‘Why Do We Think We Are Doing Everything Right [Just] Because We Do It’: What Transforms Chinese and Scottish Student-teachers’ Taken-for-granted Views in Study Abroad Experiences

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Abstract

This paper reports on how varied study abroad experiences transformed understanding of difference of student-teachers from two universities. Data were collected through a qualitative questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with 14 Chinese and Scottish student-teachers who presented what they had experienced and how they had made sense of difference. Drawing on transformative learning, this study reveals that opportunities to experience difference and resultant emotional struggles can develop student-teachers' emotional maturity and readiness for change. It also highlights that critical reflection on challenges in their preconceptions about the self and others is essential to transform their preconceived views and develop their openness to difference. To maximise the transformative potential of study abroad programmes, we argue that student-teachers must be provided with a discourse that disrupts their taken-for-granted views and learning opportunities that have a critical orientation.

Keywords: study abroad programmes; teacher education; transformative learning; emotional maturity; critical reflection

Introduction

Global interconnectedness and cultural diversity are changing the landscape of teacher education in the twenty-first century. Intensified social relations throughout the world have contributed to the complexity of social dynamics which is frequently represented in all aspects of human life such as economy, reforms, crises, migration, and education (Apple 2011). This raises an urgent need for globally competent teachers who are able to develop students' critical awareness of global issues and worldviews, and foster respect for difference and responsibility for a more peaceful, just and inclusive world (UNESCO 2015). The diversifying population in communities and classrooms has complicated the nature of teachers' work (Santoro 2017). Teachers are expected to be confident in teaching topics concerning cultural diversity and difference so that they can help students examine different perspectives, particularly those characterised by stereotypes, biases, marginalisation and exclusion (Longview Foundation 2008; UNESCO 2014). Yet, this is a complex goal to achieve and one that requires dedicated training and support (Walters, Garii, and Walters 2009).

In Western contexts, study abroad programmes are regarded as a unique way of fostering student-teachers' intercultural competence and preparing them for global and multicultural contexts (Addleman et al. 2014; Santoro and Major 2012). Study abroad programmes are also seen as opportunities for student-teachers to experience otherness and engage with difference (Dantas 2007; Dunn et al. 2014). The importance of study abroad programmes accrues due to teachers' inability to incorporate global perspectives into teaching (McGaha and Linder 2014) and/or unpreparedness for working with culturally

diverse students (Ferguson-Patrick, Macqueen, and Reynolds 2014; Santoro and Forghani-Arani, 2015).

Research has shown that these issues are common in Scotland (Hick et al. 2011; Santoro 2017) where the majority of school teachers are predominantly white Scottish (Scottish Government, 2014) and trained within the dominant culture. This has been acknowledged by the General Teaching Council for Scotland (2012) which expects teachers to be able to respect social and cultural diversity and educate all children for local and global citizenship. This expectation affects how teachers are trained, with study abroad programmes being a key strategy to develop globally competent teachers.

China too has developed an interest in study abroad programmes even though their approach differs from the Western one. It mainly focuses on internationalising student-teachers' educational experiences by exposing them to 'advanced' educational ideas and practices in the West (Li and Santoro forthcoming; Clarke et al. 2020). Such an approach falls short of fulfilling the goal of fostering education for cultural diversity and international understanding as expected in the Framework for Core Competences of Chinese Students (Core Competences Research Team 2016). This questions teachers' preparedness for working in a global and multicultural context. If the rationale for developing student-teachers' intercultural competence is a crucial component of today's teacher education in both Scotland and China, more research is needed to explore student-teachers' engagement with difference and its impact on their understanding of the self and others.

This paper aims to provide an in-depth understanding of the extent to which Chinese and Scottish student-teachers from two universities engage with difference while studying abroad in different countries or regions and how these experiences transform their understanding of difference. The comparative element of the study makes an important and original contribution to the field as it provides insights into how student-teachers develop

emotional maturity through experience with difference and how critical reflection differs from content and process reflection in facilitating transformative learning.

The following section presents a review of literature on engagement with difference through study abroad programmes.

Engaging with difference: challenges and benefits for student-teachers

Direct interaction with difference is a key value of study abroad programmes. Student-teachers' taken-for-granted views can be challenged when the most ordinary cultural aspects are made visible in their encounters with difference in new environments (Dantas 2007). Particularly, exposure to other cultures provides them with opportunities to 'enter into the spirit of other cultures, see the world the way they do and appreciate their strengths and limitations' (Parekh 2000, 227).

