for their inquiry-based project. Teachers chose a start date based on the 24 solar terms and according to their class schedules. They started the project by taking students to the school yard for observations. Students equipped themselves with the necessary tools—such as gloves and containers—to collect materials for future use. They also took this opportunity to experience nature and to document necessary information. They then filled out weather details on the nature notes observation sheet: temperature, humidity, heat index, sunshine duration, and air quality. Next, after sorting out the materials that they collected, the students chose a topic based on their personal interests. In the third step, each student chose a broad area of inquiry and created an inquiry question that they were expected to research (filling out the project planner). In the fourth step, students chose a method that they were going to use to demonstrate their learning and filled out the nature notes contract. In step five, students chose to answer one of the two questions posed by the teacher as a final reflection.

This inquiry package was designed in a well-organised format. It was a systematic way to help students complete their project. It is worth noting that there was a contract for students to sign. The purpose of this action was to help students assure their commitment to complete the project by a deadline. What impressed the students most was that they had the freedom to choose their topic and demonstrate their work in whatever way they wanted to. Besides that, students’ willingness to participate in the video conference sharing was also respected by their teachers. In other words, the project was mostly driven by the students’ personal interests, and they enjoyed this flexibility. The students were extremely satisfied because they had never experienced such full freedom in other assignments. This feeling was essential to students and consequently kept them highly motivated to participate in and complete the project in a timely manner. The creativity of their products, the confident attitudes that were shown in the video conferences, and the satisfaction that was demonstrated in the interviews together lead to a conclusion that the 24 Nature Notes project was successfully implemented by the teachers in the Canadian school.
**Respecting and Learning from Each Other’s Culture**

A meeting was set in November 2016 between the research team and two Canadian teachers who were willing to participate in the project. They received background information about the project. While they individually learned the background knowledge, they consulted the research team whenever they had questions in regards to their plans for implementation of the project in their classes. The teacher participants appreciated the chance to learn about Chinese culture, such as the 24 solar terms and the twelve constellations. Teacher F reflected:

I felt that I wasn’t aware of how the season changes while observing China before this. I have no idea about the whole aspect here, like the solar terms and the 12 constellations…It is completely different from everything I have ever learned, but that’s what I enjoyed. (Teacher F, personal communication)

Teacher F believed that “self-reflection is very valuable as a teacher.” She realized that a lot of things made sense after reading materials that were provided to her by the research team. “Like the Awakening of Insects…that make [sic] sense… from a cross-cultural point of view. It is very interesting for myself.” She enjoyed learning about “how different cultures experience the same things but in completely different ways” because that increased her knowledge.

From the point when Teacher F took over the project, she attended every video conference and was prepared to learn new knowledge. A Chinese student shared a story about a pair of parrots that she observed in one of the video conferences. In her sharing, one parrot escaped from the cage but it did not fly away. It seemed that it was unwilling to leave and waited for its partner. It flew away with its partner once the student let go of the other parrot inside the cage. The Chinese student interpreted this as a romantic story—the two parrots stay loyal to each other. She then connected such observation with human family life and moved on to criticize the ever-increasing divorce rate in China. Another Chinese student shared her observation of a tree in her grandmother’s backyard. The tree top was broken off by a storm one year. She felt sad about the tree and believed it would not survive. However, the tree grew new leaves the next spring. She commented that a person’s life could be like this. Everyone might have times of difficulty, but he or she should not give up and always stay optimistic for future opportunities. Teacher F was enlightened by the idea that the Chinese student learned such life lessons from her nature observations. Teacher F shared her excitement in that meeting: “what a fantastic idea it was.” She delivered her appreciation to the Chinese teachers and students. She also took notes about the idea and decided to incorporate this life lesson idea into her next round of the project. As a result, Teacher F revised the student inquiry work package by adding the following two questions for the next chosen solar term, Awakening of Insect:

1. What lesson did you learn about life through understanding your chosen insect or animal?
2. What do you see differently now that you know about your insect or animal?
Through this exchange of ideas, Teacher F acknowledged the cultural differences between the two countries. She not only valued the differences, but was also willing to open herself up to accept new ideas. The other Canadian teacher, Teacher H, said that she also liked the idea of gaining personal reflection from the project. Teacher H particularly liked the life lesson idea because “kids like story and it increases their level of engagement.” She “was so excited” to learn about this idea, although she did not build that into her next design of the program. In her future teaching, she promised to “take more opportunities to build that in.”

When speaking of the Canadian students’ attitudes towards cultural differences, according to the two teachers, their students also loved the idea of the life lesson. In Teacher H’s Grade 8 class, she had a discussion with students after the video conference. One of her students told her that the Chinese students “included a moral lesson, like the legend building” in the project. The students hoped Teacher H would incorporate that idea in their project. In Teacher F’s class, the two new questions made her students look at animals, plants and nature from a new perspective. Her students welcomed this addition. In the group interview, all Grade 8 students reported that they liked the idea of writing stories to reflect on what they learned from nature. Student D shared her view by giving an example. She stated that Chinese students “always have really interesting stories. Like that girl who talked about the tree. That was like a real story, and it was cool.” Student A elaborated on her feelings: “it is easier for you to relate to the animals when you learn the similarity between you and the animals.”

To form a life lesson like their Chinese counterparts did was a new experience for the Canadian students. They appreciated the Chinese students’ inspiration in creating stories related to human life. They were willing to try the Chinese way. Student J studied caterpillars and observed their transformation from ugly and imitating forms to beautiful butterflies. She shared a life lesson she learned from her observations: “people should not judge other people based on their appearance.” This example showed how a student’s understanding can be advanced beyond just simply doing a regular project to forming a deeper understanding of life. This change suggested that the influence of the Chinese school impacted Canadian teachers’ implementation of the project and students’ views on human relationships.

Despite the nature observation, the Canadian students also noticed some differences between themselves and the Chinese students in terms of the ways they completed the project. They appreciated the Chinese students’ artistic talents as they always drew beautiful pictures. However, Student D proposed a critical point: “they all presented their work in the same way. They all drew pictures.” Unlike the Chinese students, Canadian students presented their work in multiple formats. The Canadian students appreciated their freedom and were proud of their own creativity because it “makes the project more fun”. Noticing these differences, the Canadian students gave some suggestions to their Chinese partners. They suggested the Chinese students can “change the way of presentation instead of just doing it like a picture and writing,” so that the Canadian students can see the Chinese students’ unique ways of presentation.

On the Chinese side, participating students appreciated the Canadian students’ innovative ways of presenting their learning and capabilities in searching for information. Chinese Student L recalled that “a Canadian student shared that he would present his project as a song. The influence
to me was that: you observe the creatures with your eyes, but you can use a variety of ways to present what you learned.” Chinese Student P shared her thoughts: “they found a lot of professional thesis…I will learn from them to search for professional articles and learn to read thesis [sic].” However, Chinese Student Q had an opposite opinion on this matter. She was not impressed with the presentation methods that many Canadian students preferred. She suggested that “instead of just simply searching for information from the internet, they should obtain data by doing more experiments.” While at the same time, Student Q pointed out an excellent Canadian style: the hand-made products. She also brought up that “the Canadian students showed a higher interest to [sic] nature than the Chinese students... They were also happy to exchange ideas with us even though they had to go to school earlier for video conferences.”

The Chinese teachers also highly valued the Canadian students’ creativity in the work that they demonstrated. In one of the video conferences, a Canadian student presented a three-dimensional butterfly model; this piece of art surprised all Chinese video conference attendees. The Chinese teachers appreciated the innovations showed in the Canadian students’ work. They were inspired by the Canadian children and decided to add new requirements in the next round of the 24 Nature Notes project. The Chinese teachers encouraged their students to learn from the Canadian partners and explore new ways to present their work. According to the lead science teacher, Teacher L, this encouragement worked very well, as they saw significant changes in their students’ work. As a result, Chinese teachers collected many more three-dimensional projects than in the previous round of the project.

**Limitations**

For Canadian teachers and students, the primary problem that they faced was time. The 24 Nature Notes project was not a part of the Ontario Grade 7 or Grade 8 curriculum, and teachers reported that they had to find additional time to conduct this project. Teacher H said that “my only challenge was making sure that we have enough time.” Since their schedule was tight and each project consisted of several steps under the inquiry-based design, the teachers found it hard to rush several projects in one school year. They suggested to slow down the pace so that students have time to do a better job. Consequently, only two projects were completed in the third year.

Another limitation that the Canadian students faced was a lower frequency of nature observations due to weather conditions. Student A indicated that “the season changes a lot in China, they have more seasons than us...they have a lot more species than we have here.” Windsor is a lot colder than Chongqing, and winter in Windsor can last nearly six months, so students were unable to find as many animals or plants they liked to observe during the school year. At occasions set by the 24 Nature Notes, the Canadian students tried but were unable to find insects or animals in the school yard. They therefore had to rely on second-hand resources to finish their projects.

The other limitation for the Canadian students was a lack of chance to observe nature after school due to their parents’ unavailability. According to Teacher F, “it would be very challenging” to get parents involved in their children’s school activities. The school is located in a low socioeconomic area of Windsor. Many parents need to work and may not be able to spend much
time to take their children to natural environments. This limitation also forced some students to search for information from the internet instead of collecting data from nature.

The Chinese students conducted multiple nature observations and accumulated much different data. They felt it hard to demonstrate all their learning in the limited space on one page of A4 paper as the school required them to do. Their challenge was to select the most representative data to show their learning. Besides this, Student P and Student Q both believed that choosing an appropriate way to demonstrate their work would be another difficulty.

According to the Chinese lead science teacher, Teacher L, he found that the time zone differences and internet problems created obstacles for video conferencing. The internet problems affected the quality of communication and the time difference influenced the coordination of meetings and the length of communication. Hence, teachers and students were not able to always have smooth interactions online. These were the major challenges that both sides faced.

Discussion and Conclusion

The 24 Nature Notes project was part of the reciprocal learning program between participating Canadian and Chinese schools. It adopted the perspective of reciprocal learning as a collaborative partnership (Xu & Connelly, 2017). The project was designed as a practice-based, international collaborative activity with a focus on cross-cultural experiences. It aimed to foster an exchange of ideas and share teaching and learning experiences between participating schools located in two different cultural and educational contexts. Data showed that the project was a rewarding experience for participating teachers and students from both countries, although there was space for improvement of the quality of collaboration. Participating teachers and students enjoyed the cross-cultural experiences. They developed a broader knowledge and a deeper understanding of each other’s culture as Gillespie and Melber (2014) suggest should be a result, from their study of an international collaborative program with a focus on science learning. The understanding of each other’s differences equipped participating teachers and students with an open-minded attitude so that they could not only sense each other’s strengths but also understand each other’s limitations. Such open-mindedness is necessary for any participants to have in a reciprocal learning program.

Positive Experiences

In this project, the students from both sides were given freedom of choice in selecting a topic that interested them. Students highly valued and enjoyed this freedom of learning as it helped them become self-motivated learners. Through the project, participating students demonstrated strong self-awareness and high curiosity. The Canadian students highly appreciated the freedom of choosing topics as well as choosing presentation methods. They realized the differences between themselves and the Chinese students and were willing to learn from their Chinese counterparts. They were confident about their own creativity as many of them have the talents to demonstrate their learning in innovative ways. Meanwhile, they were inspired by Chinese students to reflect on life lessons learned from nature observations.
Similar to their Canadian partners, the Chinese students also highly valued the experiences of working on the project. Their interests in nature increased as they verified knowledge that they had learned through observations in the wild. The positive impacts that the project brought to them included: a) setting them free from a heavy school workload, b) opening their eyes to view nature from a new perspective, c) respecting their personal interests, and d) giving them the freedom to learn. They were delighted with these learning opportunities as they had never experienced them before. They were proud of their projects and learned new ways of presenting their learning from interacting with the Canadian students.

Teachers from both sides viewed the differences between the two cultures positively. Like their students, they respected the differences and learned from each other’s strengths. The Canadian teachers were open-minded and they implemented the curriculum with a flexible approach. The teachers were the project designers, but they were also willing to listen to the students’ opinions, having discussions with the students about the additional requirements for the project. This student-centered school culture gave students the freedom to explore their interests. Students were allowed to choose their favourite topics as well as choose the interesting ways to present their findings. The Chinese teachers noticed the Canadian teachers’ strengths when both sides exchanged thoughts and ideas. Due to such appreciation, the Chinese teachers were willing to adjust and give their students more freedom.

Cross-Cultural Influences

The Canadian teachers and students learned about Chinese culture from the project. The 24 Nature Notes are categorized as indigenous knowledge that reflects how the Chinese developed their unique time system. There are 24 specific points during the year when the weather noticeably changes. This system reflects how ancient Chinese viewed seasons, weather and the human-nature relationship. The Canadian teachers learned this Chinese tradition and culture from their counterparts as well as from the research team. They then delivered this knowledge to their students. In addition, the Canadian teachers were eager to try out new ideas while being culturally sensitive to the Chinese style of thinking. Their willingness to self-adjust showed that the Canadian teachers were open-minded to Chinese ways of teaching and learning. The Canadian students followed the lead of their teachers, and were open-minded and willing to try new things. They discovered the strengths of their Chinese partners and appreciated the efforts that they made. These characteristics motivated the Canadian students to achieve success in their project work.

The Chinese teachers and students noticed that the Canadian students were learning in an atmosphere full of freedom and encouragement as the students were respected for their topics of study and choices of presentation. Such a pressure-free environment generated space for creative and innovative student work. Chinese teachers valued this way of teaching and admired such advantages. As a result, they adjusted their projects and allowed students more freedom with the presentation of their work.
Suggestions for Better Collaboration

In order to foster collaborative relationships, direct and indirect communication was made through various media formats including emails, phone calls, social app messages, and video conferences. The research teams from both sides and the English teachers from the Chinese sister school helped to bridge the linguistic gaps and facilitate school-to-school communication. The communication method highly relied on the research teams to deliver messages from one side to another. However, such communications were insufficient. Teacher participants all agreed that better collaboration is needed in the future. As Loveland, Miyakawa, and Hirayama (2004) indicate, because international collaboration projects are complicated, comprehensive preparation and design are required. Applying this insight to the project, it is advisable that teachers should have a conference prior to formally conducting the project. These preparatory meetings can be set up at the beginning of each school year, and are essential for teachers as they build initial rapport with their international partners. Teachers can make use of this opportunity to brainstorm ideas as well as openly discuss their thoughts. While such meetings took place in this project, it is suggested that such interactions can be held more frequently.

