Chinese Preservice Teachers’ Perspectives of Mentoring Relationships in an International Learning Partnership

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Abstract
Mentoring is an essential fixture of teacher education. With growing opportunities for international learning exchanges, there is a need to better understand how cross-cultural mentoring can be characterized by reciprocal learning. This study investigated mentee perceptions of the mentoring relationship in an international, cross-cultural teacher education exchange. We conducted research among 19 Chinese preservice teachers who participated in an international teacher education exchange program, exploring their perspectives on the cross-cultural mentoring relationship and mutual learning. Our findings suggest that learning outcomes are improved in a mentoring relationship when there are strong relational ties, opportunities for reciprocal learning, and a greater awareness of cultural complexity. We contend that there is value in supporting the mentoring relationship directly, which has implications for both international exchanges and teacher education programs.

Keywords
mentoring, preservice teacher education, international teacher education, reciprocal learning

Introduction
This study of mentoring relationships was completed as one of a series of studies of the Teacher Education Reciprocal Learning Program (RLP), a longitudinal collaborative program of yearly preservice teacher exchanges between a Canadian university and Chinese university between 2010 and 2020 (Xu, 2019a, 2019b). Our study is focused on Chinese preservice teachers’ perspectives of the mentoring relationship in international cross-cultural contexts. We suggest that these insights could be useful for teacher education program development, international cross-cultural understandings, and global competences for teacher education.

With a vision of “reciprocal learning” between the West and East (Xu, 2011a), the RLP sought “to provide an exceptional experience with international engagement, to broaden teacher candidates’ horizons for a society of increasing diversity, and to foster international collaboration among faculty members who are interested in cross-cultural studies and multicultural education” (Xu, 2011b, para. 2). This program has become a foundational program for Xu and Connelly’s (2013-2020) large-scale international partnership supported by Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), involving educators in two universities and two school boards in Canada, and four universities and associated schools in China (Connelly & Xu, 2019; Xu, 2019a; Xu et al., et al., 2015). Each Fall, approximately 20 preservice teachers, with a guide professor from the Chinese University, audited Canadian preservice teacher education courses and had placements in local schools. In reciprocity, Canadian preservice teachers were recruited to participate in the RLP in the Fall. In the past dozen years, studies on the RLP have focused on preservice teachers’ cross-cultural learning; changes in teacher beliefs, pedagogies, and cross-cultural understanding; intercultural competences; and professional development. Before this study, we had not conducted any research on mentoring relations between the participants and their mentees.

Globalization has meant that teachers are increasingly immersed in diverse classrooms and must seek new pedagogical responses (Townsend & Bates, 2007). These international and intercultural contexts add complexity to preservice teacher education. International organizations such as The World Bank, OECD, UNESCO, UNICEF, and Education International have begun to play an influential role in teacher education and global education (Spring, 2015). For example, one of the UNESCO’s (2013) goals for global citizenship education is to empower learners to play an active role in resolving local and global issues, thus contributing to a more sustainable world. Many countries and regions, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and China, see

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a great number of students travel around the world to develop knowledge, skills, and attitudes to better meet the working needs in a globalized world. In Ontario, Canada, the province hosting the RLP exchange, the Ministry of Education (MOE) determines that teacher preparation programs are expected “to help teacher candidates develop new understandings of the subjects they teach as well as the understanding of how to assess 21st Century competences in these subjects” (Ontario Ministry of Education [OME], 2016, p. 42). Getting teacher candidates ready to thrive in such an interconnected world requires the cultivation of global competences in teacher preparation and development. We have seen that study abroad programs have been paid increasing attention by many countries to improve teacher quality and meet associated needs for multicultural education (Townsend & Bates, 2007) and global education (Deardorff, 2006; Okken et al., 2019; Spring, 2015). Much work has been done in enhancing preservice teachers’ and graduate students’ intellectual growth, personal development, and intercultural competence through study abroad programs (Craig et al., 2014; Shaftel et al., 2007). Also, study abroad programs can help preservice teachers to broaden pedagogical skills and adopt an intercultural perspective (Chinnappan et al., 2013; Cushman, 2007a; Gleeson & Tait, 2012). Although it is true that study abroad programs have demonstrated considerable positive impacts on preservice teacher education, mentoring, one of the key factors that contributes to the success of those study abroad programs, has not been paid sufficient attention. Our study wants to fill this gap by focusing on Chinese preservice teachers’ cross-cultural mentoring relationship with their Canadian mentors.

Preservice teacher education research is rich with mentoring literature, including studies of the mentor’s role (Desimone et al., 2014), the value of mentoring conceptualized as “growth-producing experiences” (Stanulis et al., 2019, p. 568), and the possibilities of the mentoring relationship to enhance professional practice (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). While this literature gestures to the overall trend of shifting away from traditional hierarchies and toward reciprocal relationships with opportunities for both mentors and mentees to learn, there has not been much literature of the role of mentoring in international exchanges for preservice teachers. An emerging body of research explores the intercultural and international axis of mentoring in teacher education (Czop Assaf et al., 2019; O’Sullivan & Niemczyk, 2015; Schulleri, 2020). We hope this study can generate more discussion of the role of intercultural mentoring among teacher education scholars and contribute to this growing field of scholarship. We hoped to gain insight into what can be done to facilitate reciprocal learning between visiting teacher candidates and their school mentors in international cross-cultural settings. Specifically, we asked the following research questions: What do these students’ narratives of their international internship tell us about themes of reciprocal learning and intercultural complexity in mentoring? How might their perspectives inform future mentoring programing in both local and international contexts?

