



Castledown

 OPEN ACCESS

Intercultural Communication Education

ISSN 2209-1041

<https://www.castledown.com/journals/ice/>

Intercultural Communication Education, 9(3), 104216 (2026)

<https://doi.org/10.29140/ice.v9n3.104216>

Missed Opportunities for Intercultural Learning: The Marginalisation of Students' Intercultural Experiences in International Schools in China Under Neoliberalism



SIYU WANG

University of Warwick, China

wangsiyuuk1997@163.com

Abstract

This study focuses on opportunities for intercultural learning in Type C international schools, an emerging form of international schooling that has become predominant in China and primarily serves local Chinese students. Based on classroom observations and individual semi-structured interviews with students and one teacher, it examines the nature of students' intercultural experiences and analyses the significance of how students interpret and respond to these experiences. The findings show that despite perceptions of cultural homogeneity in this classroom setting, students still have valuable intercultural experiences. These experiences centre on encounters with cultural otherness, particularly students' attempts to understand and interpret unfamiliar cultural practices and their representations of cultural others. Even when arising from one-off situational encounters or exposure to media representations of otherness, such experiences can inform students' intercultural learning. This suggests that even limited encounters can provide a resource for reflection that challenges learners' assumptions and promotes reinterpretation of the encounter. However, the findings also show that the potential for prior experience to become a resource for intercultural learning is largely dependent on how learners are encouraged to engage with their own and other's experiences within the classroom environment. In this study, reflection on intercultural experience formed part of classroom learning only sporadically, with teachers' attempts to share their experiences seen as tangential to formal learning. This paper argues that this marginalization of intercultural learning reflects the neoliberal, outcomes-driven contexts in which these schools operate, undergirded by accreditation and quality assurance systems.

Keywords: Intercultural learning, Intercultural experiences, International schools, China, Neoliberal institutional logics

Copyright: © 2026 Siyu Wang. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial 4.0 International License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. **Data Availability Statement:** All relevant data are within this paper.

Introduction

Intercultural learning has long been regarded as a core mission and a source of legitimacy for international education. It is widely framed as a commitment to cultivating learners who can navigate cultural diversity and participate in an increasingly interconnected world (Zeng, 2025; Hayden & Thompson, 2013; Heyward, 2002). However, as scholars have pointed out, the realisation of this educational ideal depends significantly on enabling and constraining factors in particular national contexts and specific school settings, particularly the market factors in which schools operate (Bunnell et al., 2016; Poole & Qin, 2024). This relationship between internationalisation and market conditions is highly salient in the Chinese context, particularly in relation to the increase in international schools known as ‘Type C’ international schools. These schools typically cater to socioeconomically advantaged families and have experienced the most significant growth in recent years (Poole, 2018; Wu & Koh, 2022). The operations of Type C schools are deeply influenced by neoliberalism, in that they operate commercially and for profit while positioning themselves competitively within an educational market increasingly oriented towards local consumers (Bunnell, 2019). In China, neoliberalism has a stronger influence on international schools than on other types of schools, such as public schools, partly because international schools use English as their primary language of instruction. The use of English in this context becomes tied to ideological notions of English as a global resource for intercultural communication, as these help signal the market value of a school’s ethos and educational approach (Lu & Dasli, 2026).

Under the influence of the self-financing model and the instrumentalisation of English, international schools must actively compete in the neoliberal market to prove their value and ensure a return on investment for parents, such as demonstrating successful university admissions outcomes (Liu, 2020). Parents have assumed the role of investors, forcing schools to take their opinions into account. This, in turn, affects how schools put their educational ideals into practice, including intercultural learning. This has led to a phenomenon in which rhetoric about the importance of ‘international mindedness’ may serve a hidden agenda of achieving market-oriented goals such as brand-building and competitiveness (Bunnell, 2019). As a result, time and space tend to be allocated to content that is perceived to lead directly to university admissions outcomes. This implies that educational objectives that do not yield immediate, tangible benefits to stakeholders are given lower priority in curriculum planning than university admission targets. Yet, little research has been done to examine how intercultural learning is viewed and addressed amidst the balancing act between educational philosophies and a competitive market.

The current study investigates how students’ intercultural experiences are positioned within classroom practice in a Type C international school in China, and how this positioning is shaped by the neoliberal context in which the school operates. As will be explained further below, the study is informed by the fundamental position that intercultural experiences, even when they occur in students’ own country, can be meaningfully utilised to promote intercultural learning (Bultseva & Lebedeva, 2021).

Literature Review

Intercultural Learning in International Schools

International schools are widely expected to cultivate intercultural learning (Heyward, 2002; Silva-Enos et al., 2024), which is incorporated in diverse forms into international schools’ educational commitments or desired outcomes, such as international-mindedness (Scott, 2023) and global citizenship (Ferguson, 2024). Each school may operationalise intercultural learning in its own way, subject to neoliberal market influences (Hacking et al., 2018). This means that there can be a wide range of practices,

from an emphasis on static cultures as seen in a cultural-differentialist approach to teaching (Roiha & Sommier, 2021) to an emphasis on the cultivation of attitudinal qualities such as curiosity and openness (Ferguson, 2024) or international mindedness (Lai et al., 2014; Scott, 2023). Intercultural learning is also institutionalised in international curriculum frameworks such as the IB (Lee, 2024).

Within the neoliberal framework, intercultural learning may be viewed as providing students with a type of capital (Mitchell, 2023), and since education is viewed as an investment (Lu & Dasli, 2026), intercultural competence and related constructs also come to be construed as a measurable edge that potentially serves the competitive demands of the labour market (Piipponen, 2025). In addition to making intercultural learning more appealing, schools must also make it easier to understand and implement. For example, the IB has progressively transformed intercultural understanding into international-mindedness, refining it into assessable teaching indicators (Zeng, 2024). Through these efforts, abstract intercultural learning concepts are made tangible, enabling schools to gain clearer insight into how to implement intercultural learning in their teaching practices.

However, a case-based research report by Hacking et al. (2017) on the International Baccalaureate (IB) across a diverse range of case schools in Asia, Europe, North America, the Middle East, and China showed that parents do not fully understand the IB's educational philosophy such as the value of International Mindedness (IM), which has posed challenges for the implementation of IM education in schools (Hacking et al., 2017). Consequently, it is conceivable that intercultural understanding, which is defined by the IB as a component of IM, may not necessarily be implemented in actual teaching. These IB schools may thus overlook students' intercultural experiences as a readily accessible and valuable source of potential learning, as it may not seem to align with educational priorities in the neoliberal marketplace. This highlights the challenges that international schools face as they attempt to realise their educational ideals whilst managing operational realities, operating as hybrids of idealism and commercialism (Hayden & Thompson, 2013).

At a practical level, implementing intercultural teaching is not an easy task for many international schools. Research emphasises that intercultural learning should require learners to reconstruct their relationship with themselves and others through reflection (Byram, 1997; Dervin, 2016; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013; McConachy, 2017). Instruction therefore needs to be reflective and sustained, guiding students to reconsider their assumptions about themselves, others, and intercultural encounters. However, research suggests that the instruction tends to be relatively superficial or sporadic. Although most teachers report having provided students with opportunities to reflect on intercultural experiences (Estaji & Tabrizi, 2022), a closer look at their actual practices reveals a discrepancy between the intended outcomes and the teachers' ideals. For example, some focus solely on language and traditional festivals (Roiha & Sommier, 2021), adopt a static view of culture, or equate intercultural communication with global citizenship (Ferguson, 2024). Consequently, there is a disconnect between international schools' commitment to intercultural learning (Heyward, 2002) and its actual implementation. In some instances, teachers 'believe' they are engaging in intercultural teaching, when in fact they are not. This is relevant to Poole's (2019) observation that schools may attempt to meet accreditation requirements with performative endeavours during inspections, but struggle to maintain these practices in day-to-day operations. External pressures and a lack of internal preparedness, coupled with the inherent challenges of intercultural teaching, have made it difficult for international schools to implement intercultural teaching.