However, exposure to unfamiliar cultures in host countries can also move student-teachers out of their comfort zones and potentially lead to different levels of discomfort while hindering the transformative potential of study abroad programmes, especially when no appropriate support is in place to foster reflective and reflexive learning (Santoro 2014). Experiences of discomfort pose pedagogical challenges as they can exert ethical violence to student-teachers if they are forced to move towards directions of transforming themselves without support for critical engagement 'with troubled knowledges and discomforting emotions' (Zembylas 2015, 172). These experiences can further reproduce forms of privilege and power that student-teachers may embody as foreign travellers in host countries. These forms of privilege and power are seen in student-teachers' reinforced stereotypes or postcolonial racist attitudes towards different contexts and practices in host countries through the prism of 'exotic' or 'deficit' others (Santoro 2014, 436). In a similar vein, Major and Santoro (2016) assert that study abroad programmes that fail to guide student-teachers to

make sense of the critical incidents caused by difference are likely to reinforce their white privilege or Western hegemony. Such study abroad programmes can thus develop student-teachers' judgmental or Eurocentric assumptions (Addleman et al. 2014) rather than promoting respect for difference.

Differently, experience with difference is a crucial source for transformative learning in well-structured study abroad programmes. Timely debriefings and structured conversations led by tutors or cultural translators help transform student-teachers' ethnocentric views towards host countries and develop their respect and empathy for people of different cultures (Scoffham and Barnes 2009; Marx and Moss 2011). Direct interaction with difference and the experience of disorienting dilemmas, accompanied by guided reflection, are eye-opening and life-changing to student-teachers (Trilokekar and Kukar 2011). Although there is abundant research on student-teachers' general accounts of personal growth (Dunn et al. 2014; Addleman et al. 2014), there is far less research on student-teachers' perspectives of how they come to know and understand themselves and others from perspectives and experiences facilitated by study abroad programmes.

Despite the wealth of research in Western contexts in general, scant attention has been paid to Scottish student-teachers' study abroad experiences and their engagement with difference. This might be tied to its traditional values – initial teacher education in Scotland is mostly shaped by partnerships with local schools (Ellis 2017), with a low uptake of study abroad programmes by student-teachers (Santoro, Sosu, and Fassetta 2016).

In the Chinese context, research on Chinese student-teachers' learning through study abroad programmes is still scarce, but emerging studies reveal that experiencing different as well as 'advanced' education systems in Western countries is the main reason for sending student-teachers abroad (Clarke et al. 2020; Li and Santoro forthcoming). This means that the value of study abroad programmes is constrained to evaluating differences between home and

host countries' education systems and teaching methods (Wang, Clarke and Wei 2016). Such studies demonstrate a tendency to understand global education and relate teaching competence through a perspective of Western superiority, as Western education is deemed the model to follow. The reification of Western educational models inadvertently promotes a new form of colonialism (Crossley and Tikly 2004) rather than allowing for critical engagement with difference and transformation of taken-for-granted views.

In what follows, transformative learning is discussed as the theoretical framework before the study is introduced.

Transformative learning

Transformative learning has been comprehensively developed from Mezirow's (1978) initial work on adult learning through perspective transformation. According to him, transformative learning is a process of not only learning information and facts, but also changing the ways through which people view, feel about, understand, and act in the world (Mezirow 1991). More specifically, it is defined as 'learning that transforms problematic frames of reference – sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets) – to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective and emotionally able to change' (Mezirow 2003, 58).

A frame of reference functions as a mechanism that selectively shapes and demarcates cognition, expectations, perceptions and feelings, and keeps our sense of mental stability and coherence (Mezirow 2012). This means that if a frame of reference is called into question, one can lose the inner stability and experience a level of disorientation. A disorienting dilemma is the catalyst for change or the first stage of the process of transformative learning (Mezirow 1991). It moves learners to transitional points with the potential to lead to emotional intelligence (Goleman 1998) or emotional maturity (Mezirow 2012).

The transformation of individuals' frames of reference tends to happen when they become reflective of their taken-for-granted views. However, not all types of reflection play an equally significant role in transformative learning. Mezirow (1991) categorises reflection into three types: content, process and premise reflection. Content reflection refers to the process of individuals 'not attending to the grounds of justification for [their] beliefs', but just focusing on the content of a problem and 'simply using [their] beliefs to make an interpretation' (ibid, 107). Process reflection is defined as the way individuals react to, or deal with, problems or disorienting dilemmas, while premise reflection or critical reflection is understood as the highest level of learning, engaging individuals in questioning their own values and beliefs, and searching for more justified interpretations (Kitchenham 2008; Mezirow 2012). Integral to the transformation of perspectives and practices is a discourse that involves active dialogues (with the self or others) through which critical reflection is put into action (Taylor 2009).