**Literature Review**

This research is informed by Schwab’s commonplaces of inquiry framework, literature on mentoring as reciprocal learning, and a recognition of cultural complexity in mentoring, particularly across international contexts. It is also informed by the unique contexts for preservice teacher mentoring in Canada and China.

**Schwab’s Practical and the Commonplaces of Inquiry**

This study is contextualized in Xu and Connelly’s large-scale funded international partnership project, which is a practical inquiry that draws on Schwab’s *commonplaces* framework (Connelly & Xu, 2020). According to Connelly and Xu (2020):

Schwab’s “Practical” is not the decontextualized, atheoretical position often implied in cliches about “mere practice.” The Practical refers to the starting point for inquiry, the end-in-view for inquiry, and the language used to talk about educational practice and theory. Practice, and action, not theory and meaning (as defined by the reconceptualists) are the starting and end points of Practical inquiry. (Who is Schwab and What is the Practical section, para. 4)

The Practical as a starting point for inquiry emphasizes “narratives of inquiry” and “tentative formulations—not facts, but interpretations of facts” (Schwab, 1962, p. 24; italics in original). Building on Schwab’s work, Connelly and Clandinin (2005) developed a commonplaces of inquiring highlighting temporality, sociality, and place. As such, our starting point for this study is to recognize the personal practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988) of the Chinese participants’ lived experience of their cross-cultural reciprocal learning from China to Canada and back to China. This suggests that the participants’ interpretations of international experiences nest within the longer narrative of their educational and professional journeys, that these stories are inexorably shaped by culture and that the learning they represent have value for both the participant and the host mentor. Connelly and Xu (2020) elaborate how Schwab’s *commonplaces* frame the practical methodological and philosophical qualities of the West-East reciprocal learning international partnership project, as “each research team brings forward the research norms and theoretical frames appropriate to their particular field” (Connelly & Xu, 2020, Scientific knowledge, para. 4). There is no imposition of the “correct” values, practices or pedagogies in the pre-service teacher exchange program, one of the key components of the Canada-China reciprocal learning partnership in teacher education and school education (Xu &
Connelly, 2013–2020). Instead, this reading of inquiry reflects a focus on respecting reciprocity and on balanced, nonhierarchical power dynamics. Schwab’s approach has been employed to analyze relationships and relationality in teaching and teacher education, including in the work of Craig (2009), Kitchen (2020), and Sack (2008), and this paper continues this research trajectory.

**Considering Reciprocity and Cultural Complexity for Mentoring**

Mentoring is traditionally thought of as a dyadic partnership, with an expert modeling practice for a novice (Parker & Vetter, 2020). In this conventional relationship, a mentor is thought to have expertise, certainty, and repertoire of tools at the ready for their mentee. In education, this relationship has also, historically, replicated the power dynamic inherent to classrooms, with the mentor considered at a height or distance from their mentee. Emerging literature on mentoring, particularly mentoring in education, challenges these conventions. Cochran-Smith and Paris (1995) suggest that the mentor–mentee relationship ought not be hierarchical, but instead reciprocal. Lopez-Real and Kwan (2005) contend that a meaningful mentoring partnership offers both participants opportunities to reflect on their own instructional practice. In addition, research reveals that mentors, when given a forum to discuss their experiences, describe how the relationship brought them new learning that resulted in specific benefits to classroom practice (Molitor, 2014; Molitor et al., 2018; Parker & Vetter, 2020). Furthermore, Kochan (2013) introduces the concept of transformational mentoring that seeks to envision “what might be” rather than to focus on the mastery of “what is.” This becomes significant in maintaining the spirit of reciprocity. That is, one culture is not simply learning best practices from another, but rather the outcomes of the international partnership and mentoring lead to new possibilities for the future.

While the literature documents the changing perception of mentoring as well as the value of reciprocity, the reciprocal learning dynamic does not emerge by default. To construct a truly reciprocal relationship for learning, one must pay attention and respond with intention to power dynamics, the characteristics of listening, and the variables of cultural complexity. The power dynamic is a particularly stubborn issue, given the historical construct of the mentor as someone who holds knowledge and the mentee as someone who, using the analogy of the empty vessel, is to be the recipient of said knowledge (Kochan, 2013). In *Mentoring Each Other*, Parker and Vetter (2020) determine that a power imbalance not only lessens the likelihood that the mentor will be in a learning stance, but also that the mentor will experience higher amounts of pressure to be uniquely responsible for perfect practice. The mentee, on the contrary, is more likely to feel silenced and disconnected from the process, resulting in less meaningful and long-lasting learning.

In this way, the imbalance is detrimental to overall learning, the dynamics of relationship-building, and the effect on long-term practice.

A second and related aspect of reciprocity is how the mentoring partnership cultivates listening. Is the relationship a top-down and one-directional effort or reciprocal learning? In a traditional model, the mentor is not required to listen responsively to the mentee; instead, it is presumed that the mentee is listening somewhat unquestioningly and uncritically. In a reciprocal partnership that values “teacher knowledge” rather than simply focusing on “knowledge for teachers” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; Xu & Connelly, 2009), the mentor and mentee are counseled that both members of the relationship have knowledge and experiences of value. According to Xu and Connelly (2009), knowledge-for-teachers refers to “teaching teachers the knowledge and skills needed for certification or to implement particular curriculum programmes,” whereas teacher knowledge refers to “a narrative construct which references the totality of a person’s personal practical knowledge gained from formal and informal educational experience” (p. 221). It is, therefore, of use to learn to listen to one another in a dialogic fashion, asking questions, sharing resources, telling stories, and exploring concerns jointly.