Since the two schools operate at two far-away geographical locations each with different educational systems and cultures, it is believed that the more mutual understanding that is developed, the better effects the understanding will lead to. A virtual learning community through technology is suggested to bridge the two learning spaces. Students who have similar interests can pair-up and seek further communications within the community. Teachers and students can exchange their ideas effectively and promptly, which means that whenever they have a question, they can discuss and come up with solutions on the technology-based platform. Chia and Pritchard’s (2014) research found that virtual learning communities benefit students’ interpersonal collaboration and exchanges. It is believed that an online learning community can foster better cultural understanding and collaboration, and from there, the better reciprocity will be achieved.

In this study, students were asked to work either individually or in groups. Student groups were formed with their home-county partners. Video conferencing meetings provided limited space for student sharing. Not all students could showcase their work. Future practice should try to form bi-national student groups. That is, students can work on the same topics in a small group with partners from their sister school. This will leverage the strength of both sides and generate better intercultural communication and collaboration. Again, technology can be used to facilitate the group communication (Yang et al., 2014). This will allow students to communicate their thoughts deeply in a virtual space without distracting other people. Setting up in-depth communications will have various benefits to students, as O’Neill (2007) found, and students’ social interaction, writing, and reading skills can be developed.

References


A Narrative Inquiry of the Influence of Canadian Pre-Service Teachers’ Chinese Language Learning on Cross-Cultural Learning Through Reciprocal Learning

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Abstract

Cross-cultural experience plays a very important role in the growth of pre-service teachers. This narrative study explored Canadian pre-service teachers’ Chinese language learning and their cross-cultural experiences in China in relation to their participation in a three-month international program between a university in Canada and a university in China. This study focuses on four participants’ Chinese foreign language learning and how their Chinese learning influenced their cross-cultural learning when being immersed in a Chinese language environment. The findings show that the pre-service teachers not only developed a basic level of oral language proficiency, but also developed a higher language tolerance for the learners who are non-native speakers of English. In addition, through learning Chinese, the pre-service teachers learned more about Chinese culture and developed an appreciation of different cultures which helped them develop better perceptions and attitudes toward multicultural education in Canada.

Introduction

With cultural diversity and linguistic pluralism underlying multiculturalism in schools around the world, pre-service teachers who will be on the frontiers of the educational practice have to face different challenges in a multicultural educational environment (Banks, 1993). Because they will influence future generations, it is imperative for them to learn to employ multicultural approaches when preparing their classes in the future. Cross-cultural learning and teaching experience can broaden pre-service teachers’ worldview and improve their teaching skills. Moreover, incorporating intercultural experience into the pre-service teacher education system can help pre-service teachers adapt to the challenges of multiculturalism in their own country (Ateşkan, 2016; Cushner & Mahon, 2002).
Over the years, a variety of international teacher preparation programs have benefited pre-service teachers to develop their multicultural mindset and global competence (Cushner, 2007; Kabilan, 2013; Thomas, 2006). These programs are usually in the form of study-abroad programs, student exchange programs, short study programs, teaching practicums, immersion programs, or even brief school placements. Research indicates that such experiences are beneficial to the pre-service teachers in terms of enhancing their knowledge and skills, world views, and awareness of global issues (Brindley, Quinn, & Morton, 2009; Kabilan, 2013; Rodriguez, 2011; Unlu, 2015). Most research examined the structure and nature of cross-cultural educational experiences for pre-service teachers and affirmed the value of these programs (Cushner & Mahon, 2002; Quezada & Alfaro, 2007; Stachowski & Visconti, 1998; Williams & Kelleher, 1987; Wilson, 1993) and identified a wide range of benefits. However, there is an increasing recognition of insufficient systematic documentation of pre-service teachers’ international experiences (Conle, 2000; Cordeiro, 2007; Zeichner, 2002). Additionally, few studies examine how the pre-service teachers’ language acquisition influenced their learning and teaching life in the host country and their subsequent multicultural awareness.

This research is contextualized in Xu and Connelly’s (2013) Reciprocal Learning Program (RLP), an international pre-service education program where pre-service teachers from the University of Windsor in Canada and Southwest University in China spend a certain period of time in each other’s country to learn about each other’s cultures and seek to benefit both educational systems (Xu & Connelly, 2017). This program was developed by Xu at the University of Windsor with Dr. Shijian Chen at Southwest University in China (2010), and funded through the Social Sciences Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Partnership Grant Project (Xu & Connelly, 2013). The purpose of the program is to provide an exceptional experience through border-crossing with international engagement, and to broaden pre-service teachers’ teaching horizons in a constantly changing world with increasing societal diversity.

**The Purpose of the Study**

Based on the overall goal of the project, the purpose of the current study is to explore the Canadian pre-service teachers’ Chinese language learning while participating in the RLP and to understand their cross-cultural experiences during their stay in China. The study also hopes to gain insight into how the Canadian pre-service teachers perceive Chinese culture and how their Chinese learning influences their cross-cultural learning when being immersed in a Chinese language environment. In addition, the study seeks to determine which teaching strategies are most effective and efficient with respect to pre-service teachers’ Chinese language acquisition and to identify more useful strategies and suggestions for pre-service teachers’ future use.

To achieve these goals, the current study seeks to answer four central research questions:

1. What role does Chinese language learning play in Canadian pre-service teachers’ reciprocal learning in China?
2. What are Canadian pre-service teachers’ motivations, attitudes, and strategies for learning the Chinese language before departure and during their China visit?
3. While in China, what language acquisition strategies do Canadian pre-service teachers find most effective?

4. How do Canadian pre-service teachers learn about Chinese culture when immersed in a Chinese language environment?

Literature Review

Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning

Second language acquisition (SLA) has become a popular topic, attracting increasing interest across the globe since the 1960s (Cook, 2010, Ellis, 1994; Selinker, 1972; Skehan, 1991). SLA refers “both to the study of individuals and groups who are learning a language subsequent to learning their first language as young children” (Saville-Troike, 2006, p. 2), and is the process through which people learn or acquire a language in addition to their native language(s). Although the terms second language learning (SLL) and SLA are used interchangeably in many studies (Gass, 1997), these terms do differ (Ellis, 1994; Krashen, 1981). According to Krashen (1981), SLL refers to the conscious process of learning a second language and spending a certain period of time to learn the language with a specific purpose. Alternately, SLA refers to the acquisition of a language subconsciously or naturally with little or no formal training or learning (Abukhattala, 2013). In addition, SLA is interchangeable with foreign language acquisition (FLA) and foreign language learning (FLL) in some studies (Gass, 1997). Hence, it is necessary to get a better understanding of these relevant key terms.

Second language vs. foreign language. Both second language (L2) and foreign language (FL) describe the languages learned or acquired by people in addition to their first language (L1) (Derakhshan & Karimi, 2015). In the past, L2 and FL have been used synonymously in many contexts; however, there are some distinctions between the two (Ellis 1994; Stern, 1983). L2 is a language that “somebody learns to speak well and that they use for work or at school, but that is not the language they learned first” (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, nd). Based on the definition, L2 does not simply refer to “the chronology of language learning”; it also used to indicate “the level of language command in comparison with a primary or dominant language” (Stern, 1983, p. 13). Moreover, Derakhshan and Karimi (2015) address the importance of L2 and its status in a social context. In contrast, Saville-Troike (2006) defines FL as a language that is not commonly used in the learners’ immediate social context and notes that most people learn an FL in a formal classroom, often with a specific purpose such as future travel or other cross-cultural communication. Therefore, one of the crucial conditions used to distinguish between an L2 and an FL is to consider whether it owns a good language environment (Moeller & Catalano, 2015; Ringbom, 1980). Moreover, Stern (1983) states that an FL does not have an official status or an identified function within a country, whereas one’s L2 does.

Although SLA and FLA both describe people learning a language in addition to their L1, there are some distinctions between SLA and FLA. SLA should be differentiated from FLA based on the purposes of learning the languages and the learning environment (Hawkins, 2001). As a result of those two factors, learners’ learning motivations vary correspondently (Dörnyei, 2008).
According to Håkansson and Norrby (2010), foreign language learners often show a stronger motivation than L2 learners because of the target language’s environmental impact. The environment of L2 learners is better than FL learners, so they learn and acquire the language not only during class, but also from outside of the classroom. Hence, L2 learners show a lower motivation compared to FL learners who basically learn the target language in an environment that lacks regular interactions with the target language community (Ringbom, 1980).

**Cross-Cultural Learning and Second Language Learning**

Cross-cultural learning refers to the process of adapting to a new environment and its requirements by gaining necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Hannigan, 1990). Second language learning (SLL) is usually associated with cross-cultural learning; moreover, foreign language learning is also linked with understanding a foreign culture as language and culture cannot exist without each other. An increasing number of studies explore and demonstrate the importance of cross-cultural learning in foreign language learning, business, and other fields (Huang, 2010; Ji, Zhang, & Nisbett, 2004; Watkins, 2000; Yamazaki & Kayes, 2004). Kayes, Kayes, and Yamazaki (2005) conducted a literature review research on cross-cultural learning and identified 73 skills, clustered into ten thematic cross-cultural learning competencies. According to Chang et al. (2011), cross-cultural learning research over the past fifty years has primarily focused on the differences between Eastern and Western cultures.

**Cross-cultural experience of pre-service teachers.** Cross-cultural experience plays an essential role in the growth of pre-service teachers and, when used in conjunction with teaching experience, can broaden teachers’ worldview and improve their teaching skills. Moreover, incorporating intercultural experiences into pre-service education can help pre-service teachers adapt to the challenges of multiculturalism in their own country (Ateşkan, 2016). Research indicates that such experiences are valuable to pre-service teachers in terms of enhancing their knowledge and skills, worldviews, and awareness of global issues (Brindley et al., 2009; Kabilan, 2013; Rodriguez, 2011; Unlu, 2015). The programs cover a wide range of issues, and their durations vary from weeks to months. Moreover, some programs may be reciprocal, while others are one-way (Olmedo & Harbon, 2010; Xu & Connelly, 2013). Therefore, pre-service teachers’ cross-cultural living and studying experiences can differ to some extent.

Numerous pre-service teachers participate in different cross-cultural programs provided by a variety of schools every year (Wilson, 1993). Most research examined the structure and nature of cross-cultural educational experiences for pre-service teachers and affirm the value of these programs and identify a wide range of benefits (Cushner & Mahon, 2002; Quezada & Alfaro, 2007; Stachowski & Visconti, 1998; Williams & Kelleher, 1987; Wilson, 1993). However, there is an increasing recognition of insufficient systematic documentation of pre-service teachers’ international experiences (Cordeiro, 2007; Zeichner, 2002). Because global perspectives gained from cross-cultural experiences will ultimately influence their future students, the current study seeks to develop a more thorough understanding of three phenomena: pre-service teachers’ cross-cultural living and studying experiences, the ways in which international programs influence their teaching skills, and how study-abroad experiences are meaningful to their lives.
Chinese as a foreign language learning and teaching. Chinese is the most common language in the world, with 1.28 billion people—approximately 16% of the world’s population—speaking some form of Chinese as their first language (McCarthy, 2018). In addition, around 70% of Chinese people speak Mandarin. Chinese is also one of the oldest languages in the world and has been carrying the Chinese culture for thousands of years. According to Saville-Troike (2006) and Stern (1983), Chinese learning and teaching in some countries should be considered foreign language learning and teaching instead of second language. For example, Canada is a linguistically and culturally diverse country that recognizes English and French as its two official languages. Hence, following the arguments put forward by Saville-Troike (2006) and Stern (1983), the current study suggests that the Chinese language should be considered as a foreign language for the pre-service teachers. This framing of the language would be more appropriate in the social context.

Chinese foreign language learning (CFLL) and Chinese foreign language teaching (CFLT) have aroused an increasing number of researchers’ interest in recent decades. Many studies have covered a wide range of research areas: the nature of Chinese language, the approaches and strategies on both CFLL and CFLT, and the influence of Chinese culture on CFLL (Chang, 2017; Chisoni & Mushangwe, 2015; Moloney & Xu, 2015; Ramzy, 2006; Taft & Chung, 1999). One of the biggest differences between Chinese and other kinds of languages is that Chinese is a tonal language. In Mandarin, there are four tones: the rising tone, where the voice raises on the syllable; the departing tone, which drops at the end of the syllable; the level tone that neither drops nor raises on a syllable; and the checked tone, which drops in the middle of the syllable and then raises at the end. Pronouncing one syllable with each tone will give that syllable four different meanings in Mandarin, though in English the meaning would remain constant regardless of the tone being used. Moreover, unlike the phonetic Latin alphabet used in English, Chinese uses logographic characters which cannot be read phonetically (Taft & Chung, 1999). These characters are comprised of radicals, which are a graphical component of the larger logographic character. Using radicals as teaching tools can be helpful in the context of CFLL. As language and its culture are inseparable, it is vital to understand the importance of culture in second language learning and its significant influence on CFLL (Mushangwe & Chisoni, 2015).

CFLL motivation. Motivation is a key factor in foreign language learning and has been studied for many years. Norris-Holt (2001) defines motivation as the orientation of a learner with respect to the goal of learning a second language and divides it into integrative motivation and instrumental motivation. Instrumental motivation would lead to a significant effort in learners’ second and foreign language learning, thus achieving a greater language competence (Dörnyei, 1990, 1998; Veronica, 2008). Moreover, learner’s attitudes and motivation are both important for second language acquisition (Dörnyei, 2001).

Ruan, Duan, and Du (2015) suggest that Chinese is often regarded as a difficult language to learn in Western countries and argue that it is therefore necessary to increase the motivation of learners—especially for beginners with low language skills—when conducting a task-based class. Rueda and Chen (2005) purport that cultural differences can influence the assessment of motivational processes in second and foreign language learning. This is validated by Yu and Watkins (2008), who conclude that learners from Western countries and learners from Asian
countries are significantly different in terms of their motivation for learning Chinese as a second language. Motivation plays an essential role in learning CFL; students could easily lose their interest in Chinese learning if appropriate teaching methods and criteria are not effectively utilized to stimulate their motivation (Hettiarachchi, 2016; Mkize & Chisoni, 2015). Moreover, not only can intrinsic motivational factors such as cultural interest promote CFL, but so too can external conditions such as learning environment, teachers, and peers influence CFL learners (Yan, 2012).