The critique and transformation of one's long-held beliefs and values depend on the interaction between the inner self and external learning contexts. Study abroad programmes often place learners in unfamiliar environments, and enable them to come into contact with different cultures, people and practices, which can lead to disorienting dilemmas or cultural disequilibrium within the inner self (Parr and Chan 2015). Such experiences of crises can provoke reflection and transformation of perspectives (Laros 2017). However, Taylor (2007) points out that there is still a lack of clear discrimination between the three different categories of reflection, and their relationships with transformative learning. Hence, this paper draws on transformative learning to explore what particular elements of study abroad programmes contest and/or transform student-teachers long-held beliefs and values.

The study

This paper reports on part of the findings from a larger qualitative study which explored how teacher education is internationalised in China and Scotland and how internationalisation shapes Chinese and Scottish student-teachers' development as globally competent teachers. The study took place in China at Nanhai University in Shanghai and in Scotland at Southside University between January and December, 2016. The research sites were pseudonymised to protect participants from being identified. Both universities specialise in teacher education with study abroad programmes being a key aspect of the institutions' internationalisation agendas.

In the larger project, 67 student-teachers who had participated in different internationalisation approaches were identified for the questionnaire investigation. The questionnaire was used to collect participants' demographic information and gather their general views about learning experiences with international components and their willingness to participate in follow-up interviews. Based on the questionnaire responses, we found that 19 Chinese student-teachers and 10 Scottish undergraduate student-teachers had participated in study abroad programmes ranging from a week to a semester in varied destinations.

For the purpose of this paper, we drew on data collected through a qualitative questionnaire (to capture demographic data) and semi-structured interviews (to explore participants' experiences of studying abroad) with 14 student-teachers: eight from China and six from Scotland. Participants were purposively sampled according to the criteria that they were in their final year of the undergraduate course or studying a postgraduate course, and had participated in study abroad programmes. The selection of participants was linked to an expected degree of acquired maturity in relation to personal and professional learning as they were either approaching the end of their studies or had progressed to further study. According

to the nature of the study abroad programmes, participants were categorised into three groups (see Table 1).

The Chinese research participants saw themselves from the mainstream culture (i.e., the Han majority) of mainland China and most of them had never been outside mainland China prior to their study abroad experiences, while the Scottish participants were white Scottish and most of them had never been to countries outside Europe. For confidentiality purposes, all participants' names were replaced with pseudonyms which bear the traits of their nationalities. Further information is shown in Table 1.

Data were collected in the participants' native languages, and transcribed and translated by the first author who has a high level of linguistic and sociocultural competence in both Chinese and English. Thematic analysis was used to work with the data as it allows for close involvement with, and active interpretation of the multiple realities presented through rich descriptions and multiple perspectives (Guest, MacQueen and Namey 2011). The interview transcripts were read multiple times and each textual unit was coded when an idea arose. Codes were later collated according to recurring thematic patterns in table formats. This allowed for a refinement and identification of key themes and subthemes (Braun and Clarke 2013). From the analysis, two overarching themes emerged related to how student-teachers experienced and made sense of difference as presented and discussed in the sections below.

Experiencing difference: the ups and downs

Most of the research participants listed the contrastive images of home and host cultures, education and people, while demonstrating a big difference in the level of their engagement with difference in host countries as depicted below.

Studying abroad as a happy learner, foreigner or tourist

The eight Chinese participants from Nanhai University were in Group 1. They had mainly studied in the US, with only two having respectively studied in Taiwan and Thailand. When talking about their learning experiences abroad, most of the Chinese student-teachers showed their excitement for being exposed to interactive and student-centred classroom teaching in the US:

> [American] teachers talk less and promote communication, interaction and discussions among students. … These are different from the teacher dominating and spoon-fed teaching style in China. (Manlu)

> In the US, teachers tend to avoid using negative words in assessments. They would lead students by saying 'How about…' instead of 'Don't' or 'No' … [They would] establish a more relaxing classroom atmosphere than ours. (Siya)

These constant comparisons were in line with many of the Chinese student-teachers' expectations. As Meng affirmed:

> We have long heard about the more open, more advanced and more innovative education in the US.