A third facet of reciprocity is developing respect for one another’s cultural contexts. Cultural complexity is not unique to international partnerships in education; the issues inherent to culture present across mentoring relationships (Kent et al., 2013; Kochan, 2013; Kochan & Pascarelli, 2012), which includes student practicum and teacher induction. Kochan (2013) describes culture as having both external and internal elements. Notably, the hidden elements comprise beliefs and assumptions “understood by those within the culture, but often unnoticed or misunderstood by those outside of it . . . [which] can cause difficulties in mentoring situations and contexts” (p. 413). In local contexts, such as student practicum and induction mentoring, this cultural dissonance may exist when mentees join a school community with a different racial, socioeconomic, religious, or geographic context than what they are used to. It may also occur when the organizational values are substantially different from the mentees’ personal values. In international partnerships, while these complexities are amplified, there is also rich opportunity for transformational understanding when the cultural differences are seen as opportunities for learning, rather than obstacles to understanding.

**Mentoring Contexts in Canada and China**

In Ontario education, mentoring is built into the system at two levels: first, within teacher education programs through school practicum; second, through the New Teacher Induction Program (NTIP). The latter is independently funded by the Ontario Ministry of Education (OME) across all school boards (OME, 2021) and aims to improve new
teachers’ confidence, efficacy, instructional practice, and commitment to continuous learning within their first 2 years. Universities that offer teacher education programs design their practicum placements independently; nonetheless, these programs share common traits. First, the mentors volunteer at the school level. As such, the universities might offer guidelines for mentor selection, but are realistically operating by relying on the goodwill of local school board partnerships. A second common characteristic is that the teacher candidates and mentor teachers often forge their relationships independently and on the ground in classroom contexts. That is, most universities do not have the means to bring mentor teachers together, out of the classroom, for relationship-building.

Mentoring relationships among teachers in China, which have traditionally held to strict hierarchies, have seen significant changes. In 1994, the Ministry of Education (MOE) of the People’s Republic of China compared the relationship between novice and experienced teachers to an apprenticeship (MOE, 1994). In 2001, the State Council of the People’s Republic of China introduced the concept of teacher education to China. This was followed by another policy document in 2002, where the MOE (2002) in China highlighted Teacher Education in Chinese contexts, stating that teacher education includes preservice training, teacher induction, and in-service training with the guidance of the concept of lifelong learning. In 2011, the MOE made further reforms, stating that universities and primary and secondary schools China should select and assign teachers with strong sense of responsibility and rich experience to serve as mentors for teacher trainees (MOE, 2011). While mentoring has always been an essential part of Chinese teacher education programs, the relationship is still hierarchical, adopting an apprenticeship model in which mentees receive knowledge and skills from mentors (Wang & Paine, 2001) in concurrence with the “knowledge-for-teacher” paradigm.

**Methodology**

In this study, we have adopted narrative inquiry using qualitative methods such as participant observation, focus group interviews, and follow-up questions by email. Connelly and Clandinin (2005) point out that narrative inquiry is a way of thinking narratively of one’s lived experience in a three-dimensional (3D) life space, defined by a temporal dimension (past-present-future), a personal-social dimension, and place. As such, we study the mentoring relationships by making sense of the cross-cultural experience lived by the Chinese teacher candidates in Canada according to the 3D narrative inquiry framework. We have construed our narrative inquiry as “a relational inquiry” based on Schwab’s Practical. The data collection phases underscore personal relationships and trust-building (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) that were developed through the Teacher Education Reciprocal Learning Program (RLP) (Xu & Connelly, 2009), while the data analysis allowed us to interpret the participants’ perspectives across the 3D narrative inquiry life space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Xu & Connelly, 2009). Xu and Connelly (2009) write about how to apply narrative inquiry to teacher development by “thinking narratively” to “imagine a topic or phenomenon as an ongoing three-dimensional life space” (p. 223). Understanding Chinese participants’ lived experience in such a 3D life space helps us interpret and understand their perspectives in context of their life experience and to perceive different cultural narratives in cross-cultural interaction and communication as a natural feature of their narratives. With this conceptual framework, we, as collaborative researchers, also hoped to engage ourselves in a process of reciprocal learning among three of us by working collaboratively in conducting the research and writing up the study. In addition, as each of the three researchers involved in this study approach the project with different areas of expertise, the narrative analysis is triangulated by three separate perspectives: two researchers with insider knowledge of the program (Shijing Xu & Chenkai Chi) and one with a new point of view, informed by work on mentoring relationships in Canadian schools (Lana Parker).

**Data Collection and Analysis**

The participants, aged 19 to 21, were second- or third-year students in the 4-year Concurrent Teacher Education Program at the Chinese university (Table 1). Prior to their Canadian internship, Shijing met with and prepared the Chinese teacher candidates for their time in Canada when she brought the