**Theoretical Framework**

Mezirow’s (1991) transformative learning theory has been used to analyze how pre-service teachers engage in cross-cultural learning and teaching programs in many different countries (Cushner & Mahon, 2002; Östermark, 2011, Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011). According to Mezirow (1991), transformative learning involves being critically aware of one’s own assumptions and how they shape the ways in which people perceive, understand, and feel about the world. Challenging these structures can facilitate more inclusive and integrative perspective that reduces discrimination. Trilokekar and Kukar (2011) argue that this lens provides a way of seeing how pre-service teachers make meaning as they engage in learning and teaching activities abroad.

O'Sullivan (2003) defines transformative learning as a process that involves “a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions” (p. 327) and fosters a dramatic shift in the way people view their relationship in the world. This shift involves five aspects: a) how people understanding themselves and their locations; b) how they understand their relationships with others and the natural world; c) their awareness of their bodies; d) their sense of justice and happiness; and e) their understanding of power relations in intersectional structures of class, race, and gender. A thorough review of the literature on transformative learning suggests that pre-service teachers are depicted through a self-designed conceptual map (see Figure 1).

![Figure 1. Transformative learning process of the pre-service teachers.](image-url)
Home culture shapes pre-service teachers’ perspectives, framing the way they see the world. After entering a different cultural context, they encounter a disoriented dilemma to some extent (Taylor, 1998). This cross-cultural learning experience can change their views on education and challenge their opinions of their own values, intelligence, and potential. At the end of the transformative learning process, pre-service teachers should ideally form a new worldview that will impact their future life and work.

Methodology

Narrative Inquiry
Narrative inquiry is a qualitative methodology that studies “the ways humans experience the world” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). It is based on the premise that people understand or make sense of their lives through narrative (Bruner, 1991). The many definitions of narrative inquiry all have one common element: storytelling. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) argue that “humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives” (p. 2). In short, people live with stories. In the development of narrative research, Xu and Connelly (2009) define narrative inquiry as “a way of thinking about life” (p. 221) that is not simply telling stories. In other words, narrative inquiry refers to understanding and inquiring into experiences through a “collaboration between researcher and the participants, over time, in the place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20). Moreover, a narrative inquiry is “more than the uncritical gathering of stories” (Trahar, 2009, para. 1). This is supported by Xu and Connelly (2010), who state that “story is not so much a structured answer to a question, or a way of accounting for actions and events, as it is a gateway, a portal, for narrative inquiry into meaning and significance” (p. 356). Thus, narrative inquiry is defined not simply by storytelling, but by the critical reflection and analysis of stories that offer insights into the practical experience of people immersed in the social context of a given subject.

Narrative inquiry is an ideal methodology for education research as it explores pedagogical issues by analyzing the experiences of individuals. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) were the first to provide an overview of narrative inquiry in educational research. Dewey (1938) discusses that life is education, emphasizing the importance of experiential education. Based on his theory of experience, Clandinin and Connelly (1990) claim that there is a strong connection between life, experience, and education. This promoted the development of narrative inquiry as an approach of studying individual stories. An increasing number of narrative studies have analyzed specific domains of education, such as music education, mathematics education, and pre-service teacher education. In this way, practitioners were no longer “silenced in the research relationship” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990, p. 4). Moreover, practitioners, “who may also become co-researchers” (Huber, Caine, Huber, & Steeves, 2013, p. 220), have more space to talk about their own experiences. Besides interviews, journals, self-reflections, field notes, and other records can be used as methods to conduct a narrative inquiry.

Suitability. According to Conle (2000), narrative inquiry focuses more on the individual stories rather than a border view. This applies to the participants of the current study, who have
unique experiences and stories from visiting China. Every pre-service teacher who attends the program holds different understandings and expectations with regard to this trip to China. In addition, they have displayed different degrees of motivations, attitudes, and strategies while learning the Chinese language. Given these factors, the experiences of the participants might be transcribed quite differently. Thus, narrative inquiry will be an effective approach with respect to pre-service teachers’ cross-cultural experiences through their own stories.

**Research Procedure**

As a member of the RLP, the researcher visited China with the group of pre-service teachers for three months. Before departure, the pre-service teachers had attended nine weekly planning sessions starting in January 2018, during which they had taken regular Chinese language classes. After receiving approval from the Research Ethics Board (REB) and consent from the participants, the researcher focused on observing the participants’ Chinese language and cultural learning during their stay in China. At the end of the trip, individual interviews with the participants and follow-up Chinese language assessments were conducted after receiving additional consent from them.

**Participants**. In this study, participants were pre-service teachers studying at the University of Windsor who applied to the RLP in 2017-2018. Although they come from the same program, they differ with respect to cultural heritage, major, learning background, and teaching experience. All individuals had their own unique experiences. Ten pre-service teachers participated in the Reciprocal Learning Program from March 2018 to June 2018. Four pre-service teachers are showcased in this study, pseudonymously called Jamie, Carmen, Linda, and Tony. Jamie and Carmen are both Caucasians, while Linda was originally born in Pakistan and immigrated to Canada when she was young. Tony was born in Canada, though his parents immigrated to Canada from Vietnam. All four participants are Canadian citizens.

**Research methods**. Five research methods are implemented in this study: a) pilot Chinese language proficiency assessments, b) participant observations, c) field notes, d) individual interviews, and e) post-Chinese language proficiency assessments.

**Findings**

**Pilot-Language Assessment**

The week prior to departure, the four participants did the language assessment during class. The participants first needed to match Chinese greeting words with the correct English meanings. Then, they needed to distinguish Chinese characters from 0 to 10. Lastly, they needed to match Chinese words with the corresponding pictures. It took approximately 10 minutes for the participants to complete the assessment, which was conducted in both English and Chinese. The result turned out fairly well. All the participants did well on the Chinese greeting words and were able to recognize the Chinese characters from 0 to 10 with the help of Pinyin. Jamie and Carmen had the most answers correct. However, two participants did not do as well. Tony thought that some of the words looked familiar to him, but he just could not remember them during that assessment. Linda,
who had low expectations for the assessment, was happy with the result because she knew that she had been able to learn some Chinese words during the three months (Linda, personal communication, 2018).

Jamie’s Stories

Jamie explained this trip was an “eye-opening” experience for him (Jamie, personal communication, 2018). He had learned a lot within the three months. While learning Mandarin, Jamie showed a high level of motivation during the initial lessons before departure, and also showed a positive attitude towards learning Mandarin throughout this trip. He engaged in many public situations where he could learn and practice Mandarin. He initially started utilizing the knowledge he gained in the Chinese classes to communicate with a Mandarin-speaking flight attendant while he was on the plane from Toronto to Beijing, though other group members were still in English-speaking mode. One of the reasons that Jamie had been interested in learning Mandarin was that his brother used to teach English in China several years before Jamie joined the RLP. Jamie explained “I think I'm interested [in learning Mandarin] because my brother speaks Chinese” (Jamie, personal communication, 2018). Not only had he been influenced by his brother, but he was also fascinated by Marxism in China.

However, Jamie also reported that his motivation “went up and down” (Jamie, personal communication, 2018) during this trip. He mentioned that his busy schedule and the stress associated with it caused his learning motivation to fluctuate during the trip:

I had higher motivation, even my Dad even sent me an email like a week ago being like ‘You should come back and take a year to learn Chinese in China,’ but… [My motivation] was really high at the start, and then went down in the middle, and it’s back up by practicing a little more, but it was not enough. It went down. I think it was because I felt a little bit overwhelmed after the trip. Maybe I am overwhelmed by being in a new country. (Jamie, personal communication, 2018).

After arriving in China, Jamie continued to learn Mandarin by himself. He asked his Chinese friends to help him practice Mandarin. He also helped the Southwest University students with their English and asked them to help with his Chinese. He said that he should have asked for help from the Chinese students more. In addition, Jamie used digital language applications extensively during the three months in China, and he used WeChat, a Chinese social media application, to practice Mandarin. During our interview, Jamie showed the learning apps on his cell phone and articulated how much he had achieved with one of the apps. He said: “I have been using Pleco as an English-Chinese dictionary, and sometimes I used HelloChinese. Actually, I have gone pretty far with it. I have learned the clothes, directions, some food, time, and dates.” (Jamie, personal communication, 2018)

Jamie also shared his experience about how learning Chinese helped him teach the English language to the Chinese students:
It has been helpful like in the school, the students will come up to you and ask you a lot of questions. Like I will say, “我是历史老师 (I am the History teacher).” Even I say it poorly, but they like hearing small things like that a lot. So it has been helpful for Canadian teachers connecting with students. The students seem[ed] to like [it] a lot when I said “非常好 (very good)!”…I think maybe it helps the students [to be] willing to take more risks to learn English, and it maybe helps to lighten the class because sometimes the students are very shy when there is a foreign teacher in the class…It improves the relationship between me and the students. I can tell that the teachers also appreciate[d] it. Definitely, it could help get closer with that. (Jamie, personal communication, 2018)

**Carmen’s Stories**

Carmen initially considered English to be an international language and Chinese to be unnecessary, but she changed her attitude towards learning Mandarin after staying in China:

I think we didn't realize the importance of our survival lessons of Chinese until we came here. English is kind of a snobby language and...we just assumed that everyone knows English because it's so ‘universal’...So, we just assumed that people in China would speak English...and it's funny because we didn't really appreciate how much the survival lessons were going to help us. I brought my book of all the survival lessons in Chinese, and it's funny how I review it now, and I see how many words were used and how much we struggled the first month-and-a-half and we didn't know how to even say “我要 (I want)”, or “这个 (this)” and “那个 (that)”. We did not realize that we needed to know that! And now looking back, it's like by using all these words, and if I just focused on the beginning, then I feel like I could have learned a lot more here. I think the survival lessons were so much more important than we assumed they were. And I wish that we would have appreciated them more before we were living in China. (Carmen, personal communication, 2018)

Motivated by external and pragmatic factors, Carmen also came to realize the flaws of her own Anglo-centric perspective. This highlights how being immersed in a foreign culture can promote transformative learning with regard to cultural sensitivity and awareness. In addition, she noted that her motivation was inhibited to some degree by the difficulty of Mandarin, but she observed that her motivation became stronger after she came to China:

I have motivation because I know that I am good at learning languages, but I say that because I was good at high school French class. It's easy to get discouraged when learning Chinese. It's discouraging because it's so hard. Like “我要” and “I want”. Nothing there connects the two. So, you just straight memorize it, like really
learn it and understand it. So even if I had the motivation, it is easy to lose it just because of how different the language is. I still want to learn it especially now that I have that base of a few words. Dr. Xu told me that ‘If you can learn 300 words in Chinese, you can read the newspapers; you can probably have a solid conversation.’ It is funny because it is true that there are words that I learned “今天”, that I learned on my own…So I feel I am more motivated now that we are about to learn which I did not have before, and that is interesting. (Carmen, personal communication, 2018)

Carmen’s insights emphasize how learning motivation can be inhibited by the difficulty of learning a language that does not use a phonetic alphabet, like English does, or that does not share commonalities with Latinate languages, as French does. However, her narrative also demonstrates how these challenges can be overcome by becoming immersed in the culture of the target language, which is an essential component of CFL approaches.

**Linda’s Stories**

Although Linda was dedicated to participating all the RLP activities and motivated to visit China, she did not make much effort to learn Mandarin during the prep sessions. She confirmed this herself in the individual interview at the end of the trip. During the interview, she said that she did not learn much Mandarin from the survival Chinese lessons because she was tired from her tight course schedule in Canada. In addition, she had been more interested in Japanese and Korean, so she was not dedicated to learning Mandarin at the beginning. However, she started changing her attitude towards learning Mandarin when staying in China, and she became more confident after learning more Mandarin and made more Chinese friends:

That’s something that has surprised me. Because I was kind of happy with my Korean, my Chinese is slowly getting better, and I have made good friends with the kind university students…I used to be shy in Canada…but I become more social now in China…Before I was more interested in learning Japanese and Korean. I didn’t really want to learn Chinese, but now that I’ve learned some of it, I don’t want to lose what I have. I actually am interested in keeping this language. (Linda, personal communication, 2018)

Due to her low level of motivation, Linda did not learn much initially; however, after discovering her love for romantic dramas, I recommended several Chinese romantic dramas to her. She started to watch the Chinese dramas and enjoyed the stories immensely. The more Linda watched, the more she became interested in learning Mandarin. During the interview with Linda, she explained her language learning process:

I started to listen to the dramas. I watched dramas and that helped me because listening is how I learned. I watch shows. For example, I pick up the words “你在
where ya?” which means “Where are you?” I learned it through a drama. (Linda, personal communication, 2018)

Being immersed in the culture of the target language is a critical component of a CFL approach, and Linda’s experience seems to validate this claim and underscores how such approaches can increase internal motivation.

Linda did not use language applications to learn Mandarin when she was in China. Instead, she found that asking friends nearby was an effective way to improve her Mandarin. In addition, consistent repetition and practice could enhance the knowledge she gained. During the interview, Linda said:

When we first met [a Chinese student], I could not say her name at all. In the beginning, I just called her by her English nickname, and then I started calling her [Chinese name]. Now, it’s so easy for me, not because I hear it more, but because my tongue and my mouth are able to say and move in a way that Chinese words require. I know the four different tones. I have been practicing and practicing. For me, the learning method has always been listening to someone doing it, and saying it constantly with my friends...When I was saying something wrong, Tony would fix me, I learned it right...And then I talked to Tony, he would say something wrong, and I would fix him. (Linda, personal communication, 2018)

Linda’s response not only reinforces Carmen’s narrative, which underscores the value of friendship with the Chinese speakers, but also highlights the value of peer learning. When peers engage in learning together, they can build on each other’s knowledge.

Tony’s Stories

Because of Tony’s Vietnamese background, he had a better understanding of Asian cultures than other participants did, and he knew more about China than they did. However, he did not show a strong interest in learning Chinese. During the interview, Tony said that he had a good memory, which helped his language learning. Also, because he was bilingual, he was familiar with second language learning. Tony's ability to quickly pick up the tones and accents gave him more confidence than the others. Though he attended the classes, he did not learn any Mandarin after class or practice Mandarin in the WeChat group before departure.