With similar prior knowledge about American education, many of the Chinese student-teachers did not experience disruptions in their long-held beliefs. Instead, this led to their idealisation of the educational practices that they had learned and observed in the host country, and their slight dissatisfaction with Chinese educational practices. For example, they tended to absorb what they had learned:

> I will adopt this idea [giving more opportunities to children to do and try things] to teach my students. …I have brought back some good websites and tool kits from the US for my future classroom teaching and learning. (Yueqing)

> I will apply this [close and equal student-teacher relationship] … in my interaction with students. (Meng)

Many of the Chinese student-teachers seldom felt disoriented in the host country also because of their limited access to the local culture and people. Nanhai University often sent student-teachers abroad in large groups (between 12 and 30) which enabled them to stick together within their comfort zones:

> Our group [16 student-teachers] normally spoke Mandarin. … We had classes together. We didn't feel we were foreigners (Manlu).

This suggests that sending students abroad in large groups runs the risk of forming ‘self-contained island programmes’ (Ochoa 2010, 108) in the host country as students separate themselves from local people.

The limited interaction with difference in local communities may also explain why many Chinese participants perceived themselves as ‘happy foreigners’ in new environments:

> I felt very comfortable when they [Americans] smiled at me all the time, even though I may have language difficulties. (Yueqing)

> I was so glad … [Americans] were very kind to ask me if I needed any help. (Manyan)

The excitement of studying abroad as reported by the Chinese student-teachers can be said to resemble more experiences of tourism than transformative learning as made further evident in the following example:

> On Fridays, we went out for fun. We went to Universal Studio Hollywood, Santa Monica, Las Vegas, the Grand Canyon, and the Long Beach. The places we visited the most are the shops. (Manlu)

Sightseeing and shopping were reported as ‘happy memories’ of studying abroad by the Chinese student-teachers. These experiences, however, kept many of them within their

comfort zones when in host countries, because 'tourists can often be "sheltered" from the reality, and risk associated with being in a different culture' (Santoro, Sosu, and Fassetta 2016, 25). As such, these Chinese student-teachers could hardly experience a sense of otherness often emphasised as a unique benefit of study abroad programmes.

Experiencing 'out-of-place' as a cultural outsider

Different from the Chinese participants, the six Scottish participants from Southside University, as categorised in Groups 2 and 3, focused more on the cultural and affective aspects of their learning experiences abroad during the interviews. For example, feelings of surprise, anxiety, fear, frustration and awkwardness were prominent in their accounts. Language barriers were described by them as one of the greatest causes of discomfort and frustration, particularly when exposed to languages that were dramatically different from their own. Callie who studied in Malawi stated:

> That was frustrating for the first part. When we got to the marketplace, they were shouting and saying things to our driver. We were obviously a bit uncomfortable – we didn't know what they were saying, and what was happening. We just tried to stick together. … They were saying things in Chichewa we didn't understand.

Such discomfort also arose from interaction with local people in another English-speaking country. For example, Ada who took a placement in the US found herself:

> … a bit out of my place and a bit awkward, … because I mean, language is the biggest barrier. Even though we both speak English, a lot of people really struggle to understand what we say.

Encounters with different cultural norms placed many of the Scottish student-teachers outside their comfort zones as reflected in Gina's emotional struggles while studying in China:

> You struggle – I know a lot of times we would get maybe comments on how we dress – not negative comments, just like – ‘Oh, you are wearing that; oh, that’s interesting’.

However, the most noticeable difference in physical appearance seemed to trigger the highest level of emotional struggles such as confusion, anxiety and fear in Scottish student-teachers as exemplified in Callie’s experience in the marketplace in Malawi:

> You were wondering why people were looking at you. We all remember we went to the market one day and a baby looked at us and started to cry, because they had never seen white people before. We took this as – my goodness, the baby is crying. What have I done? We must be very upsetting to him. But it was because we were so different, especially in the markets in small villages. We felt more like outsiders, more like foreigners.

Having struggled with intense emotions, most of the Scottish student-teachers became more self-aware when communicating with people in host countries as well as immigrant children in Scotland. They realised that they should ‘slow down, as well as obviously pick up bits from different languages’ (Ada) and ‘really pronounce my words and make sure that I was … hopefully, giving a clearer understanding’ (Kala). Their experiences abroad also made them aware of other strategies that they could use to help children in their classrooms who might speak English as an additional language. Such a change is succinctly summarised in Callie’s statement:

> As you [the first author] said today, you can understand my accent, which clearly I’m changing to talk to you, [and] may be different from the way I … talk to my mum and my sister. I’m now aware of within how much you can alter your speech in the way you are acting around people, as well as you will do with children. I think, being a teacher, you can have lots of different personalities. You are able to, kind of, change your mindset. … I think [you should] just adapt, and try to find a way that works to communicate with everyone.