There is still a relative lack of empirical research on intercultural teaching in international schools in China. Existing research has mainly examined the broader structural and discursive landscape of international schooling, including its policy environments, market logics, institutional identities, and global-national dynamics (Bunnell, 2019, 2022; Fertig, 2007; Poole, 2018, 2020; Wright et al., 2022),

leaving less explored how intercultural learning is actually enacted or omitted in the daily life of classrooms. As one part of such a focus, this study examines how learners' prior intercultural experiences are addressed in classroom practice. The next section therefore discusses the role of experience in intercultural learning.

The Role of Experience in Intercultural Learning

Intercultural experience refers to personal experiences where individuals perceive that differences in cultural background are relevant to how people behave and how meanings are constructed and interpreted (Barrett, 2016). Cultural background is not limited to nationality but includes a wide range of sociocultural categories, such as gender, age, region, occupation, class etc. (Holliday, 1999). Experiences become intercultural through engagement with cultural otherness and the attempt to interpret what has been experienced (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). While direct experiences such as study abroad undoubtedly present opportunities for intercultural engagement (Roberts, 2002), a wide body of research has noted that intercultural experience is increasingly mediated through digital tools, popular culture, and online interaction (Kramsch, 2011; O'Dowd & Dooly, 2020; Thorne, 2003). This means that even in seemingly culturally homogeneous environments, many individuals still have intercultural experiences in various forms.

Experience plays a significant role in intercultural learning, though much depends on how individuals engage with their experience (Alred et al., 2002; Vromans et al., 2023). If students are helped to externalize their experience to others effectively, this can create opportunities for identifying the structure of perceptions and reflecting on assumptions (McConachy, 2017). In this sense, students' experiences serve as a vital resource for teachers in delivering scaffolded instruction (Savić et al., 2022). This is particularly important for learners at school-age, as their interactions and encounters in everyday life are considered a crucial starting point for intercultural learning (Piipponen, 2023).

Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) have proposed that intercultural learning is facilitated by a continuous cycle of interpretation, comparison, and reflection on experiences of linguistic and cultural diversity. During this cycle, learners interpret and compare meanings in their experiences to create new meanings for themselves and cultural others. McConachy's (2017) notion of 'experience talk' highlights how the externalisation of intercultural experience within classroom interaction creates an affordance for interpreting experience in new ways and reflecting on underlying assumptions from different vantage-points. This work argues that transforming experience into learning requires scaffolding to support the cognitive and affective work necessary to make sense of what has been experienced, such as articulating details, taking up different perspectives, examining prior assumptions, reflecting on emotional responses, and becoming conscious of one's evaluations of others (see also Chen & McConachy, 2022).

Educators play a key role in helping students take a more distanced perspective on an intercultural experience. This idea can be traced back to Tripp's (1993) seminal work on critical incidents which emphasised that an incident is not necessarily 'critical' in itself. Rather, it becomes critical when individuals retrospectively interpret and assign significance to it. This idea was subsequently adopted and developed within research on intercultural learning (e.g., McAllister et al., 2006; McConachy, 2017). In the area of intercultural learning, the concept of critical incidents suggests that the same intercultural encounter may become a critical incident if students are guided to interpret its meaning and reflect on its value or remain merely a memory otherwise.

In fact, Dervin (2016) has argued that unless reflection is handled carefully, some activities focused on the experience of otherness may reproduce stereotypes and biased discourses rather than promote understanding. This phenomenon is particularly noticeable in intercultural communication over social

media. Due to the lack of face-to-face interaction, people tend to develop idealised or stereotypical perceptions of other cultures (Izmaylova, 2017). Films, the internet, and television can all serve as sources of stereotypical representations (Jackson, 2019). Vromans et al. (2023) point out that intercultural experiences can have both positive and negative effects. Consequently, experiences warrant attention because those that are not properly managed may lead to counterproductive educational outcomes.

These studies above show that intercultural learning does not occur automatically just because of intercultural experiences. The key lies in how individuals make sense of their experiences and how educators turn these experiences into opportunities for learning. However, as mentioned above, Type C international schools in China are influenced by market forces and neoliberal educational ideologies. Against this backdrop, this study examines the potential for intercultural learning based on reflection on experience within market-oriented Type C international schools in China.

To address this issue, the study is guided by three research questions (RQs):

- RQ1. What intercultural experiences do students in this setting have, and how do they interpret these experiences?
- RQ2. How are students' intercultural experiences taken up, ignored, or marginalised in classroom interactions?
- RQ3. Under neoliberalism, what priorities shape the pedagogical positioning of intercultural experiences?

Methodology

This study utilizes qualitative methodology to examine how schools address students' intercultural experiences in classroom practice, thereby gaining an understanding of how intercultural learning is implemented in such schools, and to provide practical implications for promoting intercultural learning in Type C international schools within a neoliberal context. This study employs classroom observation and individual semi-structured interviews with both students and the teacher to examine the kinds of intercultural experiences students have, how students interpret these experiences, and whether the class recognises and develops them through reflection. Whilst the study did not adopt an ethnographic approach, it drew selectively on fieldwork practices associated with ethnographic research to develop familiarity with participants' everyday lives within the school setting (Green & Bloome, 1997). For example, the researcher was present at the school five days a week throughout the six-month fieldwork period to become familiarised with the contexts of student life. Such prolonged engagement helps to enhance the contextual depth and credibility of the research data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This was considered important given that the study focuses on a single school.

As inspired by the concept of 'methodological coherence' advocated by Morse et al. (2002), the research design also emphasises consistency between the research objectives and the methodology. For example, because this study focuses on students' intercultural experiences, some of which may occur within the classroom, classroom observation was employed to observe and record these experiences as they unfolded, rather than relying solely on the teacher's and students' retrospective accounts. Also, because accounts of intercultural experiences may involve personal or potentially sensitive stories, individual semi-structured interviews were employed to provide a relatively private space to avoid the potential influence posed by the presence of peers and group norms, as mentioned by Sim & Waterfield (2019). The one-to-one format also allowed each student's account to remain central and enabled follow-up questions tailored to their particular experiences.

Research Setting

The study was conducted in a representative Type C international school in China. As mentioned above, as a rapidly growing and dominant type of international school in China (Poole, 2018; Wu & Koh, 2022), Type C schools are representative for studying the current state of international schools in China and the situation of international schools in non-Western regions. The school was chosen not only because of its adoption of an international curriculum, but also because of the intercultural potential embedded in the way it operates. The school organises intercultural activities such as multi-cultural festivals and employs teachers with overseas study or work experience. Moreover, the school incorporates institutional practices drawn from other cultural or educational systems, such as the use of detention as a disciplinary measure. These features reflect the school's commitment and potential for intercultural education.

This school's curriculum primarily consists of A-levels (UK) and the Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD) (Canada). Students take different lessons depending on their chosen pathway, and English is a compulsory subject for all students across both curricula. The English course is divided into English Foundation (A2), English Advanced (B1), and English Advanced (B2). The classroom observed for this study was the English Foundation class (A2). The researcher selected English classes because of both the intercultural potential of language education and the ways in which language learning is shaped by neoliberal priorities. The A2 class was selected instead of the B1 and B2 classes because, based on the researcher's initial observations of all three classes, only the A2 course included intercultural content, whilst the other two classes strictly followed the syllabus and focused on IELTS test-taking techniques.