Unlike Jamie and Carmen, Tony did not demonstrate a strong motivation to learn Mandarin during the initial lessons. As he can quickly pick up the tones and accent, he was more confident than the others. In addition, Tony believed that with the help of technology, he was able to communicate with local people more efficiently:

It's more motivation to survive, basically...Again, I know language won't be that big of a deal because I'll find ways to work around it...The thing I used the most is
Tony had no intrinsic motivation to learn Mandarin, and with apps on his phone helping him engage with locals, neither did he have the external motivation to learn the language. Thus, even though he intuitively learned some of the Chinese language with greater ease than the other participants, he made little progress overall at the beginning of the trip. However, after living and learning in China, Tony found many Chinese people assumed he was also Chinese many times due to his Asian appearance. As a result, he had more opportunities to communicate with local people, which increased his learning motivation slightly. Moreover, helping teach other pre-service teachers some new Mandarin words that he learned from the locals also increased his motivation to some extent.

While being interviewed, Tony, who completed a school placement at the same primary school as Jamie, shared a similar perspective:

My Chinese, it helps my school practicum with…connecting. Students can make connections, but like even outside of the classroom, a way of teaching students like words and phrases in English because always make soon interaction like a teaching moment, right? So I didn't know what [the Chinese word for] a Frisbee was, so I showed it to the students, [and] the [students were] like “飞盘”, “oh, 飞盘, I am learning it now.” A great connection with the students, especially outside of the classroom. I will say we have a good time. (Tony, personal communication, 2018)

Post-Chinese Language Proficiency Assessment

The participants completed a post-Chinese language proficiency assessment after returning to Canada. Overall, all the participants did very well on the assessment. For the speaking part, the participants were asked to answer four simple questions related to greetings, their teachable subjects, their basic impressions about China, and the food they liked in China. All the participants were able to answer these questions in Chinese. However, some of the questions were repeated two or three times at the request of the participants. When the participants were asked to write down at least five Chinese characters on the paper, not all the participants did very well in their written assessment. For the last part, the participants needed to match the Chinese words with the corresponding pictures. However, because Pinyin was not displayed, they had to identify Chinese characters, and that proved challenging for the participants.

The post-language assessment demonstrated that the participants had developed a higher oral language proficiency since their departure. It also validated the participants’ claims that they did not put much effort into learning Chinese characters. Because the participants focused mainly on developing their listening and speaking skills when they were in China, they were only able to write a few Chinese characters. Therefore, the tests results illustrated that the participants maintained their pre-departure understanding of Chinese characters. Though they may have become more familiar with the Chinese characters during their stay in China, they were not able
to write these words correctly. Another significant finding is that the participants relied excessively on Pinyin to remember the Chinese words. Therefore, they barely recognized the Chinese characters without Pinyin.

Discussion

The Role of Participants’ Chinese Language Proficiency in China

Chinese language learning plays a significant role in the participants’ reciprocal learning in China. Learning Chinese as a foreign language helps pre-service teachers develop their interpersonal skills (Ateşkan, 2016; Kabilan, 2013; Yang, 2011; Zhao, Meyers, & Meyers, 2009). It enhanced the participants’ intrapersonal and interpersonal skills, which allowed them to have deeper and more meaningful interactions with the local communities. For example, at the beginning, the intention of learning the Chinese language helped the participants easily start a conversation with the locals, such as the teachers and students from Southwest University, the teachers and students from the local placement schools, administrators, and support staff. During the learning process, the participants had more opportunities to build close relationships with the local communities so that they could have a deeper understanding of each other. The intimate relationships between the participants and the locals encouraged the participants to keep learning Chinese. All the participants said that speaking with their local friends gave them opportunities to practice Mandarin without the fear of making mistakes. Moreover, Jamie and Linda have decided to go back to China to teach Chinese students and to keep learning Mandarin.

In addition, learning Chinese as a foreign language promotes interaction and engagement within the pre-service teachers’ group members (Kabilan, 2013; Zhao et al., 2009). A democratic learning environment was created by the pre-service teachers when they stayed in China. They not only shared the knowledge of Mandarin they learned in terms of new words or important phrases they believed; they also discussed new ideas about teaching EFL, teaching plans, and other aspects of learning. This deepened their knowledge of other specific issues and skills. For example, Linda claimed that she learned some useful Mandarin from the group members when they had a discussion together and she felt that the interaction in such a context was beneficial. Therefore, the interactions among the pre-service teachers and between them and the local community enriched the pre-service teachers’ practices and experiences with regard to their interpersonal skills (Zhao et al., 2009).

Learning Motivations

The study’s findings reveal that the participants’ motivation varied from person to person. Jamie and Carmen showed strong motivations before coming to China; however, Linda and Tony did not demonstrate strong motivations to learn Mandarin before departure. Though all the participants showed strong learning motivations when they first arrived in China, their motivations fluctuated throughout the three-month trip in China. The study’s findings also reveal that the participants only focused on their spoken Mandarin instead of learning the Chinese logographic alphabet. This was likely the result of two factors. The first is that the Chinese logographic alphabet
is very different from Western phonetic alphabets (Taft & Chung, 1999; Wang & Shiau, 1973). Thus, unlike the English language, the Chinese characters cannot be read phonetically. Hence, learning Chinese characters involves a lot of rote memorization (Winke, 2013; Xiao, 2002) and it becomes more difficult for English natives to learn Chinese. Moreover, because the participants of this study were not taught the Chinese characters in a systematic way, they did not understand the structure of the Chinese characters and the radicals (Taft and Chung, 1999). The second reason is that pre-service teachers’ motivations for learning Mandarin are primarily based on survival needs (Norris-Holt, 2001), which means that they are different from the normal foreign language learners. They learned Mandarin primarily to make living and studying in China easier during the three months. Chinese characters are used for written language, which the participants did not need for most of their interactions. Thus, it was not imperative for all the teacher candidates to learn Mandarin, and it did not influence their academic performance if they did not learn. Therefore, the participants tended to only focus on learning oral speaking for the daily necessity instead of practicing reading and writing. In the end, the intimate relationships between the participants and the locals intrigued the participants’ motivations to keep learning Chinese.

**Cross-Cultural Experience**

The three-month cross-cultural experiences of the four participants can be considered a process of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991; O’Sullivan, 2003). When the participants initially arrived in China, they started the transformative learning process. They experienced “a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions” (Maxwell, 2002, p. 18). The findings suggest that all the participants encountered a disorienting dilemma to some extent after arriving in China. The participants’ comments reveal that, while staying in China, they faced a wide range of adaptation, such as language barriers, cultural differences, and different eating habits. The time that the participants spent in China made them look at China, Chinese people, and Chinese culture from a different perspective. Before this trip, the participants held some negative attitudes or stereotypes regarding certain features of the Chinese education and culture. More positive attitudes towards the structure of society and the Chinese educational system took shape in their minds during this international trip. They addressed the importance of being exposed to a new international environment, which facilitated the hands-on experience they gained through opportunities to observe local schools, teach ESL classes, and attend cultural seminars. This is consistent with Dunn, Dotson, Cross, Kesner, and Lundahl (2014), whose participants shared structurally similar narratives. The stories shared by the participants also indicate that the overseas learning and teaching experience challenged their opinions of their own values, intelligence, and potential, thereby transforming their views on education and allowing them to form a new and more inclusive worldview (Mezirow, 1991; O’Sullivan, 2003).

**Conclusion**

The current study explores both the cross-cultural experiences of Canadian pre-service teachers in China and their Chinese language learning while participating in the RLP between Canada and
China. The current research also reveals the importance and benefits of learning Chinese as a foreign language for the pre-service teachers’ cross-cultural experiences and their professional and personal development. The narratives in the current study offer critical insights into the participants’ attitudes towards learning Mandarin and their learning motivations, which allows one to identify the various strategies that facilitate language learning among the pre-service teachers. Moreover, it provides insights into how the participants perceived Chinese culture when they were immersed in a Chinese language environment. The findings from this study indicate that pre-service teachers’ cross-cultural immersion experience provided them with insights into different cultures that benefited their future teaching career (Ateşkan, 2016; Kabilan, 2013; Rodriguez, 2011; Unlu, 2015). In addition, they encountered different obstacles and challenges, such as language barriers and culture shock during the transformative learning process (Dunn et al., 2014). More importantly, through the RLP, the participants were able to visit China where they developed themselves personally and professionally over their three-month exchange. As Connelly and Xu (2015) state, the reason that cultural exchange programs between China and Canada exist in the contexts of post-secondary learning in both Canada and China is that “the Chinese have things to learn educationally from the Canadians and, reciprocally, that the Canadians have things to learn educationally from the Chinese” (p. 2). Moreover, Xu and Connelly (2017) illustrate the concept of reciprocal learning and emphasize the importance of reciprocity in teacher education between Canada and China. This suggests that the overseas immersion experience of pre-service teachers is reciprocal for both local communities and themselves.

References


How Middle School Curriculum in Chongqing Portrays Chinese Socialism

Peter Miller

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Abstract

This project is contextualized in Shijing Xu and Michael Connelly’s (2013-2020) SSHRC Partnership Grant Project, Canada-China Reciprocal Learning in Teacher Education and School Education. The goal of the SSHRC Partnership Grant Project is to compare Canadian and Chinese education in such a way that the cultural narratives of each provide frameworks for understanding and appreciating educational similarities and differences (Xu & Connelly, 2017). The overall goal centers on reciprocal learning in teacher education between Canada and China. Xu and Connelly (2017) emphasize research that focuses on centering the voices of teachers in both Canada and China. This work seeks to help the project by providing data on China’s politics curriculum to create a better understanding of China’s education system, and to gain some insight into the hopes and dreams of Chinese politics teachers.

Learning about Chinese Marxism Through the Reciprocal Learning Program

I came to this research project as a Marxist from Canada who is interested in expanding development in China as well as improving living conditions for Chinese people. When I started in the Bachelor of Education program at the University of Windsor, I did not know about the Reciprocal Learning Program and the opportunity it provides to teacher candidates to experience education in China. However, I was informed about the program in my first week of study when I met with Dr. Xu. When she suggested I could study Chinese Marxism education, I was thrilled by the opportunity, especially to learn more about teaching in a country led by the Communist Party of China.

You may ask, why is a Canadian interested in Marxism and the Communist Party of China? I began to seriously study Marxism in my first year of undergrad when I joined the Young Communist League of Canada – Guelph club. Before I joined, I was, and continue to be active in, campaigns for post-secondary education to be tuition fee free. My role in this activism included...
traveling to Quebec for two weekends to support the Quebec student strike in 2012, where Quebec students mobilized against a 75% tuition fee increase. In these two weekends, I saw the police act out in the interests of the capitalist state and repress peaceful protestors. I was even pepper-sprayed with a group of demonstrators the night a special law was passed in Quebec which made peaceful protests illegal. Witnessing this repression, and experiencing some of this repression myself, made the Marxist texts about the state’s role in supporting the capitalist class’ interests come to life. My beliefs in the need for a communist party to fight for reforms and ultimately, socialist revolution, became stronger. Since 2012, I have been a member of the Communist Party of Canada, which, along with the Young Communist League of Canada, is a small organization—but an active one—which fights for free education, labour rights, against Canada and the USA going to war abroad, and for solidarity with Indigenous peoples, amongst other issues.

In general, Canadian and Chinese perspectives clash with respect to their opinion of socialism in China. The Canadian media, as well as the Canadian public, tend to be critical of communism in China, citing allegations of human rights violations and intrusive state interference in Chinese society, as exemplified by a recent internal government report discussing human rights in China (Blanchfield, 2017). However, the Government of China instead recognizes communism as the long-term goal for its society and holds that China is under the political and economic governance of market socialism (Kuhn, 2011). With the ongoing campaign by the Chinese Government to promote core socialist values within the Chinese population (Gow, 2016), it was interesting to learn more about how the political science curriculum portrays Chinese socialism in Chongqing, China.

China has made significant gains in development with its recent implementation of universal health insurance coverage (Yu, 2015) and lifting almost 800 million people out of poverty since the 1980s (Sanchez, 2017). According to a Pew Research Centre (2013) study, 82% of the Chinese population believe children will be better off than their parents. These developmental gains and general optimism for the future in China amongst its population contradict broad Canadian perspectives of socialism in China.

I was excited to hear in Canada that China has been both reducing poverty and has plans to lessen the gap between the rich and poor. I also believe the projects of the last party congress—to develop and consolidate the public sector—are positive for China (Xi, 2018). I am worried about the growing imperialist threats from the United States, the country’s many military bases which surround China, the increasing tensions as a result of the trade war between the United States and China, as well as growing fearmongering within Western media regarding China’s economic and political rise in the world. In this context, I was excited to hear the news that the Chinese government is increasing the number of compulsory Marxism courses in university and college.

**Research Questions: Politics Teacher’s Political Perceptions**

This *Mitacs Globalink* research project explores how the middle school political science curriculum in China portrays Chinese socialism. My primary research questions were: (a) what are the perceptions of Chinese Socialism among Chinese political science teachers in Chongqing,
China? and (b) what will the Chinese political science teachers I encounter have to say about the connection between recent developmental gains in China and China’s socialist system? These questions were answered through a quasi-qualitative narrative structure that produced other observations about China’s politics curriculum as well.

**Socialist Perspectives of China**

Unlike some Western Marxists, in general, I am supportive of the Communist Party of China and its role in improving living conditions. The late Domenico Losurdo (2016) argues that China underwent market reforms to close the gap between developed countries in the West and underdeveloped countries, including China. He also claims that this market reform does not mean China has restored capitalist leadership (Losurdo, 2016). Instead, China still is governed through the interests of the working class through the Communist Party of China. While market reforms have opened up China and capitalists have gained power in the economy, they have been shut out of formal political power (Losurdo, 2016).

On the other hand, another late Marxist philosopher whom I also have great respect for—Samir Amin (2013)—argues that China is neither socialist or capitalist, but in a transitionary state, where the country can either become socialist or regress into capitalism. China is in a unique situation in world history because the total appropriation of farmer’s land has not occurred, as is the case in all capitalist countries. For Amin (2013), China also has a large state capitalist sector that can either play a role in the transition to socialism or be further privatized, resulting in China becoming capitalist. He adds that class struggle will play a significant role during China’s transitionary stage, and whether socialism wins out depends on which class force wins in China, the working class or the bourgeoisie (Amin, 2013).