| Participant Number | Pseudonym | Sex | Specialized area               |
|--------------------|-----------|-----|--------------------------------|
| 1                  | Cai       | M   | Physical education             |
| 2                  | Chen      | M   | Political science              |
| 3                  | Han       | F   | English                        |
| 4                  | Hao       | F   | Pedagogy                       |
| 5                  | Hong      | F   | Curriculum and teaching methodology |
| 6                  | Peng      | M   | Mathematics                    |
| 7                  | Qi        | F   | Physical education             |
| 8                  | Qiu       | F   | Chemistry                      |
| 9                  | Su        | F   | Art                            |
| 10                 | Tian      | F   | Chinese literature             |
| 11                 | Wan       | F   | Political science              |
| 12                 | Xiao      | F   | Physical education             |
| 13                 | Xu        | F   | Preschool                      |
| 14                 | Xue       | F   | English                        |
| 15                 | Yan       | F   | Biology                        |
| 16                 | Ye        | F   | English                        |
| 17                 | Yi        | F   | Political science              |
| 18                 | Yu        | F   | Geographical science           |
| 19                 | Zhu       | F   | Mathematics                    |
Canadian cohort to the Chinese university for their international internship in China in the Spring semester. Shijing and Chenkai, and the RLP working team in the Canadian university provided daily support to the Chinese cohort upon their arrival in Canada in the following Fall semester. Shijing and Chenkai coordinated and organized weekly debriefings with the Chinese cohort, and kept in close contact with participants upon their return to China. In this way, across the time before, during and after the exchange, and in both countries, the narrative inquiry was made in a 3D life space shared by the participants and the researchers. As a first step, working within the larger SSHRC Partnership Grant project and benefiting from the trusting relationship developed over time, we formulated a set of questions about mentoring and invited Chinese participants to share their experiences of mentoring relationships in an extended weekly group debriefing session. For example, we asked questions about the relational aspect of their mentoring experience, including “What are the most helpful and challenging aspects of mentoring relationship?” We then invited all participants to submit a more detailed response voluntarily after the group discussion. Based on a preliminary analysis of the data, we sent follow-up questions after the participants’ return to China. We asked more focused questions, including: “Did you have the opportunity to participate in teaching activities at Canadian placements?”; and “Did you talk to your mentor about teaching in China?” As Shijing and Chenkai are bilingual in Chinese and English, we encouraged the participants to make their responses in Chinese during the group discussion and in their written notes so that each participant was able to elaborate as much as they felt comfortable. The follow-up questions about mentoring relationships were asked in English, but we added the Chinese translation to solicit more detailed and elaborate responses from our participants. When we received the responses in Chinese, Chenkai translated them into English.

The first round of questions was broad, casting a wide a net on the participants’ experiences. However, these questions were not presented to the participants as isolated research questions; instead, they were embedded in the weekly school practicum debriefing meetings during their Canadian internship. When members of each practicum group reported their classroom observations and learning of the week, the questions were asked in related contexts and situations to engage every student in reflecting on and discussing their school practicum for an enhanced learning and professional development experience. At that point, they had not yet had sufficient time to deeply reflect on their cross-cultural experiences in the midst of their Canadian internship. During this first round, the preservice teachers told stories in two distinct, yet connected aspects of their experiences: in-class learning about Canadian pedagogy and commentary about the relationship they shared with their mentors. The follow-up questions, asked 4 months after the participants had returned to China, had a more precise focus on the mentoring relationship and on underdeveloped themes. At that time, the participants had gone through different temporal, social, and spatial dimensions of their cross-cultural experiences. They shared more insights on the complexity and promise of the mentoring relationships, discussing aspects of cultural difference and reciprocal learning when situated in different temporal and social dimensions and places during the follow-up study.

During the data analysis, we attempted to understand the Chinese visiting students’ mentoring relationships with their mentors in Canadian schools by making meaning of their narratives at different times and different places of their cross-cultural lived experiences from China to Canada and back to China in the 3D narrative inquiry framework. We sought to foreground the voices of students and the stories they were sharing. Our data analysis was conducted in two phases. After the first round of data collected from the weekly debriefing and follow-up written responses from 19 participants, we identified shared themes under the categories of reciprocity in mentoring and cultural complexity in mentoring: (1) experiences of reciprocal learning leading to shifting pedagogy, including comments on curriculum content and teacher/student attitudes; (2) opportunities for reciprocity students experienced through their mentoring relationships; and (3) challenges to reciprocity experienced through their mentoring relationships. As noted above, based on these themes, we followed up with a second round of questioning. The second round of responses were also analyzed with the same themes, but with a more granular focus on: (1) implications of cultural complexity on the mentoring relationship and (2) considerations for reciprocity in the intercultural mentoring relationship.

Findings

The findings are presented in shared narrative themes identified from the participants’ responses, fieldwork notes, and emerging stories. In a similar vein to Murray Orr’s (2005) and Pushor’s (2001) research using narrative inquiry, we draw on participant experience and researcher perspective to articulate themes and stories. We outline the findings in two phases. The first is based on narratives from the first round of data, written verbatim in English by the participants after the group debriefing during their visit in Canada. These are grouped across two major themes: reciprocal learning and shifting pedagogical perspectives, and how reciprocal learning was either supported or challenged in the mentoring relationship. The second phase, analyzing responses once the students had returned to China, further elaborates the themes of cultural complexity and mentoring as reciprocal learning.

Narratives From the First Round of Questioning

Reciprocal learning and shifting pedagogy. The Chinese preservice teachers’ stories of novel and interesting teaching practices illustrate that the RLP provided an opportunity to
observe pedagogical differences without pathologizing these practices as better or worse. Some of the participants noted that the most helpful aspect of the mentoring relationship was having an opportunity to learn broadly about Canadian teaching practices. For example, Hong found it useful that there was an opportunity for authentic learning about the Canadian context:

All [of the Canadian mentor teachers] are frontline teachers, they often share their personal experience with us, rather than a theorist. Also, my mentor teacher usually tells us their curriculum design and ideas in order to help me understand.

Qi noted that the mentors were often able to contextualize what the students were seeing by providing background:

They told us about how they organize the class and their aim to have some educational activities. So, we can not only see the real classes but also know the educational principles in Canada.