To better contextualise the observed English class, the researcher reviewed the English Foundation Class course document. As summarised in Table 1, the document included sections on the course

Table 1 *Summary of Key Sections in the English Foundation Class Course Document*

Section	Content covered
Course description	Describes the course focus on improving students' listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, with attention to MFP: meaning, form, and pronunciation.
Course goals	Lists language-based, skills-based, and personal objectives, including vocabulary, grammar, communication, essay organisation, presentation skills, teamwork, confidence, and progression to B1 or B2 classes.
Teaching/Learning method	Describes the course as mainly lecture-based, with group exercises related to textbook content.
Required materials	Lists the main teaching materials, including <i>Cambridge English: For Real – Level 2</i> , related PPTs and supplementary resources.
Course grading	Explains the assessment structure, including daily tasks and performance, presentations, assignments, weekly quizzes, projects, the mid-term exam, and the final exam.
Course-specific support or supplementary instruction	Provides information about class participation requirements, preparation assignments, and how students can seek additional support from the teacher.
Course policies and information for students	Covers attendance, late work, missed exams, regrading, academic integrity, inclusivity, and student support resources.
Preliminary schedule of topics, readings, and assignments	Lists the planned topics, readings, assignments, and due dates for lessons across the semester.

Course Description

In the course, we focus on improving students language skill which includes listening, speaking, reading and writing. In addition, combine with teaching the language related tasks from MFP(meaning, form and pronunciation) aspects to further improve their ability to communicate in English.

This course is designed according to the sequence: reading-listening-speaking-writing, representing the differences between "language interpretation" and "language output". For example, students will do the reading or listening first then practice vocabulary and pronunciation, finish with freer practice of writing or speaking.

Figure 1 *Course Description Part in the Course Document*

description, course goals, teaching and learning methods, required materials, course grading, and course-specific support or supplementary instruction.

According to the '*Course Description*' (see Figure 1) section in the course documents (see Table 1), the class focused on improving students' English skills in reading, writing, listening, and speaking, as well as helping them organise ideas for essay writing. There was no explicit intercultural aim in the curriculum.

Research Participants

Basic demographic information for the student participants is presented in Table 2.

Table 2 *Participants' Demographic Information*

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Grade	Identity	Overseas experience
Lowe	16	Male	10	Student	No
Zara	15	Female	10	Student	No
Jimmy	16	Male	10	Student	No
Joel	16	Male	10	Student	Yes
Clara	15	Female	10	Student	Yes
Rainy	16	Male	10	Student	No
Logan	16	Male	10	Student	Yes
Sam	15	Male	10	Student	No
Annie	35	Female	/	Teacher	Yes

A total of eight students participated in this research, which reflected the school's small-class teaching model. The gender distribution in this class, with only two female students, was incidental. The students participating in this study are all native-born Chinese, aged 15 to 16. They are native Mandarin speakers, and English is their second language. Most of them had no long-term overseas living experience. Some students had never travelled abroad, meaning their intercultural experiences were largely 'second-hand', gained through media rather than face-to-face interactions.

Table 3 *Summary of Participants and Data Sources*

Data source	Participants	Frequency/Duration	Purpose
Classroom observations	English Foundation Class (8 students, aged 15-16)	One academic semester; Each observation lasted approximately 60 minutes. Initially every session, later 1-2 times per week.	To observe classroom discourse and identify intercultural moments in teaching and learning
Student interviews	8 students	4 rounds (each about 60 minutes)	To explore students' interpretations of classroom experiences and reflections on intercultural encounters
Teacher interviews	1 English teacher	2 rounds (each about 60 minutes)	To understand how the teacher interprets students' experiences and integrate them into classroom practice

Note. Table 3 summarises the key data sources and participants in this study, outlining the frequency, focus, and purpose of each data set.

Data Collection

As shown in Table 3, the data for this study were derived from classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. The two methods were chosen because classroom observations enabled the researcher to capture naturally occurring interactions and practices (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019), while interviews provided access to an understanding of others' lived experiences (Seidman, 2013). Students participated in four rounds of interviews conducted over one semester, and the teacher was interviewed twice.

Drawing on Dewey's (1938) seminal discussion of the relationship between experience and learning, Liddicoat and Scarino's (2013) emphasis on the processes of interpretation, comparison and reflection in intercultural learning, and McConachy's (2017) notion of 'experience talk', this study regards intercultural experiences as potential learning resources, whilst also recognising that experiences tend to require interpretation and reflection to translate into learning. Thus, student interviews focused primarily on how students reflected on and interpreted their own intercultural experiences, whether these experiences prompted reflection, and how they understood their own reactions in the classroom. The teacher interviews, meanwhile, focused primarily on how the teacher understood the educational significance of students' experiences, and how she responded to and addressed them in her classroom practice. The interview process was flexible to include follow-up questions to explore their perspectives and feelings in depth based on each student's individual experience.

Interviews with all the participants were conducted in Mandarin, which is the native language of the participants and the researcher. This enabled participants to express their experiences more fully. The interview data were first translated into English by the researcher, and selected extracts were reviewed by peer who is also a native Mandarin speaker to enhance translation accuracy and clarity.

Data Analysis

Data analysis employed thematic analysis as it is a highly flexible method that is not constrained by a predefined framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As this study was entirely data-driven and did not presuppose any potential findings, thematic analysis was particularly well-suited to achieving the study's aims. In the initial stages of the study, the researcher conducted open coding of the classroom and

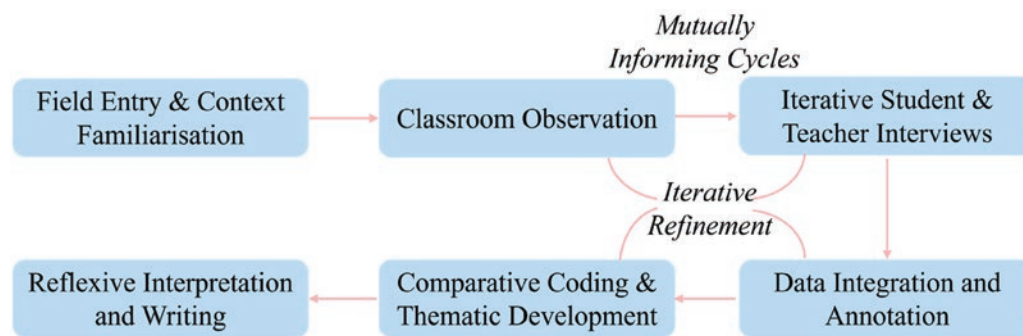


Figure 2 *Research Process and Analytical Flow*

Note. Figure 2 illustrates this study's process, which is dynamic and cyclical. The blocks present the stages from entry and contextual familiarisation to the reflective interpretation and writing. They are adjusted through feedback and interpretation. This can be demonstrated by the arrows and arcs in the figure.

interview materials by marking all the segments that were relevant to the student experience. These initial codes were then integrated and generalised to form themes that encapsulated the way experiences were presented. The analysis process was iterative between the transcribed text, classroom notes, and interview materials, with ongoing comparisons and adjustments. Simple conversational analysis transcription notations, such as timed pauses, were used in the transcription of this study in order to preserve details of the participants' tone. Figure 2 shows how data collection and analysis evolved through recursive cycles of observation, interviewing, comparison, and refinement.

Findings

Three main themes were identified in the analysis. First, the data showed that students had had intercultural experiences outside school but the potential of these experiences to contribute to intercultural learning was contingent rather than automatic. Second, the data showed that some experiences could lead to stereotypes or problematic understandings when they were not guided by the teacher. Third, students' experiences were often marginalised in the classroom, reflecting the ways in which neoliberal priorities shaped what was valued in classroom teaching.

The Contingent Potential of Out-of-School Experiences for Students' Intercultural Learning

This section shows that whilst some students use these experiences to reflect on cultural meanings, others' descriptions of their experiences tend to reproduce existing views and assumptions. The examples below illustrate these differences.

The textbook includes a unit that discusses tattoo and piercing culture. In the classroom, the teacher showed a video related to tattoos as a supplementary material. The researcher interviewed students about their opinions of the video and their feelings about tattoos. In the interview, participant Rainy associated tattoos with 'mental illness'. The interviewer then asked why he felt this way.