I find both explanations of Chinese socialism to be much more compelling than academic Marxists who condemn China as much as the U.S. empire or condemn the foreign policy of China more than the exploitative foreign policy of western imperialism, including Canada’s foreign policy. However, this paper will be influenced mostly by Amin’s (2013) article because I think it is crucial for me to take a step back, not engage in the debate over whether China is socialist or not, but instead look as objectively as I can at China’s politics and Marxist curriculum.

**Methods**

*Informal Discussions and In-Class Observations*

Dr. Shijing Xu and her research assistant, Yuhan Deng, gave me the opportunity to connect with professors at Southwest University (SWU) informally and through seminars, introductions by Marxist teaching candidates, and middle school classroom observation in Chongqing, China. I lived in an international dormitory on campus, with local schools, university students, and seminars located conveniently close to me through public transit. Thanks to receiving support from Mitacs, which Dr. Xu and Yuhan Deng helped me to secure, my travel, food, and residence stay was monetarily covered for the trip.
For my research, I audited middle school political science classes at TJB Middle School. I also had the opportunity to review some politics classes at a secondary school in the Beibei district of Chongqing. I spoke with teacher candidates and professors about their socialist curriculum in political science classes, clarified any questions I had, and heard the opinions of individual students and teachers about their curriculum. I took notes of these observations as well. At the start of my trip, I also had the opportunity to attend some special seminars organized for the contingent from the University of Windsor. I found one workshop on "Understanding China – In View of History" by Dr. Y. W. to be particularly helpful. The findings of my project primarily come from the Southwest University seminars, observing middle school classrooms, and talking informally with political science teacher candidates as well as university political science professors.

Interactions and Experiences

"Understanding China–In View of History" by Dr. Y. W. at Southwest University
Dr. Y. W.’s lecture on China interested me in a few ways. It occurred near the beginning of our time in Southwest University, in early April. He discussed the general trend of Chinese education emphasizing the importance of unity in China in its 5,000-year history. At least in modern history, China emphasizes unity because of the imperialist attacks it faced, ranging from the opium wars to Japanese aggression. Unity in China is essential for maintaining its strength, sovereignty, and the right to self-determination as a nation. I believe unity still needs to be emphasized because of the continued threat from U.S. imperialism, which I have mentioned earlier. This lecture was also helpful for me because Dr. Y. W. stressed that, for China's Communist Party, China is a dictatorship of the proletariat which, if true, is a crucial condition of socialism being the primary system in China. It was also interesting to hear that Chinese historiography generally finds peasant uprisings to be uprisings which were positive and pushed China's development forward.

Observations at Southwest University-Affiliated Middle and High School: Dynamic Lessons
I observed some middle school political science classes at a joint middle school and high school in the Beibei District at the start of my trip. For my final three weeks, I changed placements from ZJY Primary School to TJB Middle School, where I am thankful I received the opportunity to observe history, politics, and English courses, as well as teach some combined history and English courses.

I attended a senior grade one politics class about governance in China. I received some translation for this class where students discussed a video about regulations on food prices in China. The teacher led a discussion on a recent event where protestors were not allowed into a meeting where government officials voted to raise the price of some food items, and the teacher asked students to reflect on the video. He talked about how it was a positive sign that the media discussed this contentious issue, and positive that the government was held accountable by journalists. However, he also considered the negative actions of the government being too formalistic and too bureaucratic. The teacher discussed with students the positive and negative aspects of government regulations on food prices. The teacher continued by talking with students.
about the advantages and disadvantages of living in the Beibei district, their local community.

Finally, the teacher showed a video about the streamlining of social insurance in China to show the Chinese government is moving from a *management government* to a *service government*. From this lesson, I saw the teacher use class discussion to engage students, but the class was mostly lecture-based. This teacher also used real-life and local examples to help the course come to life.

I was later led to a discussion amongst politics teachers about their grade 10 curriculum. Here, one teacher did her best to interpret for me. I saw three teachers in this meeting have a debate about how to teach the curriculum about governance in China. Two teachers wanted to start the curriculum unit by discussing what they believed to be the basis of governance in China, the law. Another teacher argued that the basis of governance in China is its structure of democratic decision-making. I do not know the outcome of this debate, but I did see that the discussion was passionate yet respectful, and all the teachers remained friendly afterward. A friend of mine who was also present on the trip shared with me about other topics discussed during the meeting, including how much to teach from the textbook versus other sources. One teacher advocated to teach less from the textbook and use more personal experiences for students to learn about China's governance structure. The teachers also discussed the topic of China's treatment of ethnic minorities in comparison to issues of racism in the West, as well as issues of corruption in China compared to problems of corruption in the West. Finally, the teachers discussed how they would incorporate the new curriculum topic about the importance of *sound environmental governance* into their classroom.

It was interesting to see politics teachers from China working together to make sure they taught Senior 1 classes about governance in China in a similar way. At my first placement in Canada, my teacher complained it could be challenging to meet with other teachers in his department and coordinate curriculum. Perhaps, in Canada, some teachers are worried about being told what to teach and coordinating curriculum with their fellow teachers. Indeed, I too am worried about this situation as a future history teacher who plans to instruct many of my lessons from a Marxist perspective. I worry administrators will tell me my lessons are too radical or too anti-Canadian or without balance, and I worry about feeling pressured to change my teaching philosophy as a result.

I have good reasons to be worried: in my third year of university studies, I taught a lesson to grade 10 students about repression by the Canadian state against social movements and racialized people in Canada. After this experience, a parent of a student called the teacher who invited me. The parent worked for the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) and complained about the political content of my lesson.

*Observations at TJB Middle School: Trouble Understanding the Chongqing Dialect*

At TJB Middle school, I observed political science courses which discussed Taiwan, China’s relationship with ethnic minorities and national autonomous regions, youth and the law, and other topics. However, it was difficult to understand any of the content for these classes. Teachers spoke in the Chongqing dialect, and the SWU students who translated for me had trouble understanding this dialect.
The lessons were conducted entirely in lecture style. Students collectively answered questions, and sometimes the teacher gave students the answers to problems in their workbook. The students were to memorize their answers, and specifically the answers which the teacher told them were important. There were not many opportunities for student-led activities in these classes and lessons were taught through the textbook and in preparation for exams. This lecture-based teaching style conflicts with comments in the media made by a Marxist university professor (Wei, 2017) and comments from university students I met in Southwest University about the need for making students learn more actively about China’s politics curriculum.

Observations with University Students Via WeChat: Differences Between Canadian Civics Curriculum and China’s Politics Curriculum

I have remained in communication with two politics teacher candidates on WeChat (a Chinese social media platform). Both candidates attended the University of Windsor last fall and helped in answering my questions about the politics curriculum. One of them suggested I read the book “The Governance of China” by Xi Jinping to learn more about socialism with Chinese characteristics. She also sent me a brief description of the topics covered in the Chinese middle school and high school politics curriculum. Students need to take four compulsory courses: (a) Economy and Life, (b) Politics and Life, (c) Culture and Life, and (d) Philosophy and Life.

My most revealing conversation on WeChat with one of the teacher candidates, who had participated in an exchange at the University of Windsor with the Reciprocal Learning Program in 2017, occurred when she wrote this:

Can I ask you some questions? What’s your major in university? Will you teach Marxism after graduation? When I was in Canadian high school, I found civics teachers only teach a little about socialism and communism. And once a teacher told the students that these systems aren’t practical. So, if it’s convenient, could you tell me most schools’ attitude toward this system? And how do you feel about socialism? I am ready to accept the reality. (Chinese teacher candidate, personal communication, 2018)

From this message, we launched into a long conversation. Some of the main points I made are below:

Canadian civics classes follow a liberal ideology. Most of the teachers are hostile to socialism. I think some civics classes also give students too many open assignments where the western media manipulate students to believe negative things about other countries, including China. However, some other teachers support some political activism and are social democratic in political orientation. They encourage students to criticize some policies of capitalist governments like Canada and the USA. They encourage students to think critically and support activism in Canada that fights for worker’s rights, struggles against racism, etc.
These types of teachers are in the minority. They have some correct ideas but can easily be fooled to have the wrong idea. Some of these social democratic teachers take a strong anti-imperialist stance, but others can be tricked to support Canada and the USA’s wars of aggression abroad. I’m rare for Canada because I support Marxism Leninism and support socialism and I am in the Communist Party of Canada. There are not many teachers like me in Canada. (Chinese teacher candidate, personal communication, 2018)

From my reply, we spoke more. The candidate revealed that in Windsor she witnessed her teacher talk about socialism and fascism as if they are the same thing, and we discussed how horrible an idea this is. She emphasized that she was happy I was working to stop the prejudice in schooling against China as well. I talked to her about issues in Canada, especially regarding the oppression of Indigenous peoples, and she was aware of this issue. Humbly, she answered me by writing:

Each country has their weak points. China also has many things we need to learn. And I found a fascinating thing; in maps, most countries prefer to put itself in the middle. So does China. But China never wants to be the center. (Chinese teacher candidate, personal communication, 2018)

I have noticed Chinese teacher candidates are very humble and very open to learning from other countries. The people here have learned the importance of peaceful diplomacy, including its top leaders, and the people have discovered an international approach to learning from different cultures. Another teacher candidate I talked to in 2018 while she was on exchange in Windsor told me that China does not consider playing an aggressive role or going to war abroad. She also said she had heard many stories about the imperialist interventions of the United States, but not of Canada. Indeed, in the eyes of the Chinese, Canada is seen as a great country, when in fact, Canadian imperialism often supports U.S. imperialism, exemplified by our leading role in the recent aggressive war against Libya.

A Marxist Event: Ambitions to Promote Marxism

Students organized an event about Marxism on May 5th to celebrate 200 years since the birth of Karl Marx. They showed videos, had posters and displays discussing Marx’s achievements, and had the opportunity to write about what Karl Marx meant to them. A politics teacher candidate helped me to interpret some of the event. The Socialism with Chinese Characteristics student club organized the event well, but it seemed to be more of a drop-in event. There were too few people, but more than the Marxism event on the same day in my hometown of Guelph, Ontario, Canada. Students took photos of my friend and me as we talked about her club. Perhaps the students were surprised that I was there as a foreigner.
The students gave me the opportunity to write about Karl Marx and to sign my name on a banner. I wrote: “Marx’s ideas continue to inspire workers and oppressed people all over the world.” My friend said what I wrote was “so nice.”

I learned from my friend that her club also runs a WeChat page for students to learn more about Marxism with Chinese characteristics. Indeed, social media has a strong presence in China and Marxist departments are beginning to take seriously the need to meet students where they are at (Li, 2017) and promote Marxist education as well as core socialist values using social media. There is much competition on social media for these Marxist pages (Li, 2017).

Meeting with Politics Teacher Candidates: Ambitions to Make Their Classrooms Dynamic

Later, I met with another politics teaching candidate. It was an excellent first meeting, and she could speak English well because English is her minor. The meeting was informal, and I did not ask many questions about the curriculum. However, it was still informative for me to meet with her. We spoke about the war in Syria, and I could sense from her and other friends from China that many understand that the missiles launched by the United States and Britain were an act of aggression and against international law. They were worried about acts of aggression by the United States and would prefer that the United States and other countries use diplomatic methods to address international conflict. Instead of imperialist aggression, the United Nations should have investigated into who used chemical weapons in Syria. It seemed teachers were especially aware of global issues. Some people in Canada may not think critically about international conflict and realize that Canada supported the missile strikes in Syria by the United States.

Another topic I discussed with her was the relationship between China and the continent of Africa. I told her that it seems to me as though China is helping Africa to develop much more than the United States; the U.S. policy is to have transnational companies open up in Africa and exploit its people and resources. She said she believed that China is helping Africa too, and she believes China cares a lot about Africa in part because of the help the African nations gave to China when China joined the United Nations.

I also met with a second politics teacher candidate who has applied to come to Windsor for the Reciprocal Learning Program, (this was the same friend I met with to celebrate the birth of Karl Marx). At our first meeting, I spoke more than her because I was so excited to share with her my experiences as a Marxist in the West. I told her that, as a student, I have made it part of my task to fight for free education and against expensive tuition fees. I also said that I see it as a Marxists’ role to fight for better working conditions for all workers. And finally, I see it as a critical task for Marxists in Canada to be internationalists who support socialist countries around the world, support struggles of national liberation around the world, and advocate against Western imperialist countries from going to war. I told her about the Quebec student strikes in 2012 and how they were a time when mass action by young people brought about positive results. She asked me if this protesting was effective. I said it was, because the protest stopped a 75% tuition fee increase in Quebec. Quebec has the lowest tuition fees in the country because of the higher level of student mobilization in that province.
I learned a lot from this question about the effectiveness of protesting that was posed to me by the politics student candidate. I believe that her inquiry about whether the protests in Quebec against tuition fees were effective or not revealed a significant difference between Chinese Marxism and the Marxism I adhere to. Chinese Marxism emphasizes unity in society, while Marxism in Canada emphasizes class struggle. However, I do not think these differences are incompatible. It makes sense to me that Chinese Marxism emphasizes unity. China has a history of facing imperialist attacks from the Western world. As a united and stable country, China has prospered in its past, but when the country encountered the opium wars and Japanese aggression, for instance, China suffered at the hands of imperialism. In Canada, Marxists should play the role of enhancing the class struggle and the struggle against war, because unions should defend workers’ rights in Canada, and because the peace movement must be improved to stop Canada or the United States from participating in more wars of aggression. Through this work by Marxists in Canada, we also hope to build unity between forces and peoples in Canada who want to create a peaceful world.

The politics teacher candidate also answered questions asked by me, including when I asked her what policies made her proud to be Chinese. She mentioned she is proud of China because it is safe to be in China due to its strict gun control laws. She also cited China’s ban on drugs because she believes this is helpful to the life of a person. Finally, she mentioned China’s poverty alleviation work and the government’s foreign policy that advocates for peace. She also said she believes the Chinese system upholds the interests of workers, including actions by the Government of China to raise the starting point of personal income tax, establish medical protection and social protection, and have retirement ages of 55 for women and 60 for men.