Some participants mentioned that they had become more empathetic towards culturally and

linguistically diverse others and able to link their disruptive experiences with their future interaction with immigrant children:

> I can imagine for a child coming into an environment that they don't know… So I think it gives you a wee bit of, kind of, empathy and understanding of how really overwhelming it can be. (Ada)

> This gives you more patience when you are dealing with children who maybe can't speak English. … For example, if children come from China to Scotland, they may not be able to learn right away, because they need to feel safe in the classroom and feel a part of the classroom. (Richard)

The above quotes revealed that Scottish student-teachers, especially those in Group 2, had experienced more emotional setbacks as cultural outsiders in host countries than the Chinese participants. According to transformative learning theory, such emotional setbacks enabled them to develop towards emotional maturity which progresses from awareness, to control and empathy (Mezirow 2012). This finding also suggests that discomforting situations are vital to the development of participants' maturity in that their sense of self and inner stability is disrupted, triggering in them a higher level of self-awareness and emotional readiness for change.

Making 'sense' of challenges in frames of reference

The study also revealed how student-teachers made sense of challenges in their existing frames of reference through different forms of reflection, which fundamentally influenced how they viewed difference, or understood themselves and others. The different forms of reflection and their impact on different participants' learning are presented below.

Reinforcing ethnocentric views through content reflection

Only a few of the Chinese student-teachers in Group 1 reported that their pre-assumptions

about themselves and others were occasionally challenged when engaging with difference during their experiences abroad. This mismatch between expectations and realities was evident in recognising their own culture as different from what they had thought before and developing pride in their own culture:

> We have developed more confidence in the splendid Chinese culture and characters, which we took for granted in our life … they [students in the American primary school where she was placed] thought I had magic powers when I was writing Chinese characters in a lesson. (Zhimin)

The above quote shows that it was easier for participants to learn about themselves and their own culture when they were immersed in a different culture. This is because 'culture hides much more than it reveals and, strangely enough, what it hides, it hides most effectively from its own participants' (Hall 2013, 171). However, a challenge in one's expectations can sometimes reinforce their ethnocentric views as shown in the following example:

> … living within our own social system is very safe … when I saw that there were a lot of homeless people in the street. It was a few blocks away from the city centre of Los Angeles, and there was an unpleasant smell. (Meng)

Although Meng's statement suggests that studying abroad could boost patriotism, she made an association between homeless people and social insecurity through her limited frame of reference. Additionally, this participant tended to generalise what she had seen in one part of the US as applicable to the entire country.

A mismatch between one's beliefs, cultural norms and social values and those held by people in the host countries could cause more unjustified interpretations among some Chinese student-teachers. Manlu reported that she felt sad and sorry for black people when she heard the origin of rap from a black lecturer who was taking a facilitative role for Chinese student-teachers in the study abroad programme in the US:

> The black lecturer told us a story about why the Black are good at rap. They didn't sing for fun, but they – they were captured and sold to the US as slaves. They were not allowed to write, so they orally recorded their history and tradition by this special way of talking and singing. … It sounded very bitter to me when I knew that it was not [originally] a form of entertainment.

The information included in the above extract was not necessarily correct, but the student-teacher was unable to critically engage with the topic from multiple perspectives. Similarly, Siya, who studied abroad in four different countries, appeared to judge others' norm of beauty as 'cruel':

> I was lucky to do voluntary teaching in a small Thai village which is famous as a long-neck tribe. It's traditional for women there to wear copper rings, … but I found it so cruel and inhumane that they did it just for making their necks look longer and more beautiful.

The above quotes identified that the Chinese student-teachers were unable to critically analyse the mismatch between expectations and realities, and between different cultural norms. Although there were tasks for them to complete, there were no elements of critique in their reflection on the mismatch as mirrored in the following accounts:

> Every Thursdays, each group had a written summary of what we had learned during the week and we shared it across groups by reading. (Manlu)

> A lecturer asked me to gather information and pictures from peers in the programme to make a brochure and a video. We used these reports to promote the learning opportunity to student-teachers in junior years. … It's a recollection of our happy memories. (Rui)

Such learning activities encouraged the Chinese student-teachers to reminisce about the happy moments they had had and kept their learning at the level of content reflection which failed to facilitate them to attend to contexts of difference. Reflection emphasised by these tasks is quite common in study abroad programmes in Western contexts and runs the risk of

student-teachers generating 'a superficial social reminiscing of the experience' (Buchanan et al. 2017, 180). This finding further indicates that merely interacting with a new culture and experiencing challenges in mind, without guided reflection, led the Chinese student-teachers to 'reinforce their own identities rather than risk self-transformation' (Wang 2005, 58). In a worse scenario, it could result in misunderstanding others and others' cultures.