Extract 1. Rainy, Interview 3

Rainy: Stereotypes, I guess. I feel like most people with tattoos, not all of them, but a few, are good people. But it's really rare. Most of them are like street punks or troublemakers.

(Rainy, Interview 3)



Figure 3 *Reactions to Tattoos in Video Comment Sections (Original Language)*

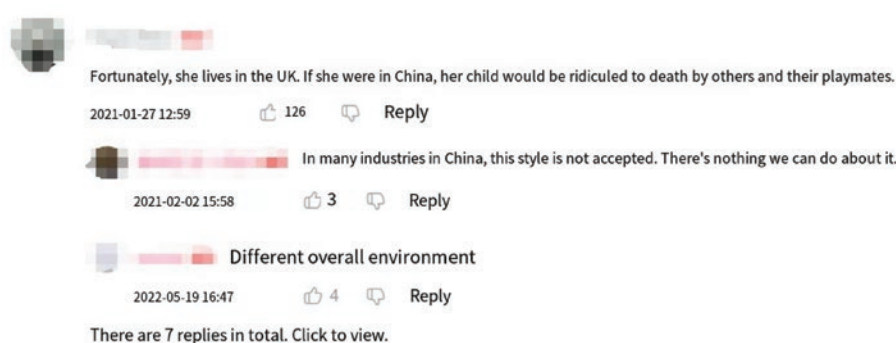


Figure 4 *Reactions to Tattoos in Video Comment Sections (English Translation)*

Rainy's response was rather negative. He associated tattoos with 'street punks or troublemakers'. His view was consistent with some of the comments that appeared under the video (see Figure 3 and Figure 4), which suggests that his understanding may have been shaped by wider social discourses about tattoos in China.

As the comment suggests, tattooed individuals are considered unacceptable in professional settings. Whilst it is difficult to verify whether the above statement represents institutional requirements, the large number of likes it received suggests public concern about the acceptance of tattoos in the workplace. It also suggests that the student's viewpoints may be in line with some of the 'mainstream' viewpoints.

Participant Joel, however, had a different viewpoint in the interview. After initially describing tattoos as 'cool', he further explained that the choice to get a tattoo could also be influenced by family background or personal beliefs.

Extract 2. Joel, Interview 3

Joel: It's cool, (1.5) it's, you know (7.0) possibly for beliefs, and not just superficial, maybe it's not for vanity, maybe it's for their beliefs, their family, and their... and then getting a tattoo.

(Joel, Interview 3)

This response was in contrast to the views of the other participants, which prompted the interviewer to invite Joel to elaborate further on his reasons for holding this view.

Extract 3. Joel, Interview 3

Joel: (Foreign athletes) They have insights into tattoos, and when they talk about the stories behind their tattoos, it deeply resonates with me.

(Joel, Interview 3)

Joel mentioned hearing the stories behind tattoos and noted that these narratives ‘really resonated with me’. Through listening to foreign athletes tell their tattoo stories, Joel began to understand tattoos in a different way from before. This indicates that he has engaged in reflection and shifted his perspective and can therefore be seen as a sign of intercultural learning. This highlighted the potential of personal experience in intercultural learning. Joel was prompted to give new meaning to tattoos by listening to the stories told by the cultural other. It shows that even within a largely monocultural environment, the student was able to engage with an authentic form of intercultural encounter through his lived experiences, and to reflect on it in a meaningful way.

However, the data suggest that the potential for intercultural learning is accompanied by the instability of experience. In some cases, experience may lead to reflection (see Extract 2 and 3), prompting individuals to reinterpret the meaning of cultural practices. However, such an outcome is not guaranteed. When the interviewer asked Rainy about his experiences, he described a situation that was to some extent similar to Joel’s experience. As a gaming enthusiast, Rainy had noticed professional players with tattoos. However, this did not give tattoos a different meaning for him.

Extract 4. Rainy, Interview 3

Rainy: For example, in gaming, because when I play, I see a few professional players, and they almost all have (tattoos).

Interviewer: Do you find it strange that they would get tattoos?

Rainy: Who knows? Maybe they just think it’s cool and looks good.

(Rainy, Interview 3)

Similar to Joel, Rainy had encountered tattooed people in his field of interest. But unlike Joel, he did not engage in perspective-taking. From the perspective of Liddicoat and Scarino’s intercultural learning processes (2013), Joel’s narrative reflects a process of moving from experience towards interpretation and reflection, while Rainy’s narrative tends to focus more on observation and personal evaluation. This indicates that relying solely on experience does not necessarily lead to reflection, thereby demonstrating the contingent potential of experience as a resource for intercultural learning. Experiences are sometimes explicitly educational, sometimes not. While some students will be reflective from hearing a moving story, others will simply experience a life event. In contrast, hearing another person’s story may be more likely to resonate than simply observing it. But the experiences students will encounter are unpredictable. What should be focused on is how these valuable raw materials for intercultural learning are taken up and transformed within the classroom. Regrettably, this experience was not brought into the classroom. After the class concluded, interviewees’ experiences still remained unanalysed and therefore unavailable for further learning.

This section has shown that, despite the perceived cultural homogeneity of Type C schools, students still possess valuable intercultural experiences. At the same time, transforming experience into learning is a contingent process. In the absence of school intervention, some students were able to transform their experiences into learning, whereas others merely encountered intercultural events without reflecting on them. In the following section, the data presented shows that some experiences can even become problematic for students’ intercultural learning.

Personal Experience as a Barrier to Intercultural Learning

In a relatively monocultural environment, students' understanding of cultural others is often mediated by exposure to representations of cultural otherness through online resources. Information available online is highly mixed in quality and intent. Students may at times treat certain online materials as reliable tools for understanding other cultures, reinforcing stereotypes, or generating biased interpretations.

In the following extract, Lowe reflects on his experience reading novels written by Chinese authors.

Extract 5. Lowe, Interview 3

Lowe: The web novels written by Chinese authors in China often perceive foreigners as (1.0) having a somewhat (0.5), well, rather one-dimensional portrayal, being (0.5) excessively self-centred and not considering the broader context. Such (1.5) traits, I feel, are quite prevalent in the current web novel genre.

[...]

Lowe: It's quite derogatory, but I feel like, since, I mean, they might be overly critical, but there should still be some truth to it, even if just a little.

(Lowe, Interview 3)

As Lowe describes, while reading Chinese web novels, he recognised that these texts 'might be overly critical', but he still found himself unconsciously influenced by these narratives. Such experience may become a barrier to intercultural learning when the meanings and assumptions embedded in these narratives are not critically examined. They portray cultural others as a flattened, homogeneous group and describe them in negative terms. Lowe's case reflects a broader issue in Type C schools, where schools are culturally homogeneous and social media is playing an ever-greater role in the contemporary society. The rise of social media over the past two decades has significantly reshaped global social networks (Zhou & Yin, 2025). Students may encounter cultural references online even without travelling abroad (see Extract 5). Since they rarely have the opportunity to establish a real relationship with the cultural other, they often rely on the information provided by digital media. Although research supports that intercultural experiences can be gained without travelling abroad or even face-to-face interaction (Ghantous & Belkhiria, 2023), when the students live in a culturally homogeneous environment, they appear to find it harder to discern information online. Despite the fact that these web novels themselves do not have any intercultural educational intent, students mistakenly use them as intercultural learning tools. Mediated experience has thus become an obstacle to their intercultural learning. This suggests they seem to require more pedagogical support than students at Type A and Type B international schools.

As Lowe had been talking about reading novels as a way to 'understand' foreigners, the interviewer then asked him whether he thought he knew foreign cultures well. Lowe expressed his feeling of limitations in the aspect of knowing culture others, attributing the perceived limitations to a lack of genuine intercultural exposure.

Extract 6. Lowe, Interview 4

Lowe: (About foreign culture) (3.0) I probably don't understand much. What I know is probably (1.0) just a drop in the bucket.

[...]