Other participants commented on specific types of pedagogical choices they witnessed during their in-class placements. For example, Chen, who specialized in History, shared what impressed him most in a Canadian history class:

In a history class, the teacher asked the student to write a family letter as a soldier in a war. The letter should include politics, history, geography and all possible information to restore the real scenario as much as possible. . . A history assignment can contain such a wealth of knowledge and emotional content, which impressed me deeply; it embodies the teaching philosophy of history education focusing on students’ sense of historical experience and embodies the idea of interdisciplinary teaching.

Su noted the distinct approaches to teaching Art in the Canadian school:

In an art class in the high school where I worked as an intern, students chose their own drawing methods according to their own drawing directions and hobbies, and their teachers could give special guidance according to their drawing methods. And that really surprised me, and I think it’s really tailored to the individual.

Yu appreciated how the Canadian mentor teacher connected a geography class to the students’ living environment:

In my geography class, the teacher took the students out to visit the surrounding environment, which impressed me a lot. It is very important to understand the surrounding environment for students who learn geography.

Hong was most impressed by the difference she perceived between a Canadian teacher and a Chinese teacher in time management:

The most memorable moment was physical exercise in Mrs. T’s class. . . She told me “Do exercise is better to increase students’ attention and keep fit, strengthen their awareness of exercise.” It’s really amazing. In China, all of our teachers try to take advantage of time to teach more knowledge or do more exercises. They never use the time to do [something] unrelated to study, even our students don’t have PE class in high schools.

Sometimes, the participants’ witness of various pedagogical practices also had an effect on their teaching beliefs:

I learned that if you treat students with sincerity and enthusiasm, all the students will love you from their heart (Xiao).

The teacher let the students show their mistakes, while the students enjoyed doing so. Because they knew they would learn a lot by putting their solution on the board (Zhu).

Tian liked the approach taken by her mentor teacher in helping his students with the awareness and understanding of the LGBTQ groups:

A teacher came to our class to share the topic of homosexuality, as well as a short story between him and his partner. I think it’s good for them to start popularizing it early. We don’t have this kind of course when we go to college, so it’s kind of cultivating students for this group of people.

Yan learned from her Canadian teachers how to treat every student equally and warmly, including those with physical and mental disabilities. Here is a verbatim quote from her reflective note written in English:

There is a student who is physically and mentally disabled, but every teacher offer them much more love, they help him dress, take him to the classroom and always call him honey. I am so touching about his confident smile and excellent learning attitude. Every student need to be treated equally and has their own strength, that what I learned from teachers here.

Cai said he would never forget the one-on-one approach his mentor teacher took in a P.E. class. The teacher used hand gestures to enable a physically disabled student to participate in the P.E. class like everyone else in the class. Cai believed that the teacher’s respect would help the student participate in his life in the society later. Ye appreciated the attitude and approach her mentor teacher took in conflict resolution when working with students of behavior issues.

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I really want to keep in touch with them when I come back to China and eagerly welcome them to China.

And Hao wanted to keep the learning pathway going:

Hope we can keep in touch forever and have more discussions about education.

Wan also suggested that there is more to learn, especially with respect to the personal aspects of the mentor’s background and values:

I want to know more about the stories of their teaching experience, why they want to be a teacher and how they teach.

The participants also noted an interest in continuing to develop and refine the communication process. Some participants expressed a strong desire to let their Canadian mentor teachers get to know them better. For example, Qi wished to let her host teachers know about her “destination after graduating from university.” Hong would like her host teachers to know about her major and strengths. Wan wished to share why she would like to be a teacher. Other participants, like Ye, were pleased at the reciprocity of the learning:

I would prefer that my relationship with my teacher is “reciprocal learning partners.” When I came to the class, she asked everyone in the class to show me respect. That really helped a lot. I felt I was at home. She is interested in how we teach in China. She even gave me the chance to teach the kids how we do math in China . . . I learnt her classroom management and the way she solves students’ questions. We learnt from each other. I really appreciate the experience here.

And Cai found that the whole experience was based on an equitable exchange of ideas:

The program is a good way for both parties to actively integrate, learn from each other, help each other and make progress together.

Xue also gestured to the inevitable conflict that can arise in reciprocal learning exchanges that are also cross-cultural in nature:

I think my mentor and I develop a comparatively successful relationship owe to his open-minded tolerance, my sincere desire for communication and my speaking skills as well. Both of us want to share with each other as much as possible but we would be cautious about the choice of words and expressions. Maybe sometimes there would be inevitable mistakes or offense, I would apology to him sincerely and explain why we would behave like this. And then we could understand more about each other.

This last theme, the nexus of mentoring and culture, while evident in the first round of responses, came into better focus through the second round.

Narratives Emerging From the Follow Up Round of Questions

Through the second round of questions, the participants’ stories reflect the challenges and “differences” they experienced during their cross-cultural school placements. With the benefit of temporal and geographic distance, the participants were also able to delineate suggestions they have to improve the teacher–student mentoring relationship in an international program. To allow them to fully express themselves, we encouraged them to respond in their language of choice; as a result, most of the responses quoted here were originally made in Chinese by participants and then translated into English.

Cultural complexity. The Chinese teacher candidates made note of some of the various aspects comprising the cultural complexity between the two groups, including a sense of understanding the differences, a desire for meaningful sharing, and an ethic of respect. In discussions of observed cultural differences, Su noted that both cultures are shaped by the context:

What impressed me the most during this period in Canada is the difference between people and people, and students and students. This is ultimately caused by the entire social environment and national conditions. Both sides have pros and cons.