Recognising incompleteness in the self through process reflection

The Scottish student-teachers in Group 3 also developed pride in their own culture and identity during their interactions with people and cultures of host countries. They noted that local people 'were always interested if you are from the UK … we are very proud of our national identity' (Ella), and 'appreciate Scottish culture more' (Ada).

However, these Scottish student-teachers became more aware of their own narrow mindsets, particularly when their expectations were challenged:

> We always felt very guilty when we were there, because we just hoped all the Swedish people would be able to speak English. (Ella)

> … when we would go into the – town [in the Netherlands], we realised that, how close-minded the British people are. … We're quite close-minded for the fact that when we go somewhere, we automatically assume someone's going to speak English and a lot of the time they do, but they don't always. … We shouldn't assume that. (Kala)

Participants' awareness of the incompleteness of the self, and the need to open oneself to the world, confirms that international learning experiences were educative to them (Romano 2007).

Apart from the discontent about their own pre-assumptions about people's ability to speak English in host countries, these Scottish student-teachers made some conscious efforts to cope with the problem by adapting their speech to the local people as mentioned earlier. These efforts suggest that these participants, on some occasions, were able to react to

challenges and capable of change, which was a practice of process reflection (Kitchenham 2008). The change made through process reflection by these student-teachers, however, was mostly found in their meaning schemes and behaviours rather than a profound change in their viewpoints or habits of mind. The lack of profound transformation is also reflected in their attitude towards the educational ideas and strategies of host countries. Similar to the Chinese student-teachers, these Scottish student-teachers expressed their eagerness to directly take some newly learned ways of teaching from host countries into their future classrooms without attending to specific learning contexts, as demonstrated by claims such as ‘the teacher really goes with children’s interests – what they want to know about. I’ll try to incorporate that as well’ (Ella), and ‘it’s [the strategy for approaching children’s behaviours] definitely something I will take forward’ (Ada).

Transforming taken-for-granted frames of reference through critical reflection

The Scottish student-teachers in Group 2 said that they had developed increased knowledge about education systems of host countries. Yet, they seemed to have experienced more challenges in their frames of reference and made more conscious efforts in making sense of them than participants in the other two groups. These challenges were caused by different cultural norms held by themselves and local people:

> Even like with me, me and a few of other girls that were on the trip, we love to tan. Not like in China, people held umbrellas up all the time [to protect themselves against the sun]. They probably feel, ‘Oh my goodness, this crazy girl, she wants to be darker. That’s not what we consider to be beautiful’. (Gina)

When faced with such different cultural norms, Gina expressed that she would initially feel ‘a bit taken aback’, and then she acknowledged that the group discussions led by the programme coordinators enabled her to re-examine herself by reflecting on ‘What will I expect? How will I cope when in that situation?’ Such effort also guided her to critically reflect on cultural

differences – 'If I was growing up over there surrounded by people of a similar nature, of course I would grow up with the same ideas and life style' and 'they are not necessarily negative, there are positive things [to learn] as well'. Meanwhile, she described her disruptive moments in China as 'a whirlwind of experiences' which 'always stick in my head as an important point of reflection' and enabled her and her peers to explore 'what [we] need to do to adapt to this'. These conscious efforts suggest that her learning was not only supported by content reflection (describing contrastive images), but also facilitated by process reflection (thinking about how to react to difference) and particularly critical reflection (questioning herself why difference exists and readjusting her attitude towards it).

Such conscious efforts also helped the other two Scottish student-teachers to negotiate meanings arising from difference and reconstruct their problematic frames of reference. Richard, who was the only male in this study and in the same programme as Gina, became ethically aware that China was different from a set of images or binaries such as good or bad in the preconceptions he and some of his fellow students had:

> I don't think there is much recognition for the Chinese. … I think some [Scottish] people perceive China as being bad in some of the customs and in cultures and people may shy away from going over China or maybe even studying in China, because they don't agree [with them]. But when you go over, it's completely different.

Richard's words reflect the ontological and epistemological mastery of the Oriental other (Chinese) by the dominant Western self (Scottish) (Said 1993), while the experience in China could trigger an ethical awareness – moving beyond dualistic conceptions about Chinese culture and people. This ethical awareness suggests that Richard's learning experience was transformative as it helped him deconstruct his preconceptions about China. The transformative nature of learning was further evidenced by his statement that – 'it's not right for me as a Scottish person to go over to China and say "that is not right", because that is

right for Chinese people'. Student-teachers' re-examination and critique of their long-held views are signs of Mezirow's (2012) mindful transformation which results in their reasoned and informed decision to act on a new insight.