Lowe: Because all the information I've:::received has come from other people's mouths, from other people's experiences or stories.

(Lowe, interview 4)

Lowe appears to be aware of his limitations. He recognises that his understanding of ‘others’ is not authentic due to the nature of the information available to him, as he said ‘All the information I’ve:::received has come from other people’s mouths’. Lowe’s self-awareness may suggest a degree of critical thinking and reflexivity in relation to this experience. Although some mediated experiences can act as barriers to intercultural learning, Lowe’s critical thinking skills and reflective abilities suggest that he may have some potential for intercultural learning. Lowe’s narrative can be viewed as a form of emerging ‘experience talk,’ as he begins to reflect on the reasons behind his views of the culture of the Other. However, unlike the ‘experience talk’ discussed by McConachy (2017), Lowe’s reflection is not guided. Therefore, although he realises that his understanding is biased, he still accepts the puzzling and perplexing conclusion that ‘foreigners value their own affairs.’ Students do need opportunities for guided reflection on cultural differences. International schools are therefore well placed to address this gap. Had Lowe’s reflections been brought into classroom discussion, the class could have helped him recognise what kinds of materials are truly authentic and which are not. Yet, in this study, such experiences often remain unspoken, as the class offers little space for students’ lived experiences to be recognised and transformed into learning.

The next section turns to the role of the classroom by examining what experience becomes visible within classroom discourse, and how its position is simultaneously marginalised within pedagogical practice.

The Marginalisation of Experience in Classrooms and Institutional Frameworks

In contrast to the invisibility of student experiences, the teacher cultivated classroom atmosphere through spontaneous sharing of intercultural anecdotes. These experiences appear as entertaining vignettes. The following extract illustrates a typical example of this phenomenon.

During a lesson on ‘medical visits’, teacher Annie shared her personal experience of visiting a doctor in the United States. She told of an interesting episode in which her ear was blocked with cotton, but she was asked to come back the following week because she did not have an appointment, but after negotiation, she was counted as an emergency, and then a nurse cleaned her ear with a syringe.

Extract 7. Classroom observation

Annie: I said, ‘Sorry, I’ll be on a flight back to China in a week. I need to see a doctor now.’ She said, ‘Okay, I’ll consider this an emergency and see you now.’ Then she took a large syringe, filled it with water, and said, ‘Let’s try to FLOAT the cotton out of your ear.’

Students: (Laugh).

[...]

Annie: Then they gave me aspirin, and I flew back home with ringing in my ears the whole way. Half of my head was full of water, so now this side of my face is bigger than the other. I really think so.

Students: (Laugh).

(Classroom observation)

Annie’s humorous way of telling the story (‘This side of my face is bigger than the other’) made the students laugh, which enlivened the classroom atmosphere. At the same time, the story contained clear intercultural potential. For instance, her account of seeking emergency medical care abroad reflects differences between healthcare systems. For Chinese students, they may be more familiar with going directly to a hospital outpatient department, queuing, and seeing a doctor on the same day, sometimes even a specialist. In Annie’s experience, whether she could see a doctor immediately depends

on whether her condition was classified as an ‘emergency’; otherwise, she would have to wait for an appointment. This contrasts with the model Chinese students are more familiar with in terms of accessibility and organisation. This presents an excellent chance for students to compare their own healthcare experiences, thus developing their intercultural learning. Viewed through McConachy’s (2017) concept of ‘experience talk,’ narratives centred on intercultural experiences in the classroom enable learners to reflect on how they interpret certain experiences and on the cultural assumptions underlying those interpretations. In this case, Annie’s experience has the potential for intercultural learning in prompting students to reflect on the underlying assumptions and preconceptions behind the healthcare system with which they are familiar. However, this potential was absorbed into humorous storytelling in the classroom. Students tend to focus more on these unexpectedly amusing anecdotes. The potential for Annie’s personal experiences to serve as material for an ‘experience talk’ was not realised in the classroom.

To better illustrate student reactions, the following classroom extract highlights their focus points during the teacher’s account of this experience.

Extract 8. Classroom observation

Annie: This is exactly how you would ask about medical issues abroad. Therefore, I suggest that everyone try to memorise it. Even if you don’t know anything else, you should at least know how to describe your illness. This can be life-saving. If you go to a hospital and can’t say anything, then, (2.0) in the worst case scenario...

Clara: I’ll just say ‘help’.

Annie: Help, the problem is, when the doctor asks you where it hurts, you’ll just say: ‘Here, here’.

Clara: Using sign language!

Annie: No, you still need to describe it. For instance, if they ask you...

Logan: Nowadays, everyone has a phone, and there are professional medical apps.

Clara: Teacher, aren’t there Chinese doctors abroad?

(Classroom observation)

Annie’s emphasis on ‘this can be lifesaving’ shows that she personally recognises the value of these intercultural experiences. However, her understanding of this value leans more towards being practical and future-oriented, instead of viewing it as the immediate goal of the classroom. She believes that for students planning to study abroad in the future, these are practical skills. Educational value is not singular; it can encompass both the immediate significance of learning in the classroom and the significance of adapting to future life. But Annie clearly leans towards the latter, as she emphasises students’ future healthcare needs and uses the term ‘life-saving’ to describe their importance.

Annie’s emphasis on practicality also reflects the influence of neoliberalism on intercultural education. As Mitchell (2023) notes, neoliberalism has shaped how people view intercultural competence, which serves the purpose of global competitiveness. By emphasising practicality, the competitiveness primarily refers to future applications in practical scenarios. The teacher intended to show that learning these may potentially enhance their adaptability and mobility in the future. It reflects the underlying neoliberal assimilation of intercultural education.

The students’ immediate response was further de-academicised. They countered the teacher’s ‘can be life-saving’ with humour (‘I’ll just say help’ ‘use sign language’), using jokes to downplay the

task's seriousness. From the content of the students' discourse, they dismissed the teacher's view on the usefulness of the content. McConachy (2017) argues that how co-participants respond to the narrator greatly influences whether the experience can develop into intercultural reflection. However, in Annie's classroom, the co-participants' de-academicised responses failed to foster reflection. Consequently, although this experience was incorporated into the classroom, its potential as a resource for intercultural reflection was not fully realised. Moreover, the timing of students' choice of joking responses is also noteworthy. For the first half of the class, the students had been acting very attentively and had followed the teacher's instructions. However, exactly when the teacher started to talk about her personal intercultural experiences, the atmosphere of the class shifted to a relaxed tone, and the discussion was gradually de-academicised. This partly reflects that the students may not regard this part of the class as 'serious learning' or real learning. As a result, even when intercultural content is present in the classroom, it is still not recognised as a learning opportunity but is instead marginalised.

A further interview with the teacher provided additional evidence supporting this view. It revealed that the intercultural content was not a teaching objective, but something the teacher shared in an improvised way. In the interview, teacher Annie said:

Extract 9. Annie, Interview 1

Annie: We've talked about this before; it happens on a whim. It's not that when I prepare for a lesson, I deliberately plan to teach students about these things.

(Annie, interview 1)

Through interviews and conversations, it could be seen that the sharing of experiences was driven by the teacher's improvisation, which reflects how the teacher prioritised what was considered important in the classroom. Key teaching content should be explicitly mentioned in the syllabus, rather than appearing on a whim. This suggests that intercultural learning is treated as an 'add-on' in the class, serving as an extension or supplement for students only when time permits. It is even viewed as a tool for setting the mood. In the subsequent student interview data, it is found that students and the teacher are in perfect agreement regarding what was considered as important.