I also learned more about Marxist curriculum. The politics student provided a written answer for me, and I have quoted her answer here:

_In junior high schools and primary schools, we usually carry out ideological and moral education and rule of law education, mainly telling students what should be done and establishing moral values. And guide them in their growing psychological problems, such as love. In high school, we use two books to introduce the economic and philosophical part of Marxism and other two books about China's politics and Chinese culture._ (Chinese teacher candidate, personal communication, 2018)

I stayed in touch with the two politics students whom I met in person, as I was surprised by some of the things they told me. One student said that the Chinese government and the Communist Party of China recognizes China as a classless society. She told me this after I said that I was teaching and observing classes at a working-class middle school. She responded that China does not recognize classes but instead recognizes different levels of income. I believe this is the wrong position for China to hold, and not a Marxist position to have. Classes still exist in China. Both capitalists and workers are in China, with different interests. I am worried that the interests of capitalists are being supported too much in China since the opening up to foreign markets after the Cultural Revolution, but I still believe that China is doing much to uphold the
interests of workers by expanding social services and improving standards of living. It was also interesting for me to hear her say that China supports the interests of the whole Chinese population and not any particular class. I believe it is essential for China to uphold the interests of the Chinese nation, but also uphold the interests of workers, and do this explicitly.

I held a final meeting with two politics teacher candidates in my last two weeks in Chongqing. One student was the same student who hoped to go to Windsor as part of the Reciprocal Learning Program in the fall, and another student was a first-year politics student. During this meeting, I asked the following questions:

1. How will you structure your classes when you become a teacher?
2. What political issues will you allow students to debate?
3. What ideas about Marxism do you think are important for all students to know?
4. What points about Marxism does your curriculum focus on?

This meeting was fascinating, with one teacher candidate telling me that she hopes not to teach her courses with such a lecture-based strategy. Instead, she hopes to teach using more activities. However, she noted that graduate students at Southwest University, and administrators in Chinese schools where she may wish to eventually work, generally believe in the superiority of the lecturing model when it comes to teaching. She also answered for me what students can debate and what students cannot debate in the Chinese classroom. Students cannot debate major questions, like whether one should love their country, but other vital questions, like whether or not to reduce school fees, can be debated.

The most interesting point of our discussion came from her answer about what significant points students should know about Marxism. She answered that students must understand (a) the theory of surplus value, and that workers create value and they should be respected; (b) that people are important to China, and should be active in China’s events; (c) that matter determines consciousness; (d) that everything is continually changing and developing, which means that you are not the same as one year ago, nor is China the same as even one minute ago; and (e) that Marxism should be used to understand, analyze, and solve problems.

**Discussions with Marxist Professors: Why Chinese Socialism is Supported by Most in China**

I met one Marxist professor by chance while playing basketball with him on campus. We set up a time to discuss politics, and I found him to be asking me more questions than I to him. He was fascinated to meet with a Marxist from Canada and asked me why Canadians seem to be okay with the fact that Canada's foreign policy aligns with the aggressive foreign policy of the United States. I tried to tell him that Canada does have a history of peaceful protests against war, including demonstrations against the U.S. war in Vietnam and the Gulf War in Iraq. However, the peace movement in Canada is at a low level of mobilization, with many Canadians tricked by the *Responsibility to Protect* (United Nations General Assembly, 2005) doctrine from our leaders, a doctrine that calls for aggressive intervention against authoritarian foreign governments—when instead the interventions are done in the interests of profit and imperialism.
In my final week, I also had the privilege of talking with a Marxist professor who helps politics teacher candidates at SWU. He confirmed what I had learned earlier in my discussions with politics teacher candidates: middle school curriculum does not discuss Marxist theory as much as in high school and university, and the curriculum focuses more on citizenship education, which teaches students about the political roles of different sections of government, the role of individuals in education, philosophy based on materialism, economics in China, and law in China. The professor also informed me that the new politics curriculum in China would bring more variety to classroom activities instead of using only lectures. Many teachers only seem to lecture, and the professor told me that he thinks students are more engaged with teachers who can share interesting stories as they lecture and less engaged with teachers who outline theories and teach only using the textbook. When asked about the engagement of students in Marxism classes, he told me that students have less incentive to be engaged because studying Marxism does not result in high paying jobs.

Perhaps the most exciting conversation occurred when I asked this professor how Marxism courses tell students to support socialism in China. He answered that it is more important for people in China to support socialism using economic incentives. People should see the benefits of development, as well as the benefits of the reduction of poverty, and the reduction of the income gap in China under socialism. These benefits result in people supporting and upholding socialism as more than a slogan put forward by a leader of the Communist Party. He cited the Chinese dream as an initiative that results in the hard work of many Chinese people.

The professor also spoke about students from China who study abroad. From his experience, these students are more likely to come back to China and appreciate its socialist system. They are more critical of the issues they see in the Western countries they study in, while still appreciating these countries. They are also very likely to come back home to China for work. His comments align with some comments I have heard from Chinese teacher candidates. For instance, I heard one teacher candidate during my placement at TJB Middle School tell me that he used to think of the United States as superior to China, but now he appreciates China for being safer. He cited the lack of gun control laws in the United States compared to strict regulations in China as one of the reasons why China is safer.

The professor told me that he thinks a significant difference between Chinese Marxism and Western Marxism is that Chinese Marxism has taken on a less confrontational and more constructivist approach. Chinese Marxism now emphasizes development, and the Communist Party does not recognize classes in China but instead varying income levels for people.

I learned more from my meeting with this professor about why I received surprised reactions when I spoke with some Chinese students about issues in Canada. Chinese people seem to believe it is rude to talk negatively of another country, and instead focus on the positive sides of most countries. Many in China take pride in speaking positively about Western countries even after Western politicians and Western media propagandize negative views about China before sharing any positive things about the country. The Marxist professor connected China's respect and focus on the positive aspects of each country to China's respect for the right to self-determination of every nation. He told me that Canada is a great country, that it is almost a socialist
country. I said to him that Canada is a capitalist country with a welfare state. The federal and provincial governments of Canada are eroding the system as we speak by privatizing public services.

**Final Thoughts: What We Should Learn from China’s Politics Curriculum**

I began to learn about how China's political science curriculum portrays socialism in China from my observations, and I hope this will build knowledge and understanding of China's education sector from a cross-cultural perspective. A greater understanding of Chinese views of socialism and their relation to China's political science curriculum will foster a greater appreciation of educational similarities and differences between China and Canada. There is still much more work to do on this topic, and I hope to learn more about China’s Marxist curriculum when I return to China to teach.

I think Marxist theory still provides a blueprint for changing the world. I understand Chinese Marxism’s focus on unity over class struggle given the political context of the country; however, I agree with Amin’s (2013) thesis that socialism will only prevail in China if the workers win against the wealthy capitalist owners of production in the class struggle currently underway in China. Politics teachers and departments will need to grapple with this reality in the future and talk about class struggle as well as unity as a dialectical relationship. Many politics students in China are siding with workers in conflicts, and are facing repression (Yang & Liu, 2018), but these students are taking the right side if socialism is to prevail in China.

I am different from most Canadians whom Chinese people meet. I have found that Chinese politics students are especially interested in talking with me. They are surprised to hear me present Canada as a country I love but one with many issues. I try to educate some of my Chinese Marxist friends on issues of poverty in Canada, biases in Canadian media against China, as well as the effects of discrimination against Indigenous people. They are interested in learning about the issues in capitalist countries. They generally believe that socialism is right for China and has helped its development immensely. The also seem excited to learn more about issues in bourgeois democracies because they admit some Chinese people think liberal democracy is better than socialist democracy. Perhaps China needs to better educate its citizens on issues related to capitalist countries. Chinese students, and especially Marxist professors, should not have objectively false ideas that Canada is a socialist country.

I believe the most critical thing Ontario’s education system can learn from China's political science curriculum is to be explicitly accepting of other countries’ rights to self-determination. Canadian social science teachers should learn from China's perspective that it is essential to emphasize the positive aspects of each country instead of highlighting the negative issues of other countries. If teachers teach this, they will not disrespect the political systems of countries like China and Cuba by saying socialism is equivalent to fascism. By focusing on the positive aspects of other countries, civics teachers in Canada can also redirect their focus to encourage students to think more critically about issues within Canada instead of only analyzing issues in other countries, as if all countries have something to learn from Canada and Canada has nothing to gain from other
countries. I am not saying that social science teachers should not be critical of other countries or should not allow students to be critical of other countries. Students and teachers can do this but must be wary of acting in a chauvinist manner by only focusing on issues in other countries. Teachers must not falsely say that Canada has a lot to teach other countries but nothing to learn from other countries. Indeed, if Ontario civics classes aim to teach students to be respectful of other cultures and nations, teachers need to allow students to understand perspectives that respect a nation’s right to self-determination, not the propaganda of the imperialistic “responsibility to protect” doctrine currently prevalent in Canada.

References


Reciprocal Learning: Academic Supports in Middle and Secondary Schools

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Abstract

This paper addresses the student support systems available in Chinese schools, with reference to those available in Canadian schools, in order to understand the most effective foundations for academic success and student motivation. The focus of educational support within Chinese and Ontario schools is rooted around times of high-stress exams, such as the Senior High School Entrance Exam (Zhongkao, 中考) and the National Higher Education Entrance Exam (Gaokao, 高考) in China, and the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) Literacy Exam and the Canadian Achievement Tests (CAT) in Ontario. I explore the available means through which schools provide guidance and additional support for students throughout the grades leading up to major examinations. This inquiry involves observation of various Chinese classrooms, research of literature examining stress levels and academic success, and observations of school programs and guidance facilities within the schools and communities.

Background

This paper explores the academic expectations of students balanced with the available mental health support agents within the school community. The purpose of the research project is to examine traditional practices and educational support within Chinese school systems in relation to student-life and academic success, in comparison to those in Canadian school systems. This project is contextualized in Shijing Xu and Michael Connelly’s (2017) Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Partnership Grant Project: Canada-China Reciprocal Learning in Teacher Education and School Education (2013-2020). The originality of this project derives from the principle of reciprocal learning between the Canadian and Chinese school systems (Xu, 2011, 2017; Xu & Connelly, 2008). According to Xu and Connelly (2017), the overall goal of the SSHRC Partnership Grant Project is to compare and contrast Canadian and Chinese education in such a way that the cultural narratives of each provide frameworks for understanding and appreciating
educational similarities and differences. The overall goal of the partnership centers on reciprocal learning in teacher education and school education between Canada and China.

**Research Questions**

This research addresses the question: what preparation techniques and support do educational institutions make available for students in high-stress settings? Sub-questions include: (a) how do the support systems and national examinations in China (Beibei, Chongqing) compare to those within Canadian (Windsor, Ontario) institutions? and (b) what mental health supports are made available for students in the school setting?

**Literature Review: Support in Chinese Schools**

In China, two tests exist at set intervals, which determine the academic futures of students: a) the Senior High School Entrance Exam (Zhongkao, 中考) and b) the National Higher Education Entrance Examination (Gaokao, 高考). Both tests produce immense academic, and consequently, sociological pressures as they “are considered as the two most significant public examinations for students in China” (Chen, Fan, Cheung, & Wu, 2018, p. 292). Both examinations are notoriously important in terms of future success and are seen as “gateway[s] to future life outcomes” (Sargent, Kong, & Zhang, 2014, p. 98). In terms of academically-gifted students who may be victims to the anxiety of maintaining academic excellence, Chen, et al. (2018) acknowledge how “Chinese society places an extraordinarily high value on education; as a result, students are expected to pursue high scores in all the examinations in order to be admitted into good secondary schools or top universities” (p. 292). Poor performance on either test results in a lower level of funding or steaming of the student into a vocational school. As is the case in Canada, postsecondary education is “an indispensable prerequisite to a well-paying job and a comfortable life in modern day China” (Sargent et al., 2014, pg. 98). Poor performance on the Zhongkao could result in access to enroll at a less prestigious high school, which could result in enrolling at a less prestigious university. The act of assigning differing values to education and the cycle of fear of inadequacy and underachieving begins at a very young age in the Chinese system.

The societal pressures that students face in the midst of adolescence may be connected to the suicide rates of people between 15-34 in both countries. “Suicide is the leading cause of death for Chinese individuals between the ages of 15 and 34” (Lim, Lim, Michael, Cai, & Schock, 2010, p. 4) and is the second leading cause of death for Canadians between the same ages (Statistics Canada, 2010). The initial acknowledgement of these findings during this research led to this paper’s focus on school pressure and emotional and stress management facilities in schools and communities between both countries.

China’s collectivism may have a heavy effect on the social expectations and pressures each student faces in middle schools and high schools. On one hand, the mindset and pressure that students share may enable them to relate to one another; thus, the common goal and drive may reduce individual pressures or stress, as is the opinion of one high school teacher I spoke with. The
collective pressure and stress contribute to the overall efficiency and drive of the students and teachers.

On the other hand, this pressure seems intimidating at a distance and would warrant a highly structured system of social and academic supports focused on preparing students for stress and maintaining good mental health. It is suggested that, “because of China's centuries-long history of collectivism, the Chinese family and its expanded network have been a bastion against mental health problems” (Lim et al., 2010, p. 4). The individual mental health problems have been restricted to private and familial bounds and hidden from the public. Students are “deeply affected by this culture, a student’s academic performance is not simply a personal issue, but also represents the honour and ‘glory’ … of his or her family” (Chen et al., 2018, p. 292). The historic respect for education therefore prescribes heavily ingrained importance and expectation on the success and engagement of students, feeding into the desperate necessity to succeed and the fear of poor academic scoring to the point that education is connected to social standing and familial reputation. In China, the avoidance of discussions about mental health may arise from a number of cultural factors. Through an historic scope, “during the Cultural Revolution, psychology and psychiatry were considered counterrevolutionary, bourgeois disciplines that exploited the masses” and therefore “people with mental disorders were released from hospitals and institutions and re-educated with Mao's thoughts” (Lim et al., 2010, pg. 5). Of course, the discipline of psychology was popularized by Freud’s focus on wealthy, white women. This notion may have had an effect on the attitudes of the nation, as the interests of bourgeois would not align with the interpretation of Marxist ideologies at the time of the Cultural Revolution. Although, this ideology has fluctuated, and the 1980s brought a strong development of collective identity and support of mental health professionals (Lim et al., 2010).