A new insight could be moved forward to action particularly when student-teachers were guided to overcome informational and emotional constraints. This is exemplified in Callie and her Scottish colleague's attempt to teach Malawian teachers active learning:

> I think we – [colleague's name] and myself went and believed that we should be going to teach these Malawian teachers how to bring in active learning, how to give all the children a voice in the class [like] we would do in Scotland. But actually getting out there, we know that wouldn't be effective in certain cultures, especially in XXX Primary School that I was working in. (Callie)

The failure to incorporate active learning into a Malawian class made her feel 'a bit awkward' at times, but the dialogue with her colleague led her to acknowledge multiple models of teaching in different contexts:

> We came to the conclusion that some of teaching techniques we are using in Scotland wouldn't work in Malawi, wouldn't work in China, wouldn't work anywhere else; it just depends on the children, depends on the class. … Malawian teachers are really skilled, being able to teach 80 to 100 children, get them all to learn things, get them to pass exams, and make them want to go to school. [That's] something – that is really amazing.

This critical incident also stimulated critical reflection on the existence of her old premise:

> Why do we think we are doing everything right [just] because we do it? … Why do we think Scotland is superior, and should be teaching other countries how to teach children, when they are obviously successful in doing so? (Callie)

These questions helped Callie unlearn her privilege and stop thinking about the superiority of Scottish education. As she said, 'I think my preconception of Malawi or Malawian education [was] definitely turned on its head'. Additionally, she also started to notice that she was so

different from her peers in the eyes of the Malawians, and that it was such an 'interesting' opportunity to 'learn stuff about ourselves as well when we were out there'. It is clear that challenged views occasioned by critical reflection moved Callie 'into the uncomfortable space of "what we do not know we do not know"' and enabled her to 'see through others' eyes by transforming [her] own eyes and avoiding the tendency to want to turn the other into the self' (Andreotti 2010, 242).

The common feature of these Scottish student-teachers' international learning experiences was that they had been well supported by the learning sessions or tasks before, during and after their learning trips. Gina and Richard attributed their life-changing learning experiences in China to the guided discussions with the group members, tutors and Chinese buddies, and the briefings and debriefings set by the Scottish programme coordinator. In Callie's case, her ability to transform her problematic frame of reference was also facilitated by effective support from a teacher educator:

> … we were with xxx [a professor] in the Cultural Awareness module [before departure]. … I think – without the module in place, we could have just gone out and actually not thought about reflecting on it. So, we were constantly thinking about every experience, and how it changed our thinking, seeing ways that shaped us. That was quite influential. We also had a written assignment to do when we came back, which was on research questions.

These nuanced accounts made by participants in Group 2 suggest that profound transformation of their taken-for-granted views involved more critical reflection on and constant reconstructions of assumptions and expectations that shaped their identity, thoughts, feelings and actions. Particularly, learning support in well-structured study programmes can trigger the interplay between the readiness of inner perspectives and the external experiences.

Discussion and conclusion

This study identifies that study abroad programmes that provide student-teachers with opportunities to experience difference as cultural outsiders have a transformative potential. Such experiences can trigger strong emotions such as surprise, anxiety, fear, frustration and awkwardness and develop emotional maturity. These emotions are important for setting the stage for student-teachers' reflection and self-transformation, and thus serve as edge-emotions (Mälkki 2010). However, limited contact with local cultures can keep student-teachers within comfort zones as happy learners, foreigners, or tourists abroad as demonstrated in many of the Chinese student-teachers' cases, even though most of them participated in longer study abroad programmes when compared with the Scottish participants (see Table 1). This indicates that the transformative potential of study abroad programmes first relies on the experience of otherness and disorienting dilemmas that challenge student-teachers taken-for-granted views. To maximise the benefits of study abroad programmes, student-teachers should be provided with opportunities to step outside their comfort zones, 'enter into the spirit of other cultures' (Parekh 2000, 227) and thus challenge their taken-for-granted views. However, it might be unethical to move student-teachers too far away from their comfort zones if there is no appropriate learning support provided before, during, and after their study abroad experiences (Santoro and Major 2012). We find that appropriate learning support – such as preparatory modules, briefings related to cultural awareness before departure and active discussions during and after study abroad programmes – can better prepare student-teachers to imagine themselves in culturally different contexts.

Our findings also provide empirical explanations about the discrimination between the three forms of reflection related to transformative learning. Learning facilitated by predominant content reflection on the learning content and experiences without inquiring into the root causes of difference caused many Chinese student-teachers in Group 1 and Scottish

participants in Group 3 to uncritically assimilate educational ideas and practices from host countries, preventing them from arriving at transformative insights. This has been characterised as ‘an empty success’ describing student-teachers’ idealisation of educational ideas and practices of host countries and inability to effectively engage with difference (Wang, Clarke and Wei 2016).