Wan echoed the sentiment:

This issue [the difference between Canada and China] is determined by the socio-economic situation and cultural background, and we can only respect differences, absorb the best and learn from one another.

Others notes that the discussion of difference should not only emphasize context but should also emphasize the strengths of both cultures. Peng wrote:

Our efforts should never be limited to “what are the differences,” because differences are everywhere. The meaning of difference never lies in the “difference” itself.

And Cai suggested:

Only by finding what both sides share most in common can a win-win situation and co-development be achieved.

Hao developed a reflexivity in considering the balance of strengths and how they might be applied in her own life:

During my internship in Canada, my critical and inclusive thinking has been put into practice. In the process of communicating with many Canadian friends, I always tolerate the differences between the two cultures and reflect on the differences afterwards. . . . Chinese culture puts more emphasis on collective interests while Canadian culture pays more attention
to individual care. When I was in Canada, I often thought about how to strike a balance between the individual and the collective.

The participants’ reflections also noted the value of opportunities to meaningfully share elements of culture through in-class and out-of-school activities. The participant responses to the discussion of cultural sharing were most evocative, as they took time to inflect their stories with pride and with detail. Qi noted:

I have seized the opportunity to teach in Canada. In a science class, I talked about the combination of Chinese lantern culture with science and technology, so that students can learn more about the Chinese culture while learning scientific knowledge.

Xue shared Peking Opera facial makeup to Canadian teachers and students:

The students . . . were very interested in being able to create characters with different personalities through the colors of facial masks and designed different characters through their own imagination.

Wan tried to use games as a cultural teaching tool in a primary classroom:

I explained Chinese culture in the classroom of VQ Primary School mainly by playing games, letting the children enjoy the fun brought by Chinese culture.

Others shared stories and experiences of student life in China as a way of relating to the Canadian classroom:

I introduced the Chinese college entrance examination and Chongqing culture to the teacher and the students in the Canadian high school. . . . The effect is quite good. (Yan)

During the internship in high school, we introduced the life of Chinese university students, the Chinese art test. . . . They all showed great interest. (Han)

I introduced my family, an ordinary and traditional Chinese family because it reflects the majority of Chinese people’s life. I also introduced Chinese education system and student life. Canadian teachers and children mostly expressed surprise and curiosity. (Zhu)

A third theme emerged as students discussed cultural complexity: the importance of respect. This was especially apparent as the participants discussed how China was discussed in the media, as part of informal conversations with mentors, or mentioned in classrooms. In a lengthy response, Chen grappled with the dynamic of cultural difference and respect as a function of reciprocal learning:

The development paths of China and Canada are quite different, so unilaterally judging a certain education method “correct or not” is lack of consideration. It is simply inappropriate to think that China’s education is backward, and Canada’s education is advanced. As a developing country, China has a stronger sense of reform and is more likely to have a humble attitude; while Canada is a developed country, it has made a lot of achievements in the field of education, and educators have greater self-confidence.

The tensions of the media perception of China arose as participants navigated questions and conversations about current events:

At that time, it occurred some issues in Hong Kong, China. While the guidance of public opinion was relatively obvious, many [Canadian] teachers were able to express that they did not comment much on this matter or thought that perhaps they should learn more about the history of Hong Kong. I think this attitude shows respect to us very much, to China. (Xiao)

The teacher discussed with us about some news, asked us whether the news report on China was true or distorted, and analyzed with us why the Western media would always prefer to report on China negatively. He also talked to us about how he viewed this issue. (Xue)

When the teacher shared the news about China in the classroom with his students, he would stop and verify with me if it was real in front of all the students, and the students listened attentively. (Zhu)

**Reciprocal learning in mentoring.** A second dominant narrative theme emerged from the second-round responses is the value of reciprocal learning for mentoring. The participants, when discussing their relationships with mentors, made comments about reciprocity, about how to adapt and respond to the partnership so that mutual learning could proceed. They also made comments about possible future directions for strengthened reciprocity. Some participants determined that in-depth communication was difficult because of their different cultural backgrounds. Others noted that they did not have a close relationship with their mentor teacher because of personality differences. Most emphasized that when the relationship was positive, it was because there was a sense of mutual appreciation, learning, and a lower power differential. That is, there was more respect and reciprocity. Cai noted the importance of balance and exchange:

As an old Chinese saying goes, “the key to sound relations between states lies in amity between the people.” Discussing with Canadian teachers and students is the integration and development of the two cultures.

Many students expressed that their role in the placement was as observers, without many opportunities to engage with real teaching tasks. Some felt that, as mentees and preservice teachers, the responsibility for maintaining the relationship was mostly their responsibility:

The most important thing is that the interns need to take the initiative to ask the teacher for advice, say hello and make other
interactions, and take the initiative to help the teacher to do something. Naturally, there will be a lot of communication during the work. (Xue)

We should take the initiative to communicate with the mentor teachers. (Peng)

Chinese interns need to communicate more with their Canadian mentor teachers in teaching activities in Canada. . You can show the teacher the lessons you designed, and let the teacher help you modify them according to the Canadian syllabus and requirements. (Yu)

We must communicate with the mentor teachers. Only after both sides have some mutual understanding can we lay the foundation for the teaching opportunity later. I fought for it myself. (Cai)

We need to overcome shyness and other emotions, and at the same time show our friendliness to our mentor teachers, making them feel comfortable to communicate with us. (Yu)

We are, like bridges for both sides. We must take the initiative to introduce and share some [aspects] of Chinese education. (Qi)