In the final interview, one of the questions asked was: 'What do you think was the most important content you learned this term?' The students' answers are shown in the table below:

Table 4 *Students' Perceptions of the Most Important Learning Content*

Participant	Answer	Reason
Clara	Grammar, vocabulary	These two are necessary for studying for the IELTS exam.
Sam	Vocabulary	Vocabulary learning was particularly memorable.
Jimmy	Grammar	It is practical and useful.
Joel	Speaking, tenses, vocabulary	Good speaking skills are necessary for going abroad.
Zara	Grammar, culture	Grammar helps achieve higher scores in exams, while learning about culture helps with studying abroad in the future.
Rainy	Vocabulary, culture	It is useful for future study and helps improve IELTS scores.
Lowe	Grammar	The teacher spent most of the class time teaching grammar.
Logan	Vocabulary	It is quite important for the IELTS exam.

The interview data in Table 4 reveal how students define what counts as ‘important’ learning, which to some extent reflects the position of intercultural content within the course. Most students consider grammar and vocabulary to be important. Furthermore, many students have expressed their concern regarding their English grades or standardised test results (Clara, Zara, Rainy, Logan). Although they have just enrolled at this school, students already harbour clear, pragmatic goals. By contrast, the importance of intercultural aspects in English lessons does not rank highly in students’ minds, which provides further corroboration of their humorous and de-academicised reactions to the teacher’s intercultural experiences, as observed in Extract 8. This demonstrates that intercultural experiences are marginalised in classroom teaching because they are not considered important.

Students’ perceptions of what is important also reflect the logic of neoliberalism. In students’ view, English education at international schools is primarily aimed at exams, studying abroad, university admissions, and practical language skills. This is also a response to the neoliberal framework within students’ perceptions. If this perspective is applied to the school context in the ‘Research Location’ section, it appears as a means for the school to position itself in the market. For example, through international curriculum pathways such as A-levels and the OSSD, the school ensures that students obtain the qualifications required for applying to overseas universities. The cultivation of English language proficiency, which enables students to meet the language requirements imposed on international applicants by overseas universities, can also be understood as part of this qualification process. At the same time, language ability is described in Bourdieu’s classic theorisation of language, symbolic power and capital as a form of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1991), and it also serves the development of global competitiveness (Lu & Dasli, 2026). Beyond qualifications and capital, the school also provides symbolic intercultural resources that respond to parents’ imaginings of ‘international education’. These include multicultural festivals, teachers with overseas experience, and ‘foreign’ educational practices such as detention, all of which help the school distinguish itself from other schools, like public schools, in terms of institutional identity. Qualification, capabilities, and resources collectively constitute this school’s strengths and have become one of the criteria students use to choose among the many international schools available. This is not necessarily a deliberate choice on the school’s part; it may simply be a characteristic the school has been driven to adopt within an invisible business environment. It is a characteristic that helps it integrate into the neoliberal environment.

As a whole, the findings reflect both the marginalisation of students’ intercultural experiences and the school’s neoliberal positioning. The following discussion will further explore the relationship between these two dimensions. It will focus on the institutional factors, examining how the school’s priorities shape the role of intercultural experience and the possibilities for deeper intercultural learning.

Discussion

This study found that even in seemingly homogeneous cultural environments, students still possess rich and diverse intercultural experiences. However, these experiences are not necessarily translated into learnable content in the classroom. Although some studies have highlighted the importance of reflecting on experiences (e.g., McConachy, 2017; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013), few studies have examined why, in specific school and classroom contexts, students’ intercultural experiences are not utilised in a way that promotes learning. The findings of this study offer a possible explanation for this issue. In this study, first, it is evident from the course documents that intercultural awareness was not explicitly included in the course goals (see Table 1). In actual teaching practice, that is, at the classroom level, the teacher primarily relied on improvisation when addressing intercultural issues (see Extract 9). This also explains why the teacher placed greater emphasis on the practical value or utility of her intercultural experiences when sharing them in class (see Extract 8). These findings suggest that intercultural learning is not a clearly defined classroom objective in this course. Thus, students’ intercultural experiences have not been further transformed into actual intercultural learning.

The findings also highlight the potential consequences of failing to address students' intercultural experiences, which not only represents a missed opportunity but also risks exposing students to the influence of mediated information. For example, in Extract 5, Lowe gradually develops certain biased interpretations upon reading the novel, and in Extract 6, he expresses a lack of confidence in his cultural knowledge. Even if students are aware that the sources of information may be biased, such information will still influence their understanding and judgement. For these students who are about to go abroad to study, this situation is clearly disadvantageous. However, having a critical awareness of the issue is not sufficient to bring about change. Several findings in the data suggest that both school and teacher have reached a subtle and consistent understanding regarding trade-offs: intercultural learning is somehow excluded from the classroom, and the class focuses on grammar and vocabulary. As shown in Table 4, most students view grammar, vocabulary, tenses, or speaking skills as the core of classroom learning, and the reasons they give mostly revolve around IELTS preparation, test scores, practicality, and future study abroad. To understand the reasons behind these trade-offs, it is necessary to examine the context in which schools operate. These external factors have shaped the decision-making logic of schools and international curriculum developers in their curriculum design and have driven them to make such choices.

As Hayden and Thompson (2013) pointed out, the operation of any international school is a combination of idealism and commercialism; this is particularly true of such emerging schools that must be self-financing. As for-profit organisations, these schools operate in a competitive market where they typically bear their own costs and profits. This mode of operation reflects a broader neoliberal logic in education, where privatisation, consumer choice and competition become central to how schools position themselves (Doherty, 2007; Woo, 2013). Thus, schools require strong university acceptance outcomes to support their enrolment and operations (Poole et al., 2022). Consequently, the conditions attached to these offers, such as achieving high A-level grades or desirable IELTS scores, become pressing priorities. Whilst intercultural learning is acknowledged as important, it lacks the same sense of urgency. During the interviews, many students expressed concerns about English language exams (see Table 4). One participant, Clara, once remarked, 'The IELTS is my ticket to the world' (Clara, interview 2). Consequently, both students and schools are compelled to focus on more practical educational objectives, such as achieving the required A-level grades or passing standardised language tests, to ensure students can gain admission to university.

The findings of this study may also be related to the nature of the courses observed, as there is a close link between English education and neoliberalism. In a neoliberal context, language proficiency is easily framed as a form of personal capital (Holborow, 2021) and understood as a tool for enhancing individual competitiveness (Lu & Dasli, 2026). In this study, students tended to associate English proficiency specifically with university-recognised language test scores, particularly IELTS scores (see Table 4). In their view, English is a valuable resource that can be converted into opportunities for higher education and a competitive advantage. At the same time, the English classroom itself inherently holds the potential for intercultural learning, which is why some students also mentioned the importance of intercultural learning (see Table 4). Consequently, this study reveals the contradictory position of the English classroom in intercultural education at international schools: on the one hand, it provides a potential space for intercultural experiences and reflection; on the other hand, it is strongly shaped by a results-oriented logic, making it difficult to fully translate this intercultural potential into formal learning content.

Implications

This study suggests that the implementation of intercultural learning in international schools depends on whether it is regarded as part of formal learning. Further, whether it can be understood as formal

learning is shaped by the neoliberal logic within which these schools operate. Consequently, the implications of this study primarily concern how to ensure that intercultural learning gains visibility and legitimacy within a neoliberal context. This will be considered from two perspectives below.

Implications for Schools in Promoting Intercultural Learning

As the classroom data showed, relying on teachers' improvised sharing is insufficient to ensure that intercultural learning is treated as formal learning, as it does not align with the priorities of neoliberal competition. Consequently, as well as positioning themselves as part of the neoliberal framework, schools should also actively seek to bring intercultural learning closer to neoliberal logic, so that it can yield practical benefits. One possible way to address this issue is to strengthen the connection between intercultural learning and the school's existing priorities, such as the university admission outcomes mentioned by Liu (2020). In university application processes that involve interviews, the ability to communicate effectively with interviewers from different cultural backgrounds is an important intercultural practice. Schools can emphasise this point to students when organising intercultural learning activities. In this way, intercultural learning could acquire greater priority and legitimacy within international schools, providing schools with the motivation to actively incorporate it into the formal teaching. However, it is important to emphasise that linking intercultural learning to practical considerations, such as university admission outcomes, does not imply that this study advocates for the complete instrumentalisation of intercultural learning. Existing research has already amply warned against how, within the discourses of neoliberalism and global educational governance, interculturalism and similar concepts are transformed into competencies that serve market competition and the production of human capital (Cobb & Couch, 2018; Mitchell, 2023; Simpson & Dervin, 2019). This proposal aims to strike a balance for intercultural learning within the contradictory context of neoliberal international schools, thereby increasing the likelihood that intercultural education can be implemented.