Our findings further highlight that if student-teachers are not supported to make critical appraisals of the differences they encounter, such encounters can inadvertently reinforce ethnocentric or inappropriate views about themselves and others as shown in some Chinese student-teachers’ experiences, or at best trigger some level of process reflection – demonstrating an ability to make changes in their behaviours as shown in some Scottish student-teachers’ control of their speech in host countries. However, ‘change in behavioural repertoire’ through process reflection leaves student-teachers’ assumptions, particularly their challenged views, unquestioned, which cannot allow for ‘epistemological change’ (Taylor 2017, 20).

Critical reflection on difference moves student-teachers from a transitional stage characterised by challenges in frames of reference and discomforting emotions towards a transformative insight. The group critique or self-questioning facilitated by academic support was vital to encourage the Scottish student-teachers in Group 2 to (re-)examine their taken-for-granted views and formulate more justifiable, open and inclusive views about different cultures and practices. The process of self-critique ultimately stopped them from perceiving themselves as superior to others, though they were sent to less developed countries. The ‘potentially colonist nature’ of study abroad programmes (Parr 2012, 106) is a common feature in many previous studies exploring the experiences of Western student-teachers sent to developing countries (Buchanan et al. 2017; Santoro and Major 2012), but it was not present in the study abroad programmes promoted by Southside University in the current

study. This finding confirms the theoretical explanation made by Mezirow (2012, 86) that 'the most personally significant and emotionally exacting transformations' need to be facilitated by critical reflection on previously unexamined views about the self and others.

Despite the sample limitation in generalisation, our findings provide important pedagogical implications. To provide a discourse for disrupting student-teachers' frames of reference, the pedagogy of discomfort needs to be incorporated into study abroad programmes as well as teacher education curricula. As an educational approach, the pedagogy of discomfort is based on the principles that disorienting dilemmas are crucial to 'challenging dominant beliefs, social habits and normative practices' (Zembylas 2015, 163) and provoking self-examination of their emotions and ideological assumptions (Mills and Creedy 2019). This requires teacher educators to develop knowledge and skills to push student-teachers out of their comfort zones in a supportive way. Central to such an approach is the design of effective learning content and contexts that can problematise student-teachers' pre-assumptions and allow them to perceive 'otherness' via an informed and reflective approach.

Critical pedagogy is vital to fostering transformative learning in teacher education as it can encourage student-teachers to critically reflect on multiple perspectives or norms held by people of different cultures. This critical orientation can 'move student-teachers beyond acquisition of technical skills' to questioning and critiquing 'their beliefs and values, and what they "know", and assume to be "normal"' and to interrogating different socio-cultural discourses that influence their teaching practices (Santoro 2017, 70). This requires teacher educators to appreciate difference and be critically aware of their own frames of reference and how they influence their practices in teacher education.

Nonetheless, a successful incorporation of the pedagogy of discomfort and critical pedagogy depends on institutional support and professional training of teacher educators who

are the key actors in designing, writing up and implementing study abroad programmes (Morley et al. 2019). Meanwhile, conversations among all stakeholders, including student-teachers, teacher educators, researchers, institutional leaders and policymakers, are essential to ensure that the aims of study abroad programmes are effectively communicated and fully integrated in teacher education. For example, the major mission of the study abroad programmes promoted by Nanhai University was to develop student-teachers' global outlook and international understanding as well as their ability to innovate in classroom teaching and learning (see Table 1), but this goal could hardly be achieved without the experience of otherness and a critical orientation. This raises an urgent need for such an approach to be reconsidered so that the belief in 'advanced' educational ideas and practices in Western countries is interrogated and a new understanding of internationalisation is reconceptualised (Li and Santoro forthcoming). At the Scottish site, what student-teachers had learned through well-structured study abroad programmes closely aligned with what was promoted by Southside University (ibid), but the benefits of the experience of otherness and critical reflection should be extended to student-teachers who study abroad through other means and who are unable to study abroad.

This comparative study allows us to have a nuanced understanding of student-teachers' developmental process towards emotional maturity and transformation of taken-for-granted views. Future research would be useful to consider a wider diversity regarding student-teachers' cultural backgrounds and study abroad programme destinations, which might offer more valuable comparisons. It can also be worthwhile to further explore the relationship between student-teachers' learning experiences in study abroad programmes and teacher educators' understanding of and practices in internationalisation. This is another aspect that has been looked at in our larger project.

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Table 1. Participants and programme features