Others noted that good communication would require the efforts of both parties:

Chinese interns should overcome their shyness and fear and take the initiative to communicate with their mentor teachers. But the mentor teachers can encourage Chinese interns and encourage Chinese interns to communicate with the teachers themselves. Of course, the teacher should also take the initiative. (Hao)

I think that in-depth participation requires mutual efforts of both sides. (Yan)

Only when both sides reach a state of eagerness for communication at the same time will communication between mentor teachers and us improve. (Zhu)

Finally, the participants made recommendations for future directions. A common and key theme among their responses was an overall request for more time to informally discuss educational differences between Canada and China. The topics that Chinese preservice teachers recommend for future exchanges include teacher and student identity, curriculum and teaching design, student assessment, educational differences in policy and practice, family education, the advantages and disadvantages of generalist and specialist teaching model, teacher–student relationships, methods of dealing with privacy, school violence, and cultural difference.

**Discussion**

The major themes emerging from the findings are elaborated below, with particular attention to implications for teacher education.

**Reciprocal Learning in Mentoring as a Pathway to Change**

The findings demonstrate how powerful mentoring can be in shifting teacher perspectives. In this study, Chinese participants were impressed or even surprised by the Canadian mentors’ classroom pedagogy focusing on the individual needs of their students. For these participants, this pedagogical emphasis reflected different educational values than they had experienced in China, where the focus is on academic excellence. In Chinese society, “learning for academic excellence as the path to success (学而优则仕)” is a living principle for most Chinese people from all walks of life. This fundamental difference was influential on the Chinese participants’ teaching beliefs in terms of classroom pedagogy and the role of the teacher. Such short-term and long-term impacts on Chinese participants’ classroom pedagogy has also been reported in Xu’s longitudinal study of the RLP participants (e.g., Xu et al., 2015; Xu, 2019a) and corresponds to many previous studies on the impact of mentoring relationships on pedagogy (Fluckiger et al., 2006; Jewell, 2007; Mathur et al., 2013; Molitor et al., 2018; Parker & Vetter, 2020; Zhao & Zhang, 2017). Overall, the literature suggests that classroom pedagogy is deeply influenced by the lived experiences of both mentoring and intercultural exchange.

**Teacher Knowledge as Key for Reciprocal Learning in a Mentoring Relationship**

Scholars have developed various conceptions of teacher knowledge, broadening its definition in the field (e.g., Ben-Peretz, 2011; Buitink, 2009; Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002; Craig et al., 2018; Craig et al., 2014; Gorski, 2009; Holden & Hicks, 2007; Xu & Connelly, 2009). In the past three decades, there has been ongoing discussion on distinguishing knowledge-for-teachers and teacher knowledge in the field of teacher education. Xu & Connelly (2009) suggest:

Teacher knowledge includes what teachers are formally taught in knowledge and skills training programmes, but also includes much more than this. . . When a teacher responds to a student or designs a particular lesson, their actions and plans are based on the totality of their experience. They respond holistically as persons. It would be a rare and unusual teacher who stopped in the middle of a lesson to consult a list of learnings from a knowledge-for-teachers workshop before taking action. (p. 221)

This concept of knowledge-for-teachers is also raised by Kochan (2013) in discussion of the mentoring context. He notes that mentees are often described using the analogy of the empty vessel, which illuminates the stubborn issue of power dynamic in the mentoring relationship and reinscribes the knowledge-for-teachers paradigm. Our findings reveal the impact of the knowledge-for-teacher paradigm and highlights the significance of it on the mentoring relationship. On
one hand, the Chinese preservice teachers appeared to value explicit examples of pedagogy during in-class teaching as something they could learn from their mentor teachers. That is, within the knowledge-for-teacher paradigm, inservice teachers and preservice teachers would follow the rules of the “good” teacher defined by abstract theories and principles. They did not seem to perceive their daily communications and interactions with schoolteachers and students as a way of sharing and enhancing their teacher knowledge. On the other hand, the fact that Canadian mentor teachers were reported as being too busy to learn about Chinese culture and pedagogy and the mentees’ teaching styles is, to some extent, also a reflection of the impact of the knowledge-for-teacher model on Canadian mentor teachers. While some mentor teachers endeavored to undertake a reciprocal learning attitude, many still took a top-down unilateral approach. We hope our research provides perspectives and insights from preservice teachers’ lived experiences in international and cross-cultural contexts to enrich this discussion of the view of teacher knowledge that is associated with teachers’ lived experiences and cultural backgrounds (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990; Connelly & Clandinin, 1985; Craig et al., 2018; Fenstermacher, 1994; Russell & Munby, 1991).

**Cultural Complexity and Reciprocal Learning in Mentoring Relationships**

Our work also underlines the value of foregrounding support for cultural complexity in the mentoring relationship as a key factor in international teacher education. The participants demonstrated dialectic understanding on the concept of difference in mentoring, moving from spotting differences to understanding differences socially, culturally, and historically. Kochan (2013) contends hidden beliefs and assumptions within different cultures can cause difficulties in mentoring contexts. We find that the cultural differences in mentoring that the participants noted were not obstacles to learning but opportunities for them to reflect upon their positionalities. Taking into consideration of the cultural complexities in mentoring, our findings add to the literature suggesting that it is necessary to transform the one-way traditional mentoring relationship to two-way reciprocal learning relationship; Bullough et al., 2002; Cochran-Smith & Paris, 1995; Johnson-Bailey, 2012).