Canada experienced a similar institutional collapse at the end of the 1960s, and the “lack of effective treatments for patients with mental illness is generally acknowledged to have significantly contributed to the relatively low esteem in which psychiatry was held” (Kirby & Keon, 2004, p. 137) up until the 1960s. Canada’s history of abuse and discrimination toward people with disabilities has profoundly influenced the stigma around mental health facilities and resources. The long line of discrimination against people with mental health disabilities has affected the “sense of inclusion and their ability to exercise their rights,” evident through the presence of “insane asylums” in which patients, “once admitted, spent the rest of their lives … isolated from family and community” (Kirby & Keon, 2004, p. 137). This sense of isolation has sustained throughout the deinstitutionalization of mental illnesses. The long, shameful history of discrimination and alienation of people with mental illnesses has now inspired ethical methods, research, awareness, and communication in terms of mental health.

Despite its atheist majority, China has high spiritual awareness. Kuan (2008) suggests, If the education of a child only stresses academic achievement, then the child will inevitably lose many developmental opportunities because this age saves a secure and happy life environment for children who have received education of the heart-spirit (xinling) and sensory-emotions (qinggan). (p. 285)
Although loosely translated and highly-spiritual, this ideology has similar aspects to Western ideas of development, such as those by Erik Erikson and Jean Piaget.

**Methodology**

For this paper, research on the available outlets for students’ mental health and well-being was conducted by way of a literature review, participant observations, informal interviews with individuals and groups, self-reflective journal entries, and note-taking. Research was triangulated in the form of observation of, and informal interviews about, school climates and atmospheres regarding mental health and students’ mental well-being.

**Participants**

The participants included multiple students and staff members within one middle school, two high schools, and a university in Chongqing, China. The classes observed included two multidisciplinary 10th grade classes, each containing between forty to fifty students, and two university English language classes, each containing roughly twenty students. Staff members involved were one middle school headteacher, one middle school English language teacher, one middle school guidance counsellor, two university professors, and three university English and journalism students and teacher candidates.

**Procedure**

The discussions all involved casual conversations to inquire into the attitudes surrounding the Gaokao, Zhongkao, and mental health. University students who had attended prior schooling (i.e., elementary, middle, and/or high school) either within the Beibei district of Chongqing or otherwise were asked about the preparation techniques they were subjected to by their schools leading up to both national exams, their feelings regarding each experience, and the guidance outlets made available to them.

Two university professors of education who work as supervisors for teacher candidates completing placements in high schools shared about the English fluency of the English majors and non-majors in their first years and beyond, and the process of the Gaokao and Zhongkao. High school and middle school teachers and headteachers talked about their roles in preparing students for the Gaokao, the attitudes surrounding mental health in their school, the Chinese educational system, and their ideas of how students can deal with mental health. One Chinese teacher candidate who was training to become a headteacher talked about the preparation techniques involved in the weeks leading up to the Gaokao.

**Findings**

**Ontario Tests and Support**

As witnessed in Ontario schools in both the Greater Essex County District School Board (GECDSB) and the Windsor Essex Catholic District School Board (WECDSB), school
environments offer consistent facilities for academic support, including a guidance room, a staff of guidance support, assemblies for mental health information and stress management techniques, mental health awareness events, and safe spaces to study. Guidance support agents or counsellors are stationed within schools to help students prepare for their futures and manage emotions, time, and stress.

The Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) assessments are conducted most commonly in grades three (math and literacy), six (math and literacy), nine (math), and ten (literacy); however, according to a literacy teacher—who is also the English department head—at one Ontario high school, if a student is sought to do poorly on a test such as the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT), additional attention is directed into advancing the student’s skills, even if that may result in a suggestion to delay the time of writing.

**Chinese Schooling and Academic Supports**

The juxtaposition between Canada’s seemingly forgiving standardized tests and the rumours of well-disciplined yet highly pressured Chinese students in China sparked my interest. As I travelled throughout China, I found that students fit the stereotypes. High school students on the campus near my host university, as well as the middle school students nearby, resided in dorms within their school campuses. The reason for this was that these were high-level schools, which students travelled great distances to attend. They would have already written their Zhongkao exams, and have been accepted to these schools and others. Their scores on the test unlocked the privilege to attend such campuses.

High school students in the Beibei district were excited to see a foreigner that they could practice their spoken English with. Many shared about their school schedules, which started around 7:30AM, with a two-hour break around 4:00PM, and then continued until around 10:00PM. The students remain in their assigned classroom and the teachers of various subjects rotate, much like the elementary schools in Ontario. In between classes, students have a break to get prepared for the following class, which usually involved taking care of the classroom by cleaning the front board, collecting papers and books, etc. Comparatively, students in Ontario high schools tend to rotate and teachers are more commonly assigned a room. For organizational purposes, students in Ontario are usually given a homeroom; however, they are not restricted to that room for the day.

One major difference between Ontario and Chinese high schools is that in China, each class has a head teacher. The head teacher is responsible for the students within his or her classroom. The principal, and a couple of head teachers suggested to me that their responsibilities include working as a team to attend to mental health needs, but this school in particular did not have a guidance teacher. The principal at the school underwent training and received a certificate in mental health and guidance. Special workshops and home visits play into the way teachers communicate the mental health concerns for a student’s well-being. If a child is struggling with a subject area, the teacher will often visit the child’s home to discuss that with the parents.

While visiting classes in Beibei district schools, I observed how students were exposed to a considerable amount of mental health reinforcements in the form of visual encouragement (i.e.,
posters) to seek additional mental health assistance available within the school, or from friends or family.

Mr. Z., a teacher at one Beibei district high school, described the way that learning difficulties are often not focused on, are ignored, or are not accepted by parents and teachers (Mr. Z., personal communication, April 21, 2018). He stated that if a student is doing poorly in school, he or she is seen as lazy. He described his role as a head teacher, which includes looking for mood changes and signs of abuse, and talking to individual students who seek emotional assistance in terms of home-life, stress, or other issues. He stated that although he is not a professional psychologist, in his role as a head teacher he assumes the responsibility for his students’ mental health and so he must look for physical or emotional symptoms of emotional distress or fluctuations in moods. Chinese homeroom teachers carry a heavy responsibility in terms of student care and “play an important role in psychological counselling of students…which includes moral education, educational and career guidance, personal development, and guidance in interpersonal relationship issues” (Lim et al, 2010, p. 5). This responsibility is connected with the communication outside of the school. Since the majority of students reside on campus, Mr. Z. explained that communication between teachers and parents is necessary and frequent.

The communities play a large part in preparing students for entrance examinations. Mr. Z. admits that the Zhongkao involves an organized system for preparation. Despite this heavy preparation, the focus is more on completing the test rather than effectively teaching students the material or developing oral English skills.

I met with the guidance counsellor, Ms. J., while teaching at a Beibei district middle school. Ms. J. is a trained psychology professional responsible for the mental health of students within her school. Her role is the guidance counsellor or psychology teacher. According to her, all schools in the Beibei district in Chongqing, China have at least one guidance counsellor who is responsible for the mental well-being of students related to stress, home-life issues, depression, anxiety, and preparation for the future (personal conversation, May 18, 2018). In the same school, a counselling room (Xīnlǐ zīxún shì) was observed; it was a bright, comfortable room decorated with plants, welcoming blue walls, windows, and softly cushioned couches. The waiting room in the main counselling office had a reception desk and couches. This room led into a separate, more secluded room in which individuals may console privately with the counsellor, Ms. J. The set-up of the counselling environment is intended to provide students with a confidential space.

In fact, the entire concept of guidance within the school was intended to cater to confidentiality, as the counselling office was located in a secluded part of the school, away from classrooms, with a stairwell on either side. This location was intended to provide the students with comfort and privacy. Students may therefore feel more inclined to seek assistance if they feel their issues are protected. The counselling office was originally in a more populated area, but moved for confidentiality reasons in order to make students feel more comfortable to visit in the more secluded environment. Students have privacy when travelling to the room and when inside the room. The counselling program is encouraged for student use by invitations from head teachers and posters displayed around the school promoting students’ relationships with the guidance counsellor.
In recent years at Ms. J.'s middle school, an additional transitional room existed in order for students to expel their anger. Among other resources, it contained a punching bag in order to allow students to release built up emotions. This experimental room was opened in 2012, and was accessible only after school. It continued for only two years and was closed when a new school leader started. Schools in Ontario sometimes have a similar transition room or learning support room that is available with supervision for students as an alternative space for class work, however, physical aggression is not encouraged.

Ms. J. described counselling sessions that parents and community members may attend. During our talk, Ms. J. stated that three meetings had been held in the past year, the last held in May of 2018. The meetings are hosted in a nearby primary school and involve parents, school staff, and social workers to help promote mental health. Additionally, all Beibei district schools invite psychologists to give speeches and training to teachers and parents. The meetings involve parent counselling about adolescent behaviour, communication skills between parents and students, and tips on how to relate to students. University psychology professors also host workshops on similar topics on campus and encourage parents to attend. Ms. J. claims that continuing education is available for teachers who seek to gain a special certificate and training in social issues. Those teachers may then organize workshops for other teachers in their own schools to spread awareness. Large meetings are arranged to focus on low-income families, foster families, deceased parents, and stress and emotional management for students (Ms. J, personal communication, May 18, 2018).

In terms of communication, there is an annual group counselling meeting at the beginning of each semester for grades 7-9 in which the counsellor introduces herself, builds encouragement and learning goals, and hosts games and activities in order to build an open and positive environment. Communication is structured within the school between teaching staff and educational psychology professionals. The guidance counsellor is said to communicate with head teachers to discuss what to avoid and what to focus on for specific students, but does not mention specific details. The counsellor is careful to address only the solutions for specific issues, but not the issues themselves, with additional parties. Furthermore, records are never shared between head teachers, administration, or psychological professionals. The counsellor may suggest or encourage further development when needed, and only talks about issues with professionals.

According to Ms. J., all teachers undergo training in basic psychology in order to handle and understand students’ issues. Teachers are trained to monitor and refer students to the counsellor if needed. The counsellor will then refer students to university psychologists if needed. Communication is also structured between the school’s academic agents and psychological professionals in the community. As a counsellor, Ms. J. has connections with psychologists from Southwest University if problems develop with her student-clients. It is her responsibility to refer students to psychological professionals if she believes further assistance is required.

In terms of preparation, the school community works together to provide students with mock-tests around one month in advance. According to some university students, the Gaokao is such a huge focus in China that the preparation for writing the test causes many other educational aspects to suffer. University students have admitted that only after the Gaokao is completed are
students able to relax. Once university life starts, students suggest that they can become lazy and careless. This is in opposition to Canadian schooling, in which university seems to be the highest point of pressure. One high school teacher suggests that the time leading up to the Gaokao and Zhongkao are the most crucial times in many Chinese people's lives. The preparation that students undergo seems to be a driving force for the anxiety that students feel, rather than a comforting outlet to dispel anxiety.

Ms. J. described how students are prepared for the Zhongkao in her middle school. One month before testing there is a meeting to help students release stress and to encourage them to talk. They participate in small games to promote relaxation. There is a three-day outdoor trip at the beginning of the semester through which students build relationships with classmates. Ms. J. suggested that peer relationships are very important in order for students to maintain success. There are after school programs established, such as student clubs, ping pong, and arts appreciation. Ms. J. was the main participating organizer until recent years but now other teachers participate as well (Ms. J, personal communication, May 18, 2018).

One teacher candidate suggested that a mock test is performed one month prior to the actual Gaokao exam. Students in younger grades volunteer to organize desks and materials in preparation. The younger grades are then taken on a field trip to vacate a portion of the school for the sake of the exam writers.

According to students, Chinese children are raised with the anxiety of taking the tests. They also have to endure the pressure of the events surrounded by family members, in which parents and security personnel flood the streets not unlike a festival-style setting. On the morning of the Gaokao, the streets around schools can be filled with family members of students. Streets are shut down, and taxis are free for students in order to ensure they arrive on time.

Professors from a Beibei district university were asked about the fluency of English in their English major and non-major students. Both professors agreed that confidence in oral English continues to be lacking, resulting in a cycle of unwillingness to practice. One professor suggested that oral English skills are difficult to develop due to the focus on the written portion of the Gaokao. (personal communication, April 22, 2018).

Discussion

There is a similar negative stigma against mental health issues in China and Canada. Hence, practices in both countries focus on secluding the counselling areas within schools to avoid embarrassment. Despite this, Beibei district school communities work to dissolve the stigma by encouraging students to visit a school counsellor in order to normalize talking about mental health. At the same time, the process caters to the attitude that mental health should be hidden due to the stigma associated with talking about mental health and concerns. It is a cycle of shame. Although privacy is important, hidden issues are demonized. According to Ms. J., many students still hesitate to act and talk to the counsellor, despite being encouraged by staff members and further attempts made to normalize mental health discussions. She claims that students are embarrassed and assume peers will see them as crazy. I have witnessed this stigma in Canada as well.
It is important to compare the histories of each country in terms of their attitudes surrounding mental health. How a collective culture views mental health reflects the resources in which mental health solutions arise from. Schools are learning environments that should address curriculum, social development, and emotional management. By examining the historic and ongoing attitudes behind mental health, societies can discover the reasons behind the stigma. School officials and staff have a large responsibility for student development because students are vulnerable. We can better understand the ways in which students struggle and excel by exploring the best available means for schools to use in order to prepare students for stress and emotional development.

Test anxiety in Canada has gained focus over recent years and is recognized to be debilitating in some cases. Standardized testing is in this way criticized for its inaccurate representation of measured learning. Canadian teacher candidates are coached to acknowledge test pressures and student anxiety. They are also encouraged to consider alternative ways of testing. This ideology is rooted in Canadian teachers’ focus on differentiated instruction and assessment.

Across schools in Ontario, Canada and Chongqing, China, teachers and guidance counsellors stress that mental health is to be taken seriously. The supports each country enacts to deal with student stress and emotional management seem comparable. However, the divide between these countries’ testing methods is vast. China’s national tests can be said to cause students intense pressure with questionable educational effectiveness; however, the guidance supports which schools have available seem scarcely more abundant than those found in Ontario’s more forgiving education system.

There is a great divide between members of higher and lower classes in China. In my informal interviews, some students and professors have suggested that in rural schools, resources are insignificant and desks may even be made of mud. Class structures and education seem to be entangled in an unforgiving cycle. When poor scoring affects family reputation, one would think that the effects of family standing, home-life, class, and economic factors on the academic success of students would warrant inquiry into social effects on academic success. Rather, academic success seems to represent the family’s reputation without significant rationale. Since academic performance so greatly affects the reputation of the family, it can be argued that family and home life have a deep influence on academic success. Where class affects educational success, so too does academia affect the lifestyle of the family, thus perpetuating class.