At the same time, in addition to the positive outcomes that intercultural learning can bring, another motivation closely tied to neoliberal logic may be risk mitigation. Considering the problematic perceptions arising from mediated experiences in this study, schools will have to recognise the risks inherent in ignoring students' existing intercultural experiences. Such experiences can be either liberating or threatening in nature (Alred, 2002), and non-face-to-face interactions may present potential problems (Izmaylova, 2017; Jackson, 2019). These risks could undermine the school's reputation and international positioning. Since international schools prioritise brand building and reputation (Bunnell, 2019), they should implement risk management strategies to address these potential threats to their image and identity.

Implications for the External Evaluation of Schools' Intercultural Learning

Beyond the initiative within the institution itself, it is also necessary to consider the broader environment in which the schools operate. As Hayden and Thompson (2013) emphasise, international schools operate at the intersection of educational idealism and commercial realities. Therefore, any attempt to strengthen intercultural learning must also take into account the market-oriented conditions under which these schools operate. Since the allocation of internal resources within schools may be influenced by these external recognition mechanisms, if accreditation and quality assurance bodies treat intercultural learning as a key component of institutional quality, schools will have an incentive to invest time and resources in it.

In addition to requiring schools to demonstrate the presence of intercultural activities, accreditation and external review processes should require more specific forms of evidence. In relation to the findings of this study, external review should examine whether schools provide the conditions for the formation

of ‘experience talk’ (McConachy, 2017). This may include whether students are given opportunities to bring their own intercultural experiences into the classroom and discuss them through classroom interaction. It should also include whether teachers employ appropriate pedagogical strategies to guide students in interpreting these experiences and engaging in meaning-making, rather than merely presenting intercultural experiences as personal stories. In course documentary review, accreditation processes could also examine whether intercultural reflection is explicitly included in course objectives.

For culturally homogeneous Type C schools, this also requires accreditation bodies to broaden their understanding of where intercultural learning can take place. Intercultural learning should not be assessed only through the visible presence of cultural diversity or multicultural activities. As this study has shown, students in culturally homogeneous environments may still encounter cultural difference through daily experiences. These experiences can become valuable resources for intercultural learning. A deeper shift lies in the ways in which intercultural learning is understood in different educational contexts. As Holliday (1999) argued, cultural diversity is not limited to national differences but also emerges from the ‘small cultures’ formed through everyday interaction. From this perspective, even seemingly homogeneous Type C school environments offer rich opportunities for intercultural learning. Thus, accreditation bodies ought to provide guidance tailored to the culturally homogeneous characteristics of these schools, enabling them to navigate their particular contexts effectively.

Part of the findings in this study may also be relevant to non-international schools, such as public schools, as they also have intercultural education goals (Cai & Yun, 2020). Although public schools do not rely entirely on student tuition for their operations, and their mode of operation may differ slightly from that of international schools operating under more directly market-driven conditions, however, given the similarly culturally homogeneous context, the influences of online intercultural experiences and the uncertainty of experiences may apply equally to public schools.

Conclusion

This study examined how intercultural learning opportunities emerge and are missed within a Type C international school in China. The findings of the study show that even within a largely culturally homogeneous Type C school, students had experiences with intercultural potential. However, whether this potential developed into intercultural learning was contingent rather than automatic. The data show that, without classroom intervention, some students reflected on their intercultural experiences, whereas others did not. Secondly, without the intervention of teachers and the classroom, some mediated experiences actually became barriers to intercultural learning. Although some students possessed the reflective and critical thinking skills required for intercultural learning, they were still unable to independently counteract the biased information found within intercultural experiences. Finally, students’ experiences are largely overlooked in the classroom, whilst the occasional mention of a teacher’s intercultural experiences serves merely to emphasise their practical utility. Overall, the study has shown that intercultural learning is largely marginalized in the classroom, which is a likely reflection of the neoliberal environment in which Type C international schools operate, where educational priorities are closely tied to market competitiveness and more visible, measurable outcomes. The study contributes to understanding of the gaps between educational discourses and the realities of classroom learning, particularly in relation to how students are afforded opportunities for intercultural learning in the classroom.

Declaration of Interest Statement

The author reports no competing interests to declare.

Data Availability Statement

Due to the sensitive nature of the data and the need to protect participant confidentiality, the data supporting this study are not publicly available.

Use of Generative AI Tools

Portions of this manuscript were assisted by ChatGPT (OpenAI GPT-5.6) for language polishing and clarity improvement. The tool was used to edit grammar, refine sentence structure, and ensure consistency of academic style. All ideas, interpretations, analyses, and arguments are the author's own.

References

- Alred, G. (2002). Becoming a “better stranger”: A therapeutic perspective on intercultural experience and/as education. In G. Alred, M. Byram, & M. Fleming (Eds.), *Intercultural experience and education* (pp. 13–30). Multilingual Matters.
- Alred, G., Byram, M., & Fleming, M. (Eds.). (2002). *Intercultural experience and education*. Multilingual Matters.
- Barrett, M. (2016). *Competences for democratic culture: Living together as equals in culturally diverse democratic societies*. Council of Europe Publishing.
- Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power*. Harvard University Press.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Bultseva, M. A., & Lebedeva, N. M. (2021). The role of intercultural competence, in the relationship between intercultural experiences and creativity among students. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 82, 256–264. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2021.04.010>
- Bunnell, T. (2019). The emerging issues of the “new era”. In T. Bunnell, *International schooling and education in the “new era”* (pp. 135–171). Emerald Publishing Limited. <https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-78769-541-220191006>
- Bunnell, T. (2022). The crypto-growth of “International Schooling”: Emergent issues and implications. *Educational Review*, 74(1), 39–56. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2021.1907316>
- Bunnell, T., Fertig, M., & James, C. (2016). What is international about international schools? An institutional legitimacy perspective. *Oxford Review of Education*, 42(4), 408–423. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2016.1195735>
- Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence*. Multilingual Matters.
- Cai, L., & Yun, H. (2020). The cultivation of intercultural communicative competence in senior high school English teaching: Based on China's Standards of English Ability. *Journal of Language Teaching & Research*, 11(4), 616–622. <https://doi.org/10.17507/jltr.1104.13>
- Chen, Y., & McConachy, T. (2022). Translating intercultural experiences into pedagogic insights: Shifts in language teachers' perceptions of English as a language for intercultural communication. *Language awareness*, 31(4), 431–449.
- Cobb, D. J., & Couch, D. (2018). Teacher education for an uncertain future: Implications of PISA's global competence. In D. Heck & A. Ambrosetti (Eds.), *Teacher education in and for uncertain times* (pp. 35–47). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-8648-9_3
- Dervin, F. (2016). *Interculturality in education: A theoretical and methodological toolbox*. Springer.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. Simon & Schuster.
- Doherty, R. A. (2007). Education, neoliberalism and the consumer citizen: After the golden age of egalitarian reform. *Critical Studies in Education*, 48(2), 269–288.