It is also notable that the second round of data collection occurred after the participants returned to China, 4 months after their Canadian internship. Their thinking on cultural complexity in mentoring was influenced by the changes of time, place, and their personal and social situations. During that period, COVID-19 emerged and China was blamed for the global spread of the virus. Those changes in the three-dimensions of the participants’ life space contributed to more nuanced and profound understanding of their mentoring relationship. As is evident in the shifting discussion during the second round, participants expressed a strong desire for their Canadian mentors to know more about them and about Chinese education and culture. They also noted their regrets for only having been an observer during their Canadian internship. The findings echo literature that suggests preservice teachers should be provided with more opportunities to reflect on their cross-cultural lived experience and rethink the mentoring relationship within a 3D life space framework (Xu & Connelly, 2009).

In addition to the participants’ comments regarding communication, the student teachers also expressed a more fundamental desire for a more balanced power dynamic and increased reciprocity: first, with respect to learning about broad aspects of Chinese and Canadian cultures, as well as specific aspects of education culture; second, with regards to more discussion of individual pedagogy and practice. The wish for more explicit reciprocity also surfaced in the context of pedagogy. Most student teachers suggested that mentoring conversations would have been meaningful if structured around discussions of difference and similarity between education systems and philosophies. Furthermore, most participants wanted a forum to discuss their own personal pedagogy or teaching area, in comparison with the mentors; these discussions would have also connected with themes of cultural, systemic, and philosophical diversity. The appeal for improved communication can be seen as a facet of the desire for more balanced relationships as a whole, which reflects the growing body of mentoring literature advocating for balanced and nonhierarchical partnerships (Cochran-Smith & Paris, 1995; Lopez-Real & Kwan, 2005; Molitor, 2014; Molitor, 2018; Parker & Vetter, 2020).

**Implications for Future Programs**

This study provides insights for mentoring relationship in intercultural and international contexts with the practical narratives of the preservice teachers about their perspectives and expectations for cross-cultural mentoring relationship. The research hopes to shift the discourse in mentoring relationship from knowledge-for-teacher to teacher knowledge in Chinese contexts and also in international and cross-cultural contexts for teacher education. In addition, this study provides preservice teachers who have a plan to do an international cross-cultural internship with some suggestions on cross-cultural communication and relationship development with their mentors. In addition, program leaders of teacher education in universities can glean some insights for their teacher program improvement with international and global education. This study provides some firsthand narratives on mentoring experiences in cross-cultural contexts from the perspectives of the mentees, which may help teachers reflect on their teaching practice from a different lens and reflect on their mentor practice with preservice teachers.

One limitation of this study is that we only included 19 Chinese preservice teachers. Owing to COVID, we were not
able to interview the Canadian mentors. In a future study, we hope to investigate Canadian mentors’ perceptions of mentoring with Chinese mentees. In addition, we intend to investigate Canadian preservice teachers’ perceptions of mentoring with their Chinese mentors.

Our recommendations reflect the original intentions of the RLP: to help people go beyond the discussion of the assimilation of newcomers to Canada to the role of newcomers as contributors, forming a mutual “we-ness” among communities (Xu, 2006, 2017). Our study exposes the fallibility of the teacher as empty vessel paradigm and suggests that teacher education programs can be strengthened by reciprocal, intercultural mentoring relationships.

Built on Kochan’s (2013) transformational mentoring constructs, which do not hold on to practices of blending or assimilation, but instead that offer an insight into entirely new mentoring ontologies, we would suggest a transformational mentoring relationship of reciprocal learning between the mentor and mentee. The unknowns and the dissimilarity between mentor and mentee are grounds for reciprocal learning, which create a stage for the emergence of a new way of understanding education, pedagogy, and relationship-building. This is especially true in international and cross-cultural contexts. To be viable, transformational mentoring cannot be left to chance. Those who are envisioning learning exchanges that feature mentorship would need to pay attention to how the mentor and mentee relationship begins, articulate the vision for transformational mentorship with reciprocal learning between both communities, and provide a language for mentors and mentees to navigate difference as an expected and welcome aspect of the learning. This translates to concrete advance planning actions with both the receiving and visiting groups, professional learning and relationship-building opportunities, naming “newness” as a desired outcome (rather than assimilation, piecemeal appropriation, or blending). In other words, transformational mentoring offers the best outcomes for a mutually respectful recognition of strengths, without suggesting that change has to look or sound like anything that currently exists. This approach with an explicit purpose for reciprocal learning can be liberating as it frees mentors and mentees from performative enactments of one another’s forms of pedagogy and creates space for mutual growth and authentic change.

Acknowledgments

The University of Windsor sits on the traditional territory of the Three Fires Confederacy of First Nations, which includes the Ojibwa, the Odawa, and the Potawatomi. We respect the long-standing relationships with First Nations people in this place in the 100-mile Windsor-Essex peninsula and the straits – les détroits – of Detroit. This research is supported by Xu and Connelly’s (2013-2020) Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) Partnership Grant Project titled “Reciprocal learning in teacher education and school education between Canada and China” [Grant # 895-2012-1011]. We would like to acknowledge both Canadian and Chinese partner institutiones and especially thank the Chinese pre-service teacher participants in this study. We would also like to express our gratitude to the reviewers for their important insights.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research is supported by Xu and Connelly’s (2013-2020) Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) Partnership Grant Project titled “Reciprocal learning in teacher education and school education between Canada and China” [Grant # 895-2012-1011].

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Note

1. The following quotes are all, but one, cited from Chinese participants’ English responses to the first round of questions verbatim. Hence readers can see language errors in some direct quotes.

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