Lastly, because East Asian immigrants are the largest immigrant population to enter Canada (Statistics Canada, 2017), it is clear that the quality of an educational opportunity is a factor driving students to participate in exchanges. Low scoring students in China can still be successful by travelling to a more forgiving schooling system; this is perhaps one of the greatest influences for migration. After returning to Canada from my teaching placement in China, I had a conversation with a Chinese exchange student attending a school operated by the WECDSB. He claimed that his fear of the Chinese education system led him to participate in the exchange.
Significance of the Study

This study encourages educators in both China and Canada to understand the varying levels of preparation taken in regards to mental health, emotional management, and assessment in the two countries. The variety of outlooks between experienced and in-training educators, psychologists, and past and present students allow for a rich understanding of the effectiveness of assessments and the overall educational systems (i.e., understanding what the point of our testing methods are, and what we are actually testing for). By drawing attention to the different styles of education in connection to class and mental health, our societies should acknowledge that there is room for improvement. This research has explored very comparable stigmas towards, and systems for, mental health in schools; however, the difference between systems appears in the process of testing and the effects of poor academic achievement.

References


Reflections of an Ontario Student Teacher in Scotland:
Cultural Language and Cross-Cultural Classroom Management

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Abstract

A new teacher in her initial teacher education (ITE) program is focused on curriculum content, classroom management and pedagogy, and this perspective does not change despite a variation in the cultural context (Hassaram, Robertson, & Garcia, 2019). “Reflections of an Ontario Student Teacher in Scotland” is a narrative of raw, qualitative reflexive data composed during a one-week period of ITE practice teaching placement in Northern Scotland (Clarà, Mauri, Colomina, & Onrubia, 2019). The English teacher-narrator identifies the language differences, comparative abilities in writing, and those one-on-one connections between student teacher and pupils that allow for a rewarding reciprocal learning experience in first year classroom management and teaching.

Day One

The headmistress gave us a tour of the school, which took over two hours. This might be the most beautiful school I have ever seen. Outside, in the front courtyard, stands an archaic bell tower with red and brown brick and spotted patchwork giving insight to its long lifespan. The roof is made of wood shingles and beneath boasts a large clock with Roman numerals. The school itself is quite different. A modern and open-concept hall welcomed us. Rows of skylights highlighted, what I assumed to be, an art installation consisting of several multi-coloured wooden beams hanging vertically from the ceiling. There are separate wings for subjects; each have their own teaching lounge. Finding ourselves in the English wing was exciting, as designated spaces for disciplines are not something I experienced in primary or secondary schools in Windsor. The classrooms here are lined with bookshelves (and filled with actual books!), whiteboards, windows, literary posters, and bulletin boards. In Windsor, I found that individual teachers often have to supply their own literature collections, aside from the standard literacy curriculum textbooks.
The third-year secondary (S3, or age 14) students were preparing for their national examinations so they did not have much classroom work today. This explained the rows upon rows of neatly lined desks in the auditorium.

The S1 students were talkative and excited. They studied the short story “The Pedestrian” by Ray Bradbury, and Miss Macleod conducted a guided reading with them. She read the story aloud with the students, provided context, and prompted students to engage in meaningful conversations. I was quite fond of utilizing this instructional approach during my teaching practice in Windsor and seeing it here felt familiar and comforting.

One of the students said I have a nice accent.

I responded, “Thank you. So do you!”

Smiled and surprised, she asked, “Oh! Do I have an accent too?”

They use “Text for Scotland” which seems to be their version of the Ontario Nelson curriculum textbooks. (The students here do not seem to like it much either.)

S5 students seem very quiet. They are reading “Romeo & Juliet” and “The Great Gatsby” right now. Lecture-based classes seem to be the norm for this level, very much resembling a traditional post-secondary English literature classroom. From my experience in Ontario, an equivalent Grade 11 class would include more activity-based learning and media-based resources.

I overheard students using the following common diction: rubbish (garbage and/or nonsense), fortnight (two weeks), and bird (girl).

**Day Two**

I scribed the third-year secondary (S3) English examination for a student with special needs. He wrote about his favourite show, “Primeval.” There is a special series of the show that takes place in Canada and he seemed rather impressed to tell me that information. When it was revealed that he had reached 700 words, he straightened his back and smiled, proudly. He said his record was 800 words.

I taught S1 students about Canada today. Cory took notes. Based on his quickness to retrieve a paper and pencil, it appeared that Cory often received special tasks like this. Afterwards, we went to the library (there is a library!) and took out books on Canada. The students had a lot of questions including:

“Are there gangs?”

“Do you have horses?”, and,

“What is the most popular restaurant?”

Many said they wanted to try poutine. Considering that a local restaurant asked if we wanted mayonnaise, shredded cheese, and ketchup on our fries, I was not surprised that poutine intrigues them. I administered a quiz and overall, they did quite well, even with the spelling. Many
couldn’t remember Ottawa as Canada’s capital, but then I didn’t realize that Edinburgh was the capital of Scotland either.

The students in S1 were very certain that Glasgow was the most dangerous city in the world. I asked Cory if he had ever been to Glasgow and he said that he had been left there as a baby for two years until the social worker came and brought him here.

Today, I also discovered A4 paper! A4 paper is 8.5 X 11.5 inches, just a half inch longer than the normal size letter paper we use daily for photocopying and letters. Lined A4 paper has two holes rather than three.

There are many plastic containers around the classroom that are used for communal supplies. I noticed I received many blank stares and crinkled brows when I mentioned these ‘bins’ and thought it was odd since the containers seemed like such common practice in their classroom. Finally, one of the students told me that they only use the bin for rubbish, and I realized that the whole day they thought I was telling them to go to the garbage for supplies.

Day Three

In my S4 class today, I used football as a topic, to great effect, for discussion regarding developing effective arguments; for example: Should Rangers and Celtic be allowed to join the English Premiere League?

In my S3 class, now that they were done their national examinations, I taught the poem “This is a Photograph of Me” by Margaret Atwood. While trying to engage students with topics they were familiar with, I was also trying to consciously choose Canadian texts to expose them to. When we discussed unfamiliar words in the poem, they revealed that they did not know what an Evergreen tree was, and they were quite thrilled to learn that we have of an abundance of “Christmas trees” growing all over Canada. They were very attentive today and I am finding these students to be quite lovely in general. They are not much different (other than the obvious things) than the children in Canada. When we analyzed the Atwood poem, I gave them the option of writing a description of their initial perception or to sketch a drawing. Since this was a lower level class, there were some students that had severe difficulties with writing. My hope was to allow these students an equal opportunity to participate in the activity and express their ideas. I noticed that several of the other students also chose to draw and it ended up being quite fun. They were very intrigued by the “dead” figure in the poem.

I am adapting to the variety of different levels and grades throughout each day’s schedule, ranging from S1 to S5 (eleven to sixteen years old). I am also adapting to the expectations the teachers here have of their students. Student expectations seem quite high, and I wonder if the inclusion of routinely scheduled standardized testing plays a role in this. I find that I am often more generous in my grading/feedback compared to the teachers here, which was not something I noticed back home. During my practice teaching in Ontario, I noticed a higher emphasis was placed on providing positive feedback. This is not to say that positive feedback is not used here, but just that there seems to be a culture of using direct, constructive criticism to motivate students.
Calum said his family has three sheep still ready “to lamb.” I learned that early spring is the season in which most lambs are born.

They count birthdays from February to February for school years. I’m not sure why. In Ontario, we usually categorize school years according to birth years (i.e. all students born in 1995 would begin kindergarten the same year).

Take note, Canadian English teachers. Here are the classroom management strategies I have noticed are effective in Scotland:

1. Always give the students a timeframe. For instance, how long do they have to work on this activity? Remind them when they are getting close to the end of the time.
2. Be direct and immediate. For example, when students become too talkative, be quick to respond.
3. For lower level classes and more disruptive classes, always have tasks for them to accomplish.
4. For larger classes, have them report answers and discuss as a group, otherwise too many students will try to answer at once.
5. Have students peer edit writing activities often and early in the process. This helps to ensure that they are completing the task properly and it breaks up the lesson
6. Use a desk bell to capture their attention rather than having to use your voice.
7. Use coloured cups that mean, “I am confident in what I am doing;” “I need some help from members of my group;” and “I need some help from my teacher.”

Day Four

I find I am very much enjoying teaching the year ones. So many things are new to them still (including the uniform, which they wear with much more enthusiasm than the older students) and they are so excited to learn. Today, we went over literary devices. I taught them how to properly say “hyperbole” and now they say it with a Canadian accent.

The S6 students are preparing for a school trip to Glasgow. They talk about it often. In particular, their excitement for many of them to try McDonald’s for the first time.

This evening, the other Canadian student teachers and I met Mr. Smith and a group of teachers from the primary school to play Shinty. The sport seems like golf and field hockey combined. I tried a few hits during warm-ups and found it quite fun. The stick was made of wood and heavier than I expected. Once the game began, I stood on the sidelines and took pictures. The field was surrounded by grey, stone townhouses. Soon the sky grew dark, and it began to rain. The wet cold acquired my fingers and I had to stop taking photos (although I did manage to capture a lovely double rainbow). Mr. Smith showed up again at 8:00pm and encouraged me to wait in his car until the game was over. Mr. Smith’s son, Rory, who is a first-year student at the secondary school, was also in the car. He said he plays rugby rather than soccer (he said “soccer” – nice boy!) and gets to miss five periods a week for training.

It is not surprising his favourite subject is ‘P.E.’ (physical education).
Rory said “this is [his] first year studying French.” He says he hasn’t quite caught on to it yet.

More common diction overheard: jumper (sweater), Tipp-ex (correction tape or ‘Wite-Out’), and water closet (washroom).

Day Five

Miss Macleod was away today for an interview, so I was asked to cover registration and year-one first and fifth periods. When a teacher is away or ill, it seems common that the other teachers in the school work together to cover classes during their open periods, rather than having hired occasional teachers come in like in Windsor. I wonder if this is common in all of Scotland, or if it is unique to this area. Being asked to take this on made me feel like a real teacher more than anything.

During third and fourth period I observed year one and two keyboard/guitar class. The teacher told me that it was not the best time to be observing the year two class because they’ve already chosen their classes for next year and many of them did not choose music, so they are very disinterested. They worked from a music book with a variety of familiar songs such as “Summer Nights”, “Auld Lang Syne”, and “Hedwig’s Theme.” “Auld Lang Syne” is one of my favourite pieces of music (and poetry) and I was delighted to see it being taught in a Scottish classroom (it is not as familiar to students in Windsor). While the students worked independently, the teacher would come around to see how they were getting on. A couple of the advanced guitar students practiced a more difficult piece in a private room.

The year one music class had several of the boys from my English group. They were taking turns on the drums and saying “jumping jelly” to help them keep time. They struggled to hit the snare and bass drums at different beats.

Nearly every student we’ve met has family somewhere in Canada, mostly in the eastern provinces. We were often told, “I have an uncle in New Brunswick” or “I have cousins on Cape Breton Island.” The kinship towards Canada here has been notable; more than other countries I’ve visited.

The headmistress commented on my “pinafore” dress today, saying that it fondly reminded her of one she had when she was a young woman.

Day Six

Today, I taught show not tell to the S2 creative writing class and Miss McLeod helped me develop learning outcomes for an activity, which she referred to as “Success Criteria.” Cory said, “There’s a better way to exercise inside. If you turn on the fan and play badminton at the fan.”

A few of the S6 students are in the process of writing personal essays for their university applications. When the headmistress learned that my academic background was in creative writing, she assigned me to work with one of the students. Mauve’s essay explored her experience witnessing a bull fight for the first time in Spain. I provided many marginal comments on her work,
and we met together to go over the feedback. I found this one-on-one very rewarding because of the direct connection.

We also heard from one of the other Canadian student teachers that some of the students saw my colleague and me sitting on a hill the evening before, “watching the sheep” (really, it was the lambs). They were very confused by this, since sheep here were as common as cows in Ontario. While I didn’t have the opportunity to talk to these students about it directly, I hoped that maybe we provided a glimpse of a different perspective. A reminder that what might be ordinary to some is extraordinary to others. At the very least, we gave them a laugh.

Day Seven

Today, I worked again with my lovely year one students. We did an editing workshop using post-it notes (or ‘sticky notes’, as they would say) and went over how to give constructive feedback. I had them work in their table groups and counted to three each time they had to move onto the next one. It is incredible how something as simple as counting makes it much more exciting for them. Each time I counted, they would get in position as if they were preparing for a race and jump to the next table. Nicole asked if I would be here again on Thursday, so she could get a photo with me and “an autograph.”

I co-taught a year one class with another Canadian student teacher on poetry, specifically haikus. We made one together as a class. We continued “show not tell”, and the rain exercise from Mary was beautiful.

Before leaving the school, I paused at the top of the stairs in the main hall. Its openness provided an opportunity to gaze, one last time, at the multi-coloured art installation, the lunch tables folded neatly along the wall, the lime green chairs stacked, a few loose papers. The students were gone, and most of the teachers were in their classrooms preparing to go home. It was quiet.

In conclusion, here are ten suggestions for Canadian student teachers in Scotland:

1. When in doubt, talk about Canada (the students love it).
2. Pack light. You won’t need as much as you think you will.
3. Bring a good raincoat.
4. Walk as much as you can.
5. Meet as many of the teachers as possible.
6. Offer to teach as much as you can.
7. Eat haggis and black pudding.
8. Take photos.
10. Read students’ academic and creative work.
References


The Journal of Teaching and Learning (JTL) acknowledges the land we operate on as part of the traditional territories of the Three Fires Confederacy of First Nations, comprised of the Ojibwe, the Odawa, and the Potawatomi. There are few places on earth where others have not walked before us or called it home.

The JTL is an international, peer-reviewed journal. The journal seeks manuscripts that provide a critical examination of historical and contemporary educational contexts. The journal publishes original research that contributes to theoretical and applied questions in teaching and learning. These may include: issues related to indigenous education, gender, class, race, ethnicity and diversity, educational policy, teacher education, educational leadership, and theories of teaching and learning. The journal also welcomes critical and exploratory essays that focus on current educational issues. The JTL is published twice a year. Submissions to the JTL are anonymously peer-reviewed.

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