- Estaji, M., & Tabrizi, S. (2022). Teachers' perceptions and strategies in the development of intercultural communicative competence: The case of international school teachers in Iran. *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 17(3), 528-545.
- Ferguson, C. (2024). Interculturalism in student and teacher understandings of global citizenship education in three International Baccalaureate international schools. *Journal of Research in International Education*, 23(2), 152-171. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14752409241276293>
- Fertig, M. (2007). International school accreditation: Between a rock and a hard place? *Journal of Research in International Education*, 6(3), 333-348. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240907083199>
- Ghantous, N., & Belkhiria, E. (2023). The Intercultural Experience Project: A practical tool leveraging multiple intercultural experiences at home to foster student intercultural competence. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 61(6), 1227-1241. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2023.2254291>
- Hacking, E. B., Blackmore, C., Bullock, K., Bunnell, T., Donnelly, M., & Martin, S. (2017). *The international mindedness journey: School practices for developing and assessing international mindedness across the IB continuum*. International Baccalaureate Organisation.
- Hacking, E. B., Blackmore, C., Bullock, K., Bunnell, T., Donnelly, M., & Martin, S. (2018). International mindedness in practice: The evidence from International Baccalaureate schools. *Journal of Research in International Education*, 17(1), 3-16.
- Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (2019). *Ethnography: Principles in practice*. Routledge.
- Hayden, M. C., & Thompson, J. J. (2013). International schools: Antecedents, current issues and metaphors for the future. In R. Pearce (Ed.), *International education and schools: Moving beyond the first forty years* (pp. 3-23). Bloomsbury Academic.
- Heyward, M. (2002). From international to intercultural: Redefining the international school for a globalized world. *Journal of Research in International Education*, 1(1), 9-32.
- Holborow, M. (2021). Language skills as human capital? Challenging the neoliberal frame. In *Education and the discourse of global neoliberalism* (pp. 50-62). Routledge.
- Holliday, A. (1999). Small cultures. *Applied Linguistics*, 20(2), 237-264. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/20.2.237>
- Izmaylova, A. R. (2017). *Using social media to develop intercultural competence through telecollaboration* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Iowa).
- Jackson, J. (2019). *Introducing language and intercultural communication* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Kramsch, C. (2011). The symbolic dimensions of the intercultural. *Language Teaching*, 44(3), 354-367. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444810000431>
- Lai, C., Shum, M. S., & Zhang, B. (2014). International mindedness in an Asian context: The case of the International Baccalaureate in Hong Kong. *Educational Research*, 56(1), 77-96.
- Lee, M. (2024). Intercultural understanding: Implications for multicultural education. *Multicultural Education Review*, 16(2), 89-93. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2005615X.2024.2376305>
- Liddicoat, A. J., & Scarino, A. (2013). *Intercultural language teaching and learning*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. sage.
- Liu, S. (2020). *Neoliberalism, globalization, and "elite" education in China: Becoming international*. Routledge.
- Lu, H., & Dasli, M. (2026). The construction of neoliberal subjects through China's English language education policies. *Journal of Education Policy*, 1-26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2026.2640560>
- McAllister, L., Whiteford, G., Hill, B., Thomas, N., & Fitzgerald, M. (2006). Reflection in intercultural learning: Examining the international experience through a critical incident approach. *Reflective Practice*, 7(3), 367-381.
- McConachy, T. (2017). *Developing intercultural perspectives on language use: Exploring pragmatics and culture in foreign language learning*. Multilingual Matters.

- Mitchell, L. M. (2023). Intercultural competence: Higher education internationalisation at the cross-roads of neoliberal, cultural and religious social imaginaries. *Religions*, 14(6), 801.
- Morse, J. M., Barrett, M., Mayan, M., Olson, K., & Spiers, J. (2002). Verification strategies for establishing reliability and validity in qualitative research. *International journal of qualitative methods*, 1(2), 13–22.
- O'Dowd, R., & Dooly, M. (2020). Intercultural communicative competence development through tele-collaboration and virtual exchange. In J. Jackson & S. Neuliep (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Intercultural Communication* (pp. 361–375). Routledge.
- Piipponen, O. (2023). Students' perceptions of meaningful intercultural encounters and long-term learning from a school story exchange. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 119, 102169.
- Piipponen, O. (2025). Resisting neoliberal influences through a dynamic approach to intercultural education. In F. Dervin (Ed.), *The Routledge handbook of critical interculturality in communication and education* (pp. 97–112). Routledge.
- Poole, A. (2018). 'We are a Chinese school': Constructing school identity from the lived experiences of expatriate and Chinese teaching faculty in a Type C international school in Shanghai. *International Journal of Progressive Education*, 14(1), 105–121.
- Poole, A. (2019). Teacher (in)discretion in international schools. *On Education. Journal for research and debate*, 2(5). https://doi.org/10.17899/on_ed.2019.5.1
- Poole, A. (2020). Decoupling Chinese internationalised schools from normative constructions of the international school. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 50(3), 447–454.
- Poole, A., Liujinya, Y., & Yue, S. (2022). "We're away from everything": Understanding the struggles faced by internationalized schools in non-urban contexts in China. *SAGE Open*, 12(1), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440221081026>
- Poole, A., & Qin, Y. (2024). Nationalising the international in China: A phenomenological study on the purpose of international schooling in an era of regulation. *British Educational Research Journal*, 50(1), 367–384. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3932>
- Roberts, C. (2002). Ethnography and cultural practice: Ways of learning during residence abroad. In G. Alred, M. Byram, & M. Fleming (Eds.), *Intercultural experience and education* (pp. 114–130). Multilingual Matters.
- Roiha, A., & Sommier, M. (2021). Exploring teachers' perceptions and practices of intercultural education in an international school. *Intercultural Education*, 32(4), 446–463.
- Savić, M., Myrset, A., & Economidou-Kogetsidis, M. (2022). Lived experiences as a resource for scaffolding metapragmatic understandings with young language learners. *The Language Learning Journal*, 50(4), 475–490.
- Scott, A. (2023). Interpreting International Mindedness in Dutch State-funded International Schools: an educational leadership perspective. *Journal of Research in International Education*, 22(2), 121–135.
- Seidman, I. (2013). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences* (4th ed.). Teachers College Press.
- Silva-Enos, S., Howard, E. R., Whiting, E. F., & Feinauer, E. (2024). Tensions between equity and elitism for local scholarship students in an international school. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 22(4), 665–677.
- Sim, J., & Waterfield, J. (2019). Focus group methodology: some ethical challenges. *Quality & quantity*, 53(6), 3003–3022.
- Simpson, A., & Dervin, F. (2019). Global and intercultural competences for whom? By whom? For what purpose? An example from the Asia Society and the OECD. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 49(4), 672–677. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2019.1586194>

- Thorne, S. L. (2003). Artifacts and cultures-of-use in intercultural communication. *Language Learning & Technology*, 7(2), 38–67. <https://doi.org/10.64152/10125/25200>
- Tripp, D. (1993). *Critical incidents in teaching: Developing professional judgement* (Classic ed., 2011). Routledge.
- Vromans, P., Korzilius, H., Bücken, J., & De Jong, E. (2023). Intercultural learning in the classroom: Facilitators and challenges of the learning process. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 97, 101907.
- Woo, D. (2013). Neoliberalism in two Hong Kong school categories. *Current Issues in Comparative Education*, 16(1), 37–48. <https://doi.org/10.52214/cice.v16i1.11514>
- Wright, E., Ma, Y., & Auld, E. (2022). Experiments in being global: The cosmopolitan nationalism of international schooling in China. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 20(2), 236–249. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2021.1882293>
- Wu, W., & Koh, A. (2022). Being “international” differently: A comparative study of transnational approaches to international schooling in China. *Educational Review*, 74(1), 57–75. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2021.1887819>
- Zeng, S. A. (2024). Critical analysis of the International Baccalaureate Primary Years Programme curriculum development: mapping the journey of International Baccalaureate education. *Cogent Education*, 11(1), 2429363. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2024.2429363>
- Zeng, S. A. (2025). Intercultural understanding in practice: insights from International Baccalaureate Primary Years Programme teachers. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2025.2574977>
- Zhou, S., & Yin, J. (2025). International students’ social media use: An integrative review of research over a decade. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 29(1), 42